

The Meanings of Lives
by Susan Wolf

The question, “What is the meaning of life?” was once taken to be a paradigm of philosophical inquiry. Perhaps, outside of the academy, it still is. In philosophy classrooms and academic journals, however, the question has nearly disappeared, and when the question is brought up, by a naïve student, for example, or a prospective donor to the cause of a liberal arts education, it is apt to be greeted with uncomfortable embarrassment.

What is so wrong with the question? One answer is that it is extremely obscure, if not downright unintelligible. It is unclear what exactly the question is supposed to be asking. Talk of meaning in other contexts does not offer ready analogies for understanding the phrase “the meaning of life.” When we ask the meaning of a word, for example, we want to know what the word stands for, what it represents. But life is not part of a language, or of any other sort of symbolic system. It is not clear how it could “stand for” anything, nor to whom. We sometimes use “meaning” in nonlinguistic contexts: “Those dots mean measles.” “Those footprints mean that someone was here since it rained.” In these cases, talk of meaning seems to be equivalent to talk of evidence, but the contexts in which such claims are made tend to specify what hypotheses are in question within relatively fixed bounds. To ask what life means without a similarly specified context, leaves us at sea.

Still, when people do ask about the meaning of life, they are evidently expressing some concern or other, and it would be disingenuous to insist that the rest of us haven’t the faintest idea what that is. The question at least gestures toward a certain set of concerns with which most of us are at least somewhat familiar. Rather than dismiss a

question with which many people have been passionately occupied as pure and simple nonsense, it seems more appropriate to try to interpret it and reformulate it in a way that can be more clearly and unambiguously understood. Though there may well be many things going on when people ask, “What is the meaning of life?”, the most central among them seems to be a search to find a purpose or a point to human existence. It is a request to find out why we are here (that is, why we exist at all), with the hope that an answer to this question will also tell us something about what we should be doing with our lives.

If understanding the question in this way, however, makes the question intelligible, it might not give reason to reopen it as a live philosophical problem. Indeed, if some of professional philosophy’s discomfort with discussion of the meaning of life comes from a desire to banish ambiguity and obscurity from the field, as much comes, I think, from the thought that the question, when made clearer, has already been answered, and that the answer is depressing. Specifically, if the question of the Meaning of Life is to be identified with the question of the purpose of life, then the standard view, at least among professional philosophers, would seem to be that it all depends on the existence of God. In other words, the going opinion seems to be that if there is a God, then there is at least a chance that there is a purpose, and so a meaning to life. God may have created us for a reason, with a plan in mind. But to go any further along this branch of thinking is not in the purview of secular philosophers.¹ If, on the other hand, there is no God, then there can be no meaning, in the sense of a point or a purpose to our existence. We are

¹ Thomas Nagel has what might be thought to be an even more pessimistic view – viz, that even if there is a God, there is no reason God’s purpose should be our purpose, no reason, therefore, to think that God’s existence could give meaning, in the right sense, to our lives.

simply a product of physical processes – there are no reasons for our existence, just causes.

At the same time that talk of Life having a Meaning is banished from philosophy, however, the talk of lives being more or less *meaningful* seems to be on the rise. Newspapers, magazines, self-help manuals² are filled with essays on how to find meaning in your life; sermons and therapies are built on the truism that happiness is not just a matter of material comfort, or sensual pleasure, but also of a deeper kind of fulfillment. Though philosophers to date have had relatively little to say about what gives meaning to individual lives, passing references can be found throughout the literature; it is generally acknowledged as an intelligible and appropriate thing to want in one's life. Indeed, it would be crass to think otherwise.

But how can individual lives have meaning if life as a whole has none? Are those of us who suspect there is no meaning *to* life deluding ourselves in continuing to talk about the possibility of finding meaning *in* life? (Are we being short-sighted, failing to see the implications of one part of our thought on another?) Alternatively, are these expressions mere homonyms, with no conceptual or logical connections between them? Are there simply two wholly unconnected topics here?

Many of you will be relieved to hear that I do not wish to revive the question of whether there is a meaning to life. I am inclined to accept the standard view that there is no plausible interpretation of that question that offers a positive answer in the absence of a fairly specific religious metaphysics. An understanding of meaningfulness in life,

² E.g., the day I sat down to begin notes on this article, a review of a book by Monique Greenwood, *Having What Matters: The Black Woman's Guide to Creating the Life You Really Want* was in the paper (Baltimore Sun, 1/16/02). The book is offered as a guide to replace Helen Gurley Brown's 1980's

however, does seem to me to merit more philosophical attention than it has so far received, and I will have some things to say about it here. Here, too, I am inclined to accept the standard view – or a part of the standard view – viz., that meaningfulness is an intelligible feature to be sought in a life, and that it is, at least sometimes attainable but not everywhere assured. But what that feature is – what we are looking for – is controversial and unclear, and so the task of analyzing or interpreting that feature will take up a large portion of my remarks today. With an analysis proposed, I shall return to the question of how a positive view about the possibility of meaning in lives can fit with a negative or agnostic view about the meaning of life. The topics are not, I think, as unconnected as might at first seem necessary for their respectively optimistic and pessimistic answers to coexist. Though my discussion will offer nothing new in the way of an answer to the question of the meaning of life, therefore, it may offer a somewhat different perspective on that question's significance.

Let us begin, however, with the other question, that of understanding what it is to seek meaning in life. What do we want when we want a meaningful life? What is it that makes some lives meaningful, others less so?

If we focus on the agent's, or the subject's, perspective – on a person wanting meaning in her life, her feeling the need for more meaning - we might incline toward a subjective interpretation of the feature being sought. When a person self-consciously looks for something to give her life meaning, it signals a kind of unhappiness. One imagines, for example, the alienated housewife, whose life seems to her to be a series of

manifesto about having it all. Instead of “she who has the most toys wins”, Greenwood says “she who has the most joy wins.” She is focused on how to “achieve a life with value and meaning.”

endless chores. What she wants, it might appear, is something that she can find more subjectively rewarding.

This impression is reinforced if we consider references to “meaningful experiences.” (The phrase might be applied, for example, to a certain kind of wedding or funeral.) The most salient feature of an event that is described as meaningful seems to be its “meaning a lot” *to* the participants. To say that a ceremony, or, for that matter, a job, is meaningful seems at the very least to include the idea that it is emotionally satisfying. An absence of meaning is usually marked by a feeling of emptiness and dissatisfaction; in contrast, a meaningful life, or meaningful part of life, is necessarily at least somewhat rewarding or fulfilling. It is noteworthy, however, that meaningful experiences are not necessarily particularly happy. A trip to one’s birthplace may well be meaningful; a visit to an amusement park is unlikely to be so.

If we step back, however, and ask ourselves, as observers, what lives strike us as especially meaningful, if we ask what sorts of lives exemplify meaningfulness, subjective criteria do not seem to be in the forefront. Who comes to mind? Perhaps, Gandhi, or Albert Schweitzer, or Mother Theresa; perhaps Einstein or Jonas Salk. Cezanne, or Manet, Beethoven, Charlie Parker. Tolstoy is an interesting case to which I shall return. Alternatively, we can look to our neighbors, our colleagues, our relatives - some of whom, it seems to me, live more meaningful lives than others. Some, indeed, of my acquaintance seem to me to live lives that are paradigms of meaning – right up there with the famous names on the earlier lists; while others (perhaps despite their modicum of fame) would score quite low on the meaningfulness scale. If those in the latter category feel a lack of meaning in their lives – well, they are right to feel it, and it is a step in the

right direction that they notice that there is something about their lives that they should try to change.

What is it to live a meaningful life, then? What does meaningfulness in life amount to? It may be easier to make progress by focusing on what we want to avoid. In that spirit, let me offer some paradigms, not of *meaningful*, but of *meaningless* lives.

For me, the idea of a meaningless life is most clearly and effectively embodied in the image of a person who spends day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies. Not that I have anything against television or beer. Still the image, understood as an image of a person whose life is lived in hazy passivity, a life lived at a not unpleasant level of consciousness, but unconnected to anyone or anything, going nowhere, achieving nothing - is, I submit, as strong an image of a meaningless life as there can be. Call this case The Blob.

If any life, any human life, is meaningless, the Blob's life is. But this doesn't mean that any meaningless life must be, in all important respects, like the Blob's. There are other paradigms that highlight by their absences other elements of meaningfulness.

In contrast to the Blob's passivity, for example, we may imagine a life full of activity, but silly or decadent or useless activity. (And again, I have nothing against silly activity, but only against a life that is wholly occupied with it.) We may imagine, for example, one of the idle rich who flits about, fighting off boredom, moving from one amusement to another. She shops, she travels, she eats at expensive restaurants, she works out with her personal trainer.

Curiously, one might also take a very un-idle rich person to epitomize a meaningless life in a slightly different way. Consider, for example, the corporate

executive who works twelve-hour, seven-day weeks, suffering great stress, for the sole purpose of the accumulation of personal wealth. Related to this perhaps is David Wiggins' example of the pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs.³

These last three cases of the idle rich, the corporate executive and the pig farmer are in some ways very different, but they all share at least this feature: they can all be characterized as lives whose dominant activities seem pointless, useless, or empty. Classify these cases under the heading Useless.

A somewhat different and I think more controversial sort of case to consider involves someone who is engaged, even dedicated, to a project that is ultimately revealed as bankrupt, not because the person's values are shallow or misguided, but because the project fails. The person may go literally bankrupt: for example, a man may devote his life to creating and building up a company to hand over to his children, but the item his company manufactures is rendered obsolete by technology shortly before his planned retirement. Or consider a scientist whose life's work is rendered useless by the announcement of a medical breakthrough just weeks before his own research would have yielded the same results. Perhaps more poignantly, imagine a woman whose life is centered around a relationship that turns out to be a fraud. Cases that fit this mold we may categorize under the heading Bankrupt.

The classification of this third sort of case as an exemplification of meaninglessness may meet more resistance than the classification of the earlier two. Perhaps these lives should not be considered meaningless after all. Nonetheless, these

³ David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXII, 1976.

are cases in which it is not surprising that an argument of some sort is needed - it is not unnatural or silly that the subjects of these lives should entertain the thought that their lives have been meaningless. Even if they are wrong, the fact that their thoughts are not, so to speak, out of order, is a useful datum. So, of course, would be the sort of thing one would say to convince them, or ourselves, that these thoughts are ultimately mistaken.

If the cases I have sketched capture our images of meaninglessness more or less accurately, they provide clues to what a positive case of a meaningful life must contain. In contrast to the Blob's passivity, a person who lives a meaningful life must be actively engaged. But, as the Useless cases teach us, it will not do to be engaged in just anything, for any reason or with any goal - one must be engaged in a project or projects that have some positive value, and in some way that is nonaccidentally related to what gives them value. Finally, in order to avoid Bankruptcy, it seems necessary that one's activities be at least to some degree successful (though it may not be easy to determine what counts as the right kind or degree of success). Putting these criteria together, we get a proposal for what it is to live a meaningful life: viz., a meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value.

Several remarks are needed to qualify and refine this proposal. First, the use of the word "project" is not ideal: it is too suggestive of a finite, determinate task, something one takes on, and, if all goes well, completes. Among the things that come to mind as projects are certain kinds of hobbies or careers, or rather, specific tasks that fall within the sphere of such hobbies or careers: things that can be seen as Accomplishments, like the producing of a proof or a poem or a pudding, the organizing of a union or a high school band. Although such activities are among the things that seem intuitively to contribute to the meaningfulness of people's lives, there are other forms of meaningfulness that are less directed, and less oriented to demonstrable achievement, and we should not let the use of the word "project" distort or deny the potential of these things to give meaningfulness to life. Relationships, in particular, seem at best

awkwardly described as projects. Rarely does one deliberately take them on and, in some cases, one doesn't even have to work at them - one may just have them and live, as it were, within them. Moreover, many of the activities that are naturally described as projects - coaching a school soccer team, planning a surprise party, reviewing an article for a journal - have the meaning they do for us only because of their place in the nonprojectlike relationships in which we are enmeshed and with which we identify. In proposing that a meaningful life is a life actively engaged in projects, then, I mean to use "projects" in an unusually broad sense, to encompass not only goal-directed tasks but other sorts of ongoing activities and involvements as well.

Second, the suggestion that a meaningful life should be “actively engaged” in projects should be understood in a way that recognizes and embraces the connotations of “engagement.” Although the idea that a meaningful life requires activity was introduced by contrast to the life of the ultra-passive Blob, we should note that meaning involves more than mere, literal activity. The alienated housewife, presumably, is active all the time – she buys groceries and fixes meals, cleans the house, does the laundry, chauffeurs the children from school to soccer to ballet, arranges doctors’ appointment and babysitters. What makes her life insufficiently meaningful is that her heart, so to speak, isn’t in these activities. She does not identify with what she is doing – she does not embrace her roles as wife, mother, and homemaker as expressive of who she is and wants to be. We may capture her alienated condition by saying that though she is active, she is not actively engaged. (She is, one might say, just going through the motions.) In characterizing a meaningful life, then, it is worth stressing that living such a life is not just a matter of having projects (broadly construed) and actively and somewhat successfully getting through them. The projects must engage the person whose life it is.

Ideally, she would proudly and happily embrace them, as constituting at least part of what her life is about.⁴

Finally, we must say more about the proposal's most blatantly problematic condition – viz, that the projects engagement with which can contribute to a meaningful life must be projects “of positive value”. The claim is that meaningful lives must be engaged in projects of positive value - but who is to decide which projects have positive value, or even to guarantee that there is such a thing?

I would urge that we leave the phrase as unspecific as possible in all but one respect. We do not want to build a theory of positive value into our conception of meaningfulness. As a proposal that aims to capture what most people mean by a meaningful life, what we want is a concept that "tracks" whatever we think of as having positive value. This allows us to explain at least some divergent intuitions about meaningfulness in terms of divergent intuitions or beliefs about what has positive value, with the implication that if one is wrong about what has positive value, one will also be wrong about what contributes to a meaningful life. (Thus, a person who finds little to admire in sports - who finds ridiculous, for example, the sight of grown men trying to knock a little ball into a hole with a club , will find relatively little potential for meaning in the life of an avid golfer; a person who places little stock in esoteric intellectual pursuits will be puzzled by someone who strains to write, much less read, a lot of books on supervenience.)

⁴ It seems to me there is a further condition or qualification on what constitutes a meaningful life, though it does not fit gracefully into the definition I have proposed, and is somewhat peripheral to the focus of this essay: namely, that the projects that contribute to a meaningful life must be of significant duration, and contribute to the unity of the life or of a significant stage of it. A person who is always engaged in some valuable project or other, but whose projects don't express any underlying core of interest and value is not, at least, a paradigm of someone whose *life* is meaningful. Here perhaps there is something illuminating in making analogies to other uses of “meaning,.” for what is at issue here has to do with their being a basis for ‘making sense’ of the life, of being able to see it as a narrative.

The exception I would make to this otherwise maximally tolerant interpretation of the idea of positive value is that we exclude merely subjective value as a suitable interpretation of the phrase.

It will not do to allow that a meaningful life is a life involved in projects that seem to have positive value from the perspective of the one who lives it. Allowing this would have the effect of erasing the distinctiveness of our interest in meaningfulness; it would blur or remove the difference between an interest in living a meaningful life and an interest in living a life that feels or seems meaningful. That these interests are distinct, and that the former is not merely instrumental to the latter can be seen by reflecting on a certain way the wish or the need for meaning in one's life may make itself felt. What I have in mind is the possibility of a kind of epiphany, in which one wakes up – literally or figuratively – to the recognition that one's life to date has been meaningless. Such an experience would be nearly unintelligible if a lack of meaning were to be understood as a lack of a certain kind of subjective impression. One can hardly understand the idea of waking up to the thought that one's life to date has seemed meaningless. To the contrary, it may be precisely because one did not realize the emptiness of one's projects or the shallowness of one's values until that moment that the experience I am imagining has the poignancy it does. It is the sort of experience that one might describe in terms of scales falling from one's eyes. And the yearning for meaningfulness, the impulse to do something about it will not be satisfied (though it may be eliminated) by putting the scales back on, so to speak. If one suspects that the life one has been living is meaningless, one will not bring meaning to it by getting therapy or taking a pill that, without changing one's life in any other way, makes one believe that one's life has meaning.

To care that one's life is meaningful, then, is, according to my proposal, to care that one's life is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in projects (understanding this term broadly) that not just seem to have positive value, but that really

do have it. To care that one's life be meaningful, in other words, is in part to care that what one does with one's life is, to pardon the expression, at least somewhat objectively good. We should be careful, however, not to equate objective goodness with moral goodness, at least not if we understand moral value as essentially involving benefiting or honoring humanity. The concern for meaning in one's life does not seem to be the same as the concern for moral worth, nor do our judgments about what sorts of lives are meaningful seem to track judgments of moral character or accomplishment.

To be sure, some of the paradigms of meaningful lives are lives of great moral virtue or accomplishment – I mentioned Ghandi and Mother Theresa, for example. Others, however, are not. Consider Gauguin, Wittgenstein, Tchaikovsky – morally unsavory figures all, whose lives nonetheless seem chock full of meaning. If one thinks that even they deserve moral credit, for their achievements made the world a better place, consider instead Olympic athletes and world chess champions, whose accomplishments leave nothing behind but their world records. Even more important, consider the artists, scholars, musicians, athletes of our more ordinary sort. For us too, the activities of artistic creation and research, the development of our skills and our understanding of the world give meaning to our lives – but they do not give moral value to them.

It seems then that meaning in life may not be especially moral, and that indeed lives can be richly meaningful even if they are, on the whole, judged to be immoral. Conversely, that one's life is at least moderately moral, that it is lived, as it were, above reproach, is no assurance of its being moderately meaningful. The alienated housewife, for example, may be in no way subject to moral criticism. (and it is debatable whether even the Blob deserves specifically moral censure.)

That people do want meaning in their lives, I take it, is an observable, empirical fact. We have already noted the evidence of self-help manuals, and therapy groups. What I have offered so far is an analysis of what that desire or concern amounts to. I

want now to turn to the question of whether the desire is one that it is good that people have, whether, that is, there is some positive reason why they *should* want this.

At a minimum, we may acknowledge that it is at least not bad to want meaning in one's life. There is, after all, no harm in it. Since people do want this, and since there are no moral objections to it, we should recognize the concern for meaning as a legitimate concern, at least in the weak sense that people should be allowed to pursue it. Indeed, insofar as meaningfulness in one's life is a significant factor in a life's overall well-being, we should do more than merely allow its pursuit: we should positively try to increase opportunities for people to live lives of meaning.

Most of us, however, seem to have a stronger positive attitude toward the value of meaningfulness than this minimum concession admits. We do not think it is merely all right for people to want meaning in their lives – as it is all right for people to like country music, or to take an interest in figure-skating. We think people positively ought to care that their lives be meaningful. It is disturbing, or at least regrettable, to find someone who doesn't care about this. Yet this positive assessment ought to strike us, at least initially, as somewhat mysterious. What is the good, after all, of living a meaningful life, and to whom?

Since a meaningful life is not necessarily a *morally* better life than a meaningless one (the Olympic athlete may do no more good nor harm than the idly rich socialite), it is not necessarily better *for the world* that people try to live or even succeed in living meaningful lives. Neither is a meaningful life assured of being an especially happy one, however. Many of the things that give meaning to our lives (relationships to loved ones, aspirations to achieve) make us vulnerable to pain, disappointment and stress. From the inside, the Blob's hazy passivity may be preferable to the experience of the tortured artist or political crusader. By conventional standards, therefore, it is not clear that caring about or even succeeding in living a meaningful life is better *for the person herself*.

Yet, as I have already mentioned, those of us who do care that our lives be meaningful tend to think that it is a positively good thing that we do. We not only want to live meaningful lives, we want to want this - we approve of this desire, and think it is better for others if they have this desire, too. If, for example, you see a person you care about conducting her life in a way that you find devoid of worth - she is addicted to drugs, perhaps, or just to television, or she is overly enthusiastic in her career as a corporate lawyer - you are apt to encourage her to change, or at least hope that she will find a new direction on her own. Your most prominent worry may well be that she is heading for a fall. You fear that at some point she will wake up to the fact that she has been wasting or misdirecting her life, a point that may come too late for easy remedy and will, in any case, involve a lot of pain and self-criticism. But the fear that she will wake up to the fact that she has been wasting her life (and have difficulty turning her life around) may not be as terrible as the fear that she won't wake up to it. If you came to feel secure that no painful moment of awakening would ever come because your friend (or sister or daughter) simply does not care whether her life is meaningful, you might well think that this situation is not better but worse. We seem to think there is something regrettable about a person living a meaningless life, even if the person herself does not mind that she is. We seem to think she *should* want meaning in her life, even if she doesn't realize it.

What, though, is the status of this "should", the nature or source of the regret? The mystery that I earlier suggested we should feel about our value in meaningfulness is reflected in the uneasy location of this judgment. If my own reaction to the woman who doesn't care whether her life is meaningful is typical, the thought that she should, or ought to care is closer to a prudential judgment than it is to a moral one. (If there is a moral objection to a person who lives a meaningless life and is content with that, it is not, in my opinion, a very strong one. The Blob, after all, is not hurting anyone, nor is the idle rich jet-setter. She may, for example, give money to environmental causes to offset

the damage she is doing in her SUV, and write generous checks to Oxfam and UNICEF on a regular basis.) The thought that it is too bad if a person does not live a meaningful life (even if she doesn't mind) seems rather to be the thought that it is too bad *for her*.

The closest analogue to this thought in the history of ethics of which I am aware is Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*. His conception of the virtuous life as the happiest life is offered as a conclusion of an enlightened self-interest. According to standard conceptions of self-interest, however (either hedonistic or preference-based), it is not obvious why this should be so, and, unfortunately, Aristotle himself does not address the question explicitly. Rather, he seems to think that if you do not just see that the virtuous life, in which one aims for and achieves what is "fine," is a better, more desirable life for yourself, that just shows that you were not well brought up, and in that case, there is no point trying to educate you.

Our question, the question of whether and what kind of reason there is for a person to strive for a meaningful life, is not quite the same as the question of whether and what kind of reason there is to aspire to virtue, - though, when one is careful to interpret "virtue" in the broad and not specifically moral way that Aristotle uses the term, it is closer than it might seem. Still, as I say, Aristotle does not really address the question, and so, though I take my line of thought to be Aristotelian in spirit, a scholarly study of Aristotle's texts is not likely to be an efficient way of finding an answer to the question ourselves.

What reason is there, then, if any, for a person to want to live a meaningful life? I have said that we seem to think it would be better for her, that it is, at least roughly, in her self-interest. At the same time, the thought that she should care about meaning seems to depend on claims from outside herself. Even if there are no desires latent in her psychology which meaningfulness would satisfy, we seem to think, there is reason why she should have such desires. She seems to be making some kind of mistake.

If my analysis of what is involved in living a meaningful life is right, then the question of why one should care about living a meaningful life is equivalent to the question of why one should care that one's life be actively and somewhat successfully engaged in projects of positive value. The source of perplexity seems, in particular, to be about the reason to care that one's projects be positively valuable. As long as you are engaged by your activities, and they make you happy, why should one care that one's activities be objectively worthwhile?

The answer, I believe, is that to devote one's life entirely to activities whose value is merely subjective, to devote oneself to activities whose sole justification is that it is good for you, is, in a sense I shall try to explain, practically solipsistic. It flies in the face of one's status as, if you will, a tiny speck in a vast universe, a universe with countless perspectives of equal status with one's own, from which one's life might be assessed. Living a life that is engaged with and so at least partially focussed on projects whose value has a nonsubjective source is a way of acknowledging one's non-privileged position. It harmonizes, in a way that a purely egocentric life does not, with the fact that one is not the center of the universe.

The basic idea is this: The recognition of one's place in the universe, of one's smallness, one might say, or one's insignificance, and of the independent existence of the universe in which one is a part involves, among other things, the recognition of "the mereness" of one's subjective point of view. To think of one's place in the universe is to recognize the possibility of a perspective, of infinitely many perspectives, really, from which one's life is merely gratuitous; it is to recognize the possibility of a perspective, or rather of infinitely many perspectives, that are indifferent to whether one exists at all, and so to whether one is happy or sad, satisfied or unsatisfied, fulfilled or unfulfilled.

In the face of this recognition, a life that is directed solely to its subject's own fulfillment, or, to its mere survival or towards the pursuit of goals that are grounded in nothing but the subject's own psychology, appears either solipsistic or silly.

A person who lives a largely egocentric life – who devotes, in other words, lots of energy and attention and care toward himself, who occupies himself more specifically with satisfying and gratifying himself, expresses and reveals a belief that his happiness matters. Even if it doesn't express the view that his happiness matters objectively, it at least expresses the idea that it matters to him. To be solely devoted to his own gratification, then, would express and reveal the fact that his happiness is *all* that matters, at least all that matters to him. If, however, one accepts a framework that recognizes distinctions in nonsubjective value, (and if one believes, as seems only reasonable, that what has nonsubjective value has no special concentration in or connection to oneself) this attitude seems hard to justify.

To accept that framework is, after all, to accept the view that some things are better than others. To me, it makes sense partially to understand this literally: Some *things*, it seems to me, are better than others: people, for example, are better than rocks or mosquitoes, and a Vermeer painting is better than the scraps on my compost heap.⁵ What is essential, though, is that accepting a framework that recognizes distinctions in nonsubjective value involves seeing the world as value-filled, as containing with it distinctions of better and worse, of more and less worthwhile, if not of better and worse objects per se, then of better and worse features of the world, or activities, or opportunities to be realized. Against this background, a life solely devoted to one's own gratification or to the satisfaction of one's whims seems gratuitous and hard to defend. For, as I have said, to live such a life expresses the view that one's happiness is all that matters, at least to oneself. But why should this be the only thing that matters, when there is so much else worth caring about?

Those familiar with Thomas Nagel's book, *The Possibility of Altruism*, may have recognized an allusion to it in my suggestion that a life indifferent to meaning was

⁵ *pace* the creepy scene in the movie "American Beauty" of the garbage bag blowing in the wind

practically solipsistic. The allusion is significant, for the argument I am making here, though it is directed to a different conclusion, bears a strong resemblance to the argument of that book. Nagel's argument invites us to see a person who, while evidently trying to avoid or minimize pain to himself, shows total indifference to the pain of others, as a practical solipsist in the sense that he fails, in his practical outlook, to recognize and appreciate that he is one person among others, equally real. Roughly, the suggestion seems to be that if you appreciate the reality of others, then you realize that their pains are just as painful as yours. If the painfulness of your pain is a reason to take steps to avoid it, then, the painfulness of their pain should provide reasons, too. To be totally indifferent to the pain of others, then, bespeaks a failure to recognize their pain (to recognize it, that is, as *really* painful, in the same way that yours is painful to you).

This is not the occasion to discuss the plausibility of Nagel's interpretation of the pure egoist as a practical solipsist, nor even to describe Nagel's complex and subtle position in enough detail to be able fairly to evaluate it. What I want to call attention to has to do not with the substance of the argument but with the type of argument it is: specifically, Nagel's argument suggests that appreciation of a certain fact – in this case, the fact that you are just one person among others, equally real – is a source of practical reason – in this case, it gives you reason to take the pains of others to constitute reasons for action. If Nagel is right, we have reason to care about the pain of others that is grounded, not in our own psychologies (and more specifically, not in any of our own desires), but in a fact about the world. His suggestion is that a person who fails to see the pain of others as a source of reason acts 'as if' the pain of others is not real, or not painful. But of course the pain of others *is* real and *is* painful. Such a person thus exhibits a failure not just of morality or sympathy, but of practical reason, in the sense that his practical stance fails to accord with a very significant fact about the world.

My suggestion that we have reason to care about and to try to live meaningful rather than meaningless lives resembles Nagel's in form. Like him, I am suggesting that

we can have a reason to do something or to care about something that is grounded not in our own psychologies, nor specifically in our own desires, but in a fact about the world. The fact in question in this case is the fact that we are, each of us, specks in a vast and value-filled universe, and that as such we have no privileged position as a source of or possessor of objective value. To devote oneself wholly to one's own satisfaction seems to me to fly in the face of this truth, to act "as if" one is the only thing that matters, or perhaps, more, that one's own psychology is the only source of (determining) what matters. By focusing one's attention and one's energies at least in part on things, activities, aspects of the world that have value independent of you, you implicitly acknowledge your place and your status in the world. Your behavior, and your practical stance is thus more in accord with the facts.

Admittedly, this is not the sort of reason that one must accept on pain of inconsistency or any other failure of logic. Just as a person may simply not care whether her life is meaningful, so she may also simply not care whether her life is in accord with, or harmonizes with the facts. (It is one thing to say we should live in accord with the facts of physics, geography, and the other sciences. Living in accordance with these facts has evident instrumental value – it helps us get around in the world. But living in a way that practically acknowledges, or harmonizes with the fact that we are tiny specks in a value-filled world will not make our lives go better that way.) Such a person cannot be accused in any strict sense of irrationality. Like noninstrumental reasons to be moral, the reason to care about living a worthwhile life is not one that narrow rationality requires one to accept. At the same time, it seems appropriate to characterize my suggestion (and Nagel's) as one that appeals to reason in a broader sense. For my suggestion is that an interest in living a meaningful life is an appropriate response to a fundamental truth, and that failure to have such a concern constitutes a failure to acknowledge that truth.

As we have already seen, the truth to which I am proposing a meaningful life provides a response is the truth that we are, each of us, tiny specks in a vast and value-

filled universe. Like the truth that we are, each of us, one person among others, equally real, it opposes what children and many adults may have a tendency to assume – namely, that they are the center of the universe, either the possessor or the source of all value. (It is because both Nagel’s truth and mine are opposites of that assumption that both might plausibly be understood as alternatives to practical solipsism.) Unlike Nagel’s truth, mine is not specifically addressed to our relation to other people. A person may, therefore, appreciate and practically express one of these truths and not the other. Whereas an appropriate response to the equal reality of other people may be, if Nagel is right, an embrace of morality or something relating to morality, my proposal is that an appropriate response to our status as specks in a vast universe is a concern and aspiration to have one’s life wrapped up with projects of positive value.

Perhaps, however, I have not made it clear why this is an appropriate response. The question may seem especially pressing because the thought that we are tiny specks in a vast universe, and the sense that it calls for or demands a response has, in the past, tended to move philosophers in a different direction. Specifically, the thought that we are tiny specks in a vast universe was in the past closely associated with that murky and ponderous question to which I referred at the beginning of my talk – the question of The Meaning of Life. The thought that we are tiny specks in a vast universe has indeed often evoked that question, and, to those who either do not believe in or do not want to rest their answers in the existence of a benevolent God, it has more or less immediately seemed also to indicate an answer. Considering their answer to the question of the Meaning of Life and contrasting it with my response to the fact of our smallness, may clarify the substance of my proposal.

The train of thought I have in mind is one that has, with variations, been expressed by many distinguished philosophers, including Camus, Tolstoy, Richard Taylor, and, curiously, Nagel himself. For them, the recognition of our place in the universe – our smallness, or are speckness, if you will - seems to warrant the conclusion

not only that there is no meaning to life as such but also that each individual life is necessarily absurd.

On the view of these philosophers, a life can be meaningful only if it can mean something *to* someone, and not just to *someone*, but to someone other than oneself and indeed someone of more intrinsic or ultimate value than oneself. Of course, anyone can live in such a way as to make her life meaningful to *someone* other than herself. She can maintain her relationship with parents and siblings, establish friendships with neighbors and colleagues. She can fall in love. If all else fails, she can have a child who will love her, or two children, or six. She can open up an entire clinic for God's sake. But if a life that is devoted solely to yourself, a life that is good to no one other than yourself lacks meaning, these philosophers not implausibly think, so will a life that is devoted to any other poor creature, for he or she will have no more objective importance than you have, and so will be no more fit a stopping place by which to ground the claim of meaningfulness than you. Nor, according to this train of thought, will it help to expand your circle, to be of use or to have an effect on a larger segment of humankind. If each life is individually lacking in meaning, then the collective is meaningless as well. If each life has but an infinitesimal amount of value, then although one's meaning will increase in proportion to one's effect, the total quantity of meaning relative to the cosmos will remain so small as to make the effort pathetic.

From the perspective of these philosophers, if there is no God, then human life, each human life, must be objectively meaningless, because if there is no God, there is no appropriate being *for whom* we could have meaning.

From this perspective, my suggestion that the living of a worthwhile life constitutes a response to a recognition of our place in the universe might seem ridiculously nearsighted, as if, having acknowledged the mere-ness of my own subjectivity, I then failed to acknowledge the equal mere-ness of the subjectivity of others. But I think this misunderstands the point in my proposal of living a life that realizes

nonsubjective value, a misunderstanding that derives from too narrow a view about what an appropriate and satisfactory response to the fact of our place in the universe must be.

The philosophers I have been speaking about - we can call them the pessimists - take the fundamental lesson to be learned from the contemplation of our place in the universe to be that we are cosmically insignificant, a fact that clashes with our desire to be very significant indeed. If God existed, such philosophers might note, we would have a chance at being significant. For God himself, is presumably very significant and so we could be significant by being or by making ourselves significant to Him. In the absence of a God, however, it appears that we can only be significant to each other, to beings, that is, as pathetically small as ourselves. We want to be important, but we cannot be important, and so our lives are absurd.

The pessimists are right about the futility of trying to make ourselves important. Insofar as contemplation of the cosmos makes us aware of our smallness, whether as individuals or as a species, we simply must accept it and come to terms with it. Some people do undoubtedly get very upset, even despondent when they start to think about their cosmic insignificance. They want to be important, to have an impact on the world, to make a mark that will last forever. When they realize that they cannot achieve this, they are very disappointed. The only advice one can give to such people is: Get Over It.

Rather than fight the fact of our insignificance, however, and of the mere existence of our subjectivity, my proposal is that we live in a way that acknowledges the fact, or, at any rate, that harmonizes with it. Living in a way that is significantly focussed on, engaged with, and concerned to promote or realize value whose source comes from outside of oneself, does seem to harmonize with this, whereas living purely egocentrically does not. Living lives that attain or realize some nonsubjective value may not make us meaningful, much less important, to anyone other than ourselves, but it will give us something to say, to think, in response to the recognition of perspectives that we ourselves imaginatively adopt that are indifferent to our existence and to our well-being.

At the beginning of this paper, I raised the question of how the meaning of life – or the absence of such meaning – was related to the meaningfulness of particular lives. As I might have put it, does it really make sense to think that there can be meaningful lives in a meaningless world? In light of this discussion, we can see how the answer to that question might be “yes” while still holding on to the idea that the similar wording of the two phrases is not merely coincidental.

If I am right about what is involved in living a meaningful life – if, that is, living a meaningful life is a matter of at least partly successful engagement in projects of positive value – then the possibility of living meaningful lives despite the absence of an overall meaning *to* life can be seen to depend on the fact that distinctions of value (that is, of objective value) do not rely on the existence of God or of any overarching urpose to the human race as a whole. Whether or not God exists, the fact remains that some objects, activities and ideas are better than others. Whether or not God exists, some ways of living are more worthwhile than others. Some activities are a waste of time.

People are sometimes tempted to think that if God doesn't exist, then nothing matters. They are tempted to think that if we will all die, and eventually all traces of our existence will fade from all consciousness, there is no point to doing anything; nothing makes any difference. Tolstoy evidently thought this sometimes, and gave eloquent voice to that view. But the reasoning is ridiculous. If one activity is worthwhile and another is a waste, then one has reason to prefer the former, even if there is no God to look down on us and approve. More generally, we seem to have reason to engage ourselves with projects of value whether God exists and gives life a purpose or not.

Putting things this way, however, fails to explain why we use the language of meaning to describe lives engaged in activities of worth. Putting things this way there seems to be no connection at all between the question of whether there is a meaning to life and the question of whether individual lives can be meaningful. I believe, however, that there is a connection, that shows itself, or perhaps that consists in the fact that the

wish for both kinds of meaning are evoked by the same thought, and that, perhaps, either kind of meaning would be an appropriate and satisfying response to that thought. The thought in question is the thought (the true thought) that we are tiny specks in a vast universe. It is a thought that is apt to be upsetting when it first hits you – at least in part because, looking back from that position, it may seem that one had until then lived “as if” something opposite were true. One had lived perhaps until then as if one were the center of the universe, the sole possessor or source of all value. One had all along assumed one had a special and very important place in the world, and now one’s assumption is undermined. One can see how, in this context, one might wish for a meaning to life. For if there were a meaning – a purpose, that is, to human existence that can be presumed to be of great importance, then, by playing a role, by contributing to that purpose, one can recover some of the significance one thought one’s life had. Like the pessimistic philosophers I talked about a few minutes ago, I doubt that that path is open to us. But there seems another way one can respond to the thought, or to the recognition of our relatively insignificant place in the universe, that is more promising, and that can, and sometimes does, provide a different kind of comfort. If one lived one’s life, prior to the recognition of our smallness, as if one was the center of the universe, the appropriate response to that recognition is simply *to stop living that way*. If one turns one’s attention to other parts of the universe – even to other specks like oneself – in a way that appreciates and engages with the values or valuable objects that come from outside oneself, then one corrects one’s practical stance. If, in addition, one is partly successful in producing, preserving, or promoting value – if one does some good, or realizes value, then one has something to say, or to think in response to the worry that one’s life has no point.

Only if some suggestion like mine is right can we make sense of the intuitions about meaningfulness to which I called attention in the earlier part of this paper. According to those intuitions the difference between a meaningful and a meaningless life

is not a difference between a life that does a lot of good, and a life that does a little. (Nor is it a difference between a life that makes a big splash and one that, so to speak, sprays only a few drops.) It is rather a difference between a life that does good or is good or realizes value and a life that is essentially a waste.⁶ According to these intuitions, there is as sharp a contrast between the Blob and a life devoted to the care of a single needy individual as there is between the Blob and someone who manages to change the world for the better on a grand scale. Indeed, there may be an equally sharp contrast between the Blob and the monk of a contemplative order whose existence confers no benefit or change on anyone else's life at all. Ironically, along this dimension, Tolstoy fares exceptionally well.

Thus it seems to me that even if there is no meaning to life, even if, that is, life as a whole has no purpose, no direction, no point, that is no reason to doubt the possibility of finding and making meaning in life – that is no reason, in other words, to doubt the possibility of people living meaningful lives. In coming to terms with our place and our status in the universe, it is natural and appropriate that people should want to explore the possibility of both types of meaning. Even if philosophers have nothing new or encouraging to say about the possibility of meaning of the first sort, there may be some point to elaborating the different meanings of the idea of finding meaning in life, and in pointing out the different forms that coming to terms with the human condition can take.

True, the Good and the Lovable:
Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity¹

Susan Wolf

In the title essay of Harry Frankfurt's first collection of essays², Frankfurt makes a plea for the importance of a topic rarely addressed by philosophers: what to care about. It is curious that the question of what is *worth* caring about comes up quite late in the essay and is treated as relatively peripheral. Even more curious is Frankfurt's answer: Some things, Frankfurt writes, may be important to a person independently of whether she cares about them.³ But we care about many things that would not be important to us if we did not care about them - our individual friends, for example, and such activities as philosophy, basketball, or music. With respect to this category, Frankfurt's answer to the question of what to

¹ I benefited greatly from the discussions of audiences at the University of Colorado, William and Mary, the Australian National University, and Johns Hopkins University, as well as to the participants of The Contours of Agency Conference who heard an earlier draft of this paper. In addition, I owe special thanks to Nomy Arpaly, Chris Grau, Sarah Buss, and Lee Overton, for detailed comments.

² Harry G. Frankfurt, *The importance of what we care about* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³ In personal correspondence, he explained that he has in mind things like background radiation or protein in one's diet that are important to something (such as health) that the person *does* care about. He did not intend to suggest that anything (even health, for example) might be important to a person independently of anything the person cares about. This is somewhat confusing in the text, for he writes that "the question of what to care about (construed as including the question of whether to care about anything) is one which must necessarily be important to him." *Ibid.*, p. 9. He immediately qualifies this, however, with the comment that even this may not be *sufficiently* important to the person to make it worth his while to care about it.

care about is striking: it is "suitable" he says to care about what it is *possible* for you to care about.⁴ Care, in other words, about what you can. In "Duty and Love"⁵ he writes in a similar vein about love.⁶

My main purpose in this paper will be to take issue with this provocative claim, or at least with the suggestion lurking behind it that the question of whether something is *worthy* of our love and concern is out of place. Though philosophers, perhaps especially moral philosophers, may tend to place too much importance on the worthiness of possible objects of love, the proper, albeit unexciting response, is to take a more moderate position rather than to reject the relevance of worth entirely. The bulk of this paper, then, is aimed at making this unexciting point and at exploring the way in which worthiness does or should fit in to our considerations of what to love and care about.

The degree to which my position on this matter is opposed to Frankfurt's is not easy to pin down, for Frankfurt does not explicitly reject the relevance of worth entirely. He rather avoids the subject. But it is curious

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Duty and Love," *Philosophical Explorations*, Vol. 1 (1), 1998, 4-9.

⁶ Though Frankfurt does not discuss the relation between love and care at length, he evidently regards loving to be a type of caring – or, more precisely, he takes the varieties of loving to be types of caring. See "The importance of what we care about," *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

that Frankfurt's silence, or near silence, on the relevance of objective value to the questions of what to care about and love resonates with Frankfurt's discussion of other topics, where I also think inattention to (or silent denial of) the relevance of objective value leads Frankfurt to flawed conclusions. One such topic is wholeheartedness, a virtue for which Frankfurt has unbounded enthusiasm. Another is free will, which Frankfurt famously analyzes as the freedom to have the will you wholeheartedly want to have. I shall discuss these briefly at the end of this essay. On these issues, as well as on the question of what to care about, Frankfurt avoids an acknowledgment of the relevance of worth. Because of this - at least so I shall argue - his positions are ultimately unsatisfactory.

Frankfurt's view and its opposite

In both "The importance of what to care about" and "Duty and Love" Frankfurt's primary concern is not to address the question of *what* to care about but to stress the importance to us of caring about *something*. As Frankfurt emphasizes, caring about or loving things (activities, persons) other than ourselves makes an enormous difference to our ability to live fulfilling lives. Moreover, Frankfurt believes that "it is not so

easy for most of us to find things that we are capable of loving."⁷ These points together, presumably, lead him to conclude that we should care about what we can.

"What makes it more suitable," Frankfurt asks, "for a person to make one object rather than another important to himself?" He answers

It seems that it must be the fact that it is *possible* for him to care about the one and not about the other, or to care about the one in a way which is more important to him than the way in which it is possible for him to care about the other. When a person makes something important to himself, accordingly, the situation resembles an instance of divine *agape* at least in a certain respect. The person does not care about the object because its worthiness commands that he do so. On the other hand, the worthiness of the activity of caring commands that he choose an object which he will be able to care about.⁸

What Frankfurt is recommending, however, is not completely clear. What does it take to license the claim that a particular person *is able* to care about a thing (that is, that it is possible for him to care about it)? Although we cannot care (or cease to care) about things at will, with effort over time we can come to care about things that we do not care about naturally. Perhaps, and especially if we allow the use of nefarious or misguided psychological techniques, we can come to care about some very odd or very

⁷ "Duty and Love," *op. cit.*, p. 7. I am more optimistic than Frankfurt about humans' capacity to find

creepy things. One might come to develop a passion for making dishes that include marshmallow fluff as an ingredient - or more seriously, one might develop a love of torture.

Now Frankfurt nowhere suggests that we should care about everything we possibly can. So the fact that one *can* care, say, about torture, does not imply that one positively *should*. On the other hand, if we look to the passage above for advice about *whether* we should (or, for that matter, about advice about whether we should care about recipes with marshmallow fluff), the kinds of questions on which it urges us to focus seem to leave some salient considerations out (at least, it leaves them out as considerations having direct unmediated importance). Frankfurt seems to advocate that we care about what we can - and that, if we have a choice about what to care about, we care about whatever will be most fulfilling, rewarding, and satisfying to us to care about. If our make-up and circumstances are such that we will be more rewarded by caring about helping people rather than hurting them, then we should cultivate our sympathies. If, however, we would

objects of love.

⁸ "The importance of what we care about," *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

be more fulfilled by taking up the call of sadism, nothing in Frankfurt's remarks seems to discourage it.

These concerns should make us wary about Frankfurt's position - or at least cautious about stating it precisely. If the view that love need not reflect any judgments of worth in the beloved seems problematic, however, the opposite view - that love *should* reflect worth - may seem even worse. Indeed, I suspect that antagonism towards that view lies behind the extreme statement of Frankfurt's own position.

The view I have in mind as the opposite view, that love should reflect worth, may be stated more precisely as the view that one's love of a person or object or activity should be proportional to its value or worthiness to be loved. One should love most that which is most deserving. One might put this by saying one should love the Good. Such a view seems more or less taken for granted by both Plato and Aristotle, and is at least implicitly suggested by some high-minded styles of Christianity and some versions of consequentialist thinking. Despite the venerable figures and traditions that have explicitly or implicitly embraced it, however, we have strong reason to reject it.

That there is *something* wrong with the view seems evident from the very thought of the conclusions it seems to imply: that we should love or care about one person more than another because she is a more worthy candidate of love (more intelligent, stronger, wittier, perhaps) is highly offensive. Even the view that one should care about activities or objects in proportion to their worth - classical music more than rock, for example, or philosophy more than fashion or food, seems absurd. A person who holds such a view and tries to pattern her cares after it seems alternately pompous, stiff, and self-righteous or naive, foolish, and pathetic. I can think of at least two different ways of trying to articulate what is so objectionable about these suggestions. Both seem to me to have something right about them.

First, one might think that the idea that some things are more worthy candidates of love and concern than others reflects a mistaken view about the existence or nature of objective value. The view that one should love what is good in proportion to its goodness evidently presupposes that some things are better than others. But, so the objection goes, this is simply false. Though people differ in intelligence, attractiveness, and virtue, they do not (it is said) differ in worth, so the idea that one should

love according to worth is out of place here. Similarly, it may be argued the idea that some activities and interests are worthier than others is misguided. One activity is as good as another, if one can get equally enthusiastic about it. Pauline Kael's writing about movies is as good - for her and for the world - as Quine's writing about the indeterminacy of translation. My aerobics instructor lives as worthwhile a life as my doctor. The idea that one's loves should proportionally reflect the value of the objects of love thus may seem to reveal a false picture of the evaluative facts of the world. If we reject the false presuppositions about value on which the view is thought to rely, the position may seem literally unintelligible.

Alternatively, one might regard the view in question as intelligible but horrible. The problem is not that there are no evaluative facts that could be a basis for channeling one's affections. It is rather that a world in which people did so direct their loves would be the worse for it. Perhaps, so this objection goes, some people and things are better than others. Mozart's body of work is presumably better than Salieri's. People like Mother Theresa are presumably better than drug-dealing slumlords. But the idea that one should love according to what's worth

loving nonetheless seems seriously misguided. Just imagine the parent who loves one child more than another because the one is better (smarter, perhaps, or more unselfish).

The view that one should love what is worth loving and in proportion to its worthiness, then, seems horribly wrong. Yet the view that Frankfurt's work seems to suggest, that worthiness and love have nothing to do with each other, seems, for reasons already hinted at, problematic as well. This suggests that the truth lies somewhere in between - that worth figures in, somehow, to what it is desirable to care about, but not exclusively or perhaps decisively. In the next section, I shall explore what role worth might play in answer to the question of what ideally to care about. Following that, I shall take up the question of what, beyond or behind our intuitive responses might justify the view that worth plays a role.

The role of worth in what to care about

Staying, for the time being, at the level of intuitive responses, gives us some reason for thinking that the role worth plays in determining what to care about is to set a minimal condition. For it is not until we consider extreme examples - examples, we might say, of utterly worthless activities or objects - that the judgment that these are

unsuitable objects of care wins general approval. When it comes to people, the dominant view is that all people are appropriate objects of love. Even regarding the question of what activities or interests to have, we are tolerant, even encouraging about a very wide range - sports and science, food and philosophy, cars, movies, antiques, jazz - all seem fine as objects of interest, even passion. Never mind whether and which things are better or "most important."

It is a common view of parents and teachers that it doesn't matter what a child cares about, as long as he or she cares about *something*. This thought seems to support the Frankfurtian view, until we force the issue by looking at extreme cases. When parents say they just want their children to care about *something*, they mean they don't care whether it is soccer or ballet, mathematics or piano. But they start to get worried if their children spend all their time and money following the career of The Back Street Boys or playing bingo on the internet or working at breaking the world record for long distance spitting. Even worse if their interests veer to the morally objectionable - to hate groups or Satanic cults or sexual sadism, for example.

A plausible hypothesis is that there is a condition of worthiness lurking in the background of our views about

suitable, desirable caring, but that it is a minimal condition. We want what people care about to have some worth, to go above some bottom line of goodness, but there is no need to try to match one's cares proportionately to relative amounts of goodness. As long as the things you care about are good enough (and most things people tend to care about are), you're fine. You don't need to worry about whether they are as good as other possible objects of care.

Successful as this view seems to be in matching most of our intuitive judgments, I don't think it is strictly right. The phrase "You can do better," offered in advising a friend about her love life or her job, is at least sometimes in order. As the use of the comparative suggests, its point is not to insist that the man or the job at issue is utterly worthless or even falls below some minimal line - it is rather that as long as one has or is in a position to cultivate having more options, there is something to be said for aiming higher for a more interesting or virtuous or appealing partner or a more challenging or responsible or socially useful job.

Furthermore, interests we might approve of, even delight in, as hobbies on the side, may worry us if they take over too much of a person's attention and energy.

Being a fan of a sports team, a bridge player, a lover of musical comedies, adds interest and variety to life, and helps make one person different from another, giving us distinct identities. Interests like these are good and healthy - but they can take more time, and demand more sacrifice of other things than they are worth. These reactions suggest that some kind of proportionality requirement, rather than a simple minimal condition, is operating in shaping our judgments about what it is suitable to care about. People should care about only what is at least somewhat worth caring about; and how much people should care about things, both in themselves, and relative to other things they care about, depends somewhat on *how* worth caring about the objects in question are.

But how can we accept such a requirement without committing ourselves to the view that we have already criticized - the view that you should love what is good and only insofar as it is good? A few further considerations may temper the requirement in ways that make it more acceptable.

The first is that in accepting the view that worthiness of an object is a factor in the suitability of that object to be an object of care, we are not committed to the view that it is the sole or dominant factor. Just

as, to use a mundane example, expense and comfort are both factors in the suitability of a pair of shoes for purchase, worth may be one factor among others in the suitability of an objection for our affection. Indeed Frankfurt's own discussions of what to care about and what to love provide us with another factor. I shall call it affinity.

As Frankfurt notes, loving itself, caring deeply about some things, is itself of enormous importance to living a good and satisfying life. To go through life not loving anyone, not caring about anything is a horrible fate - far worse, most of us would say, than living with cares that bring with them considerable grief and frustration. Friendship and love bring with them the risk of pain at the beloved's misfortunes and sorrow; aspirations and ideals cannot be reached without difficulty, striving, and often stress. Few, however, would trade a life of love and commitment with its concomitant sorrows for a life free of risk and pain that lacked any real cares.

Caring, then, and loving, are goods in themselves - especially if the caring is deep and passionate. This - and the fact that one cannot make oneself care deeply and passionately about something at will - is what supports Frankfurt's judgment that one should care about what it is possible for one to care about. This is what is sensible

in the parents' desire that their children just care about something.

Imagining a parent trying to find a suitable spouse for her child highlights the difficulties with the idea that a person can and should love according to some impersonal list of good qualities. It seems pointless even to try to love a person, career, or project that one cannot get excited about even if one recognizes that he, she or it is tremendously worthwhile. When it comes to choosing (insofar as one can choose) what to love or care about, then, the fact that one activity, object, or person is not objectively as good or better than any number of others may pale in importance before one's enthusiasm for that particular one. Affinity, then, in addition to worth, is relevant to the question of what to care about.

Even this position - that worth and affinity are both factors that weigh in to the question of what to care about, factors that interact and possibly compete - would be dry and wrongheaded if taken in a certain way against the background of certain assumptions about value. If, for example, one believes or even takes seriously the possibility, that people can be rated and ranked rather precisely on some scale of merit - if one thinks, perhaps, that the traits our society standardly values in people,

like intelligence, physical attractiveness, kindness, talent, make one person more valuable, and so more worthy of love than another - the view that worth and affinity are both factors determining the suitability of an object of love may remain as offensive as the original view that worth alone matters. For it suggests that it would be preferable if one's loves did match this ranking (would that I had a more objectively worthy child!), even if that consideration might be outweighed or compensated by affinity. This seems as repugnant as the "purer" view that one should love what is good just insofar as it is good.

The fact is, however - or at least I think the fact is - that the realm of value is both complex and pocketed with indeterminacies. Though total skepticism about value seems to me unwarranted, the idea that each person or object can be assigned a precise quantity of value on a scale by which it can be compared with others seems deeply mistaken.

In the domain of persons, the dominant view is that no person is more valuable than any other - not because there is no such thing as value, but because each person has a value beyond price. It would follow from this that the chilling idea that we should try to train our affections so as to love people in proportion to their value is out of place not because of any objection to the idea that value

is an appropriate consideration in connection with what to love, but rather because, when it comes to people, any person qualifies as maximally satisfying this consideration.⁹ By contrast, there is less consensus on the appropriateness of showering comparable affection on a pet, a disagreement plausibly explained by doubts about whether lower animals *merit* the same kind and degree of devotion.

In evaluating possible objects of interest and love other than people - activities, projects, and inanimate objects, for example - we can expect to find similar indeterminacies and incommensurabilities. There may be no answer to questions like, 'Is it more worthwhile to pursue sculpture, basketball, or chess?' or it may be that, particularly when one breaks free of some traditional, elitist or otherwise narrow-minded assumptions, the answer to such questions is more often than might be expected, that each is in its own way more or less equally worthwhile.

⁹ This, however, appears to be at odds with our willingness to think "you can do better" in connection with a person's choice of partner, at least as I interpreted that remark earlier in this essay. I believe this reflects a serious tension or confusion in our thoughts on the value of persons that deserves more philosophical attention than it has received. One way of resolving this tension is to understand "you can do better" as a purely relational remark, referring not at all to how good a person the possible loved one is, but to how good it is *for the lover* to love that person. Another possibility is to distinguish two strands in our talk of the goodness or value of persons. In one sense, perhaps, all persons are of equal value, making them equally deserving of a kind of respect and certain forms of treatment; in another, some people are better than others, in virtue of their different qualities, and this may make them differentially deserving of certain kinds of love. I regret that I cannot do justice to this interesting issue here.

Perhaps even more important than the considerations mentioned so far is a further point - namely, that affinity for an object, activity or person encourages or makes possible kinds of worth or value that would not exist without it, value that lies not in the object considered in itself, but in the lover of that object or the relationship between them. Some people bring out the best in each other; they allow or encourage each other to fulfill their potentials. Similarly, a person's affinity for a genre or for a more particular type of entity can inspire and stimulate him in ways no other thing can. One thinks of Glenn Gould's relation to Bach, of Merchant and Ivory's relation to post-Victorian fiction.

In asking what it would be best or "most suitable" for a person to care about or love, then, we are apt to take into account at least three sorts of consideration: whether (and how much) the object in question is itself worth caring about, whether (and how much) the person has an affinity for the object in question, and whether (and how much) the relation between the person and the object has the potential to create or bring forth experiences, acts, or objects of further value.

I conclude, then, that, when held in conjunction with the qualifications discussed above, the view that

considerations of worth are relevant to the question of what to care about and what to love accords better with our considered untheoretical judgments than the view I have attributed to Frankfurt, that one should care simply about what one can, never mind how worthwhile what one cares about is.

Reasons why worth should play a role

That a view matches our untheoretical judgments (our intuitions, as they are often called, even though they are meant to embrace reflective and considered judgments and not just gut reactions) gives some support to the view. Still, we can look for reasons supporting or explaining the view we find ourselves pretheoretically to have. *Ought* we to care that the things we care about are worth caring about - that they meet some standard of objective value? What difference does it make whether what we care about is objectively valuable or not? I can think of two reasons for wanting our cares to be attentive to what is worth caring about, two reasons, that is, for thinking that worth should be a consideration for what to care about. One has to do with an interest in truth, the other with an interest in meaning.

We have, I believe, an interest in truth - or, more precisely, an interest in living in the real world. We do not want to be living in a fantasy world, to be deluded, particularly about aspects of the world with which we interact and on the basis of which we make decisions and orient our lives. This interest may not be universal - that there are some who are untroubled by the thought of a life plugged into Nozick's pleasure machine suggests that it is not. Nor need it be overriding - some truths may be so painful and disruptive that we would be better off not knowing them. Nor am I sure that the question of whether one *should* care fundamentally about the truth admits of any argument. Still, the interest is natural enough, prevalent enough, and sensible enough to allow us to say that, other things being equal, we are better off not being deluded, especially about things that play a significant role in our lives.

Among other things, this implies that we do not want to be deluded about the things that we love and care about. But if you love something, or seriously care about it, it is hard not to think of it as good. If you love something, you probably will think of it as good - though not necessarily better than things that you do not love. Often, love develops out of our finding or seeing something

good about the things we come to love; our loving something also tends to make us look for and attend to the good that is in it. To love a thing that one doesn't regard as good or worthy of love is, at the least, uncomfortable. As Michael Stocker notes, it is a mark of a good life that there be a harmony between what one cares about and what one thinks good.¹⁰ This provides one reason why it is preferable to love what is worth loving: loving what is worth loving allows us to love happily, wholeheartedly, unashamedly¹¹ with our eyes wide open.

The second reason for wanting to love what is worth loving is related to the first. It is that, in addition to wanting to live in the real world, we want to be connected to it - that is, we want our lives to have some positive relation to things or people or ideas that are valuable independently of us. This, I believe, is at the core of the desire to live a meaningful life.¹² More specifically, I think meaning in life arises when affinity and worth meet. In other words, meaning in life arises when subjective

¹⁰ Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73, 14 (August 12, 1976) pp. 453-66.

¹¹ Unashamed, that is, with respect to this issue. It is, of course, possible to be ashamed, unhappy, and conflicted about loving something or someone for reasons other than the unworthiness of the object of one's love. It may be inappropriate to love someone, or to love her in a particular way, for reasons other than worthiness.

¹² See my "Meaningful Lives in a Meaningless World," *Quaestiones Infnitae* Vol. 19 (June, 1997), publication of the Department of Philosophy, Utrecht University, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy & Policy* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter, 1997) 207-225, and "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. XCVII (1997) 299-315.

attraction meets objective attractiveness, when one finds oneself able to love what is worth loving, and able, further, to do something with or about it - to contribute to or promote or preserve or give honor and appreciation to what one loves.

Again, the interest in living a meaningful life may be neither universal nor overriding. Again, the question of whether one should care about living a meaningful life may not admit of argument.¹³ Still the interest is natural enough, prevalent enough, and sensible enough to allow us to say that, other things being equal, it is better to live a meaningful life. If there is nothing we love or are able to love, a meaningful life is not open to us. But if what we love, and so what we devote ourselves to, is worthless, our lives will lack meaning as well.

In case these remarks seem harsh or overly judgmental, let me remind you that they are offered against the background assumption that the facts about value are likely to be highly pluralistic and complex and that in consequence our approach to questions of objective value should be tolerant and open-minded. The values recognized by somber moralists hardly exhaust the sorts of values that make things and people worth caring about and loving.

I assume, indeed, that most of what people love and care about - nature, culture, religious community, knowledge, sports, and of course family and friends - are well worth loving and caring about. And most of the time, the various things that people care about they care about to an appropriate degree. If this is so, one might wonder whether it is necessary to bother mentioning, much less harping on, the need for the objects of our love and care to be worth loving and caring about. Why bother mentioning a condition that is almost always satisfied without even thinking about it?

One reason to mention it is that it is part of a complete answer to the question of what to love and care about, even if a part that is easily satisfied in a wide variety of ways. Another is that even if most of what people love and care about is suitably worth caring about, not all of it is, nor is there a guarantee that, without attending to considerations of value, people's patterns of caring will forever meet this condition. If we forget that worthiness is a consideration relevant to the question of what to care about, we may become confused about whether and why we should encourage our children, for example, to develop some of their interests rather than others.

¹³ Though I offer one in "Meaningful Lives in a Meaningless World," *op. cit.* pp. 17-21.

Moreover, in a world in which people's tastes and passions are increasingly determined by market forces that do not have the good of their subjects or of the world at heart, the possibility that people will increasingly come to care about what is not worth caring about may be a growing danger.

Thus it seems to me we should accept the unexciting thesis I announced at the beginning of the paper - that relevant to the question of what to love is the question of what is worthy of love. It is better to love what is worthy of love than to love what is not.

Frankfurt's avoidance of objectivity

As I also mentioned at the beginning of this paper, this position, boring and common-sensical as it is, seems to me to go against the grain of Frankfurt's writings on what to love and care about. For the core of Frankfurt's message seems to be that it is important to care about, to love *something*, never mind what it is, and so, *a fortiori*, never mind whether it is worthy of love. At the same time, Frankfurt never explicitly rejects the position for which I have been arguing. Indeed, despite his claiming that one should care about what it is possible to care about, he admits that caring a lot about avoiding the cracks in the

sidewalk would be in some way regrettable.¹⁴ And when he says that "the importance to us of loving does not derive from an appreciation by us of the value of what we love," he inserts the parenthetical phrase "at least, not exclusively."¹⁵ These remarks suggest that Frankfurt does not so much reject the thesis that objective value matters, as that he wishes to avoid, or de-emphasize the subject. If this were right, then my difference with Frankfurt (on this issue, at least) would be merely one of emphasis - and a difference in emphasis need not be a *disagreement* about anything at all.

However, I suspect that there is a disagreement lurking behind the difference in emphasis. For the neglect or avoidance of considerations of objective value that I have been discussing in connection with the question of

¹⁴ More precisely, he writes "No doubt he is committing an error of some kind in caring about this. But his error is not that he cares about something which is not really important to him. Rather, his error consists in caring about, and thereby imbuing with genuine importance, something which is not worth caring about. The reason it is not worth caring about seems clear: it is not important to the person to make avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk important to himself. But we need to understand better just why this is so..." "The importance of what to care about," *op.cit.*, p. 94.

Frankfurt's claim to the contrary, it does not seem clear to me why, from Frankfurt's perspective, avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk is not worth caring about. (I leave aside the possibility that the person's care is based on a factual error - that he believes, for example, that if he steps on a crack he will break his mother's back.) Compare someone who cares about learning to play the Beethoven sonatas (I assume this would not be a mistake) with the person who cares about avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk. Why is it important *to* the former to make learning the Beethoven sonatas important to himself but not important *to* the latter to make avoiding the crack in the sidewalk important to himself? On my view, we may distinguish the worthiness of caring about these two aims by referring to the contrast between what is valuable about learning the Beethoven sonatas (it spurs the person to develop his skill at the piano, it brings him to a more intimate understanding of the beauty of the works, and so on) and what is valuable about avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk (precisely nothing). But this would not naturally be expressed in terms of its being important *to* the person to make the achievement in question important to himself. In any event, it does not seem to be what Frankfurt has in mind.

what to love and care about is part of a pattern in Frankfurt's work. There are a number of issues on which Frankfurt writes to which it seems to me a concern for objectivity is relevant. Since Frankfurt never expresses nor acknowledges such a concern, I suspect that he thinks it misguided or out of place.

One such issue concerns the desirability of wholeheartedness. In "The Faintest Passion,"¹⁶ Frankfurt writes in glowing terms about the value of wholeheartedness, and in correspondingly negative terms about its opposite, ambivalence. Indeed, he writes "It is a necessary truth about us that we wholeheartedly desire to be wholehearted."¹⁷

Now, I am inclined to describe myself as ambivalent about wholeheartedness (and correspondingly ambivalent about the opposite of wholeheartedness, ambivalence itself). For to be wholehearted about one's values, one's interests, one's loves is to be fully and unwaveringly committed to them, to harbor no doubts, nor any inclination or willingness to doubt whether to continue in one's attachment to them. But if one believes that one's values might be wrong, or that it might be a mistake to care or to

¹⁵ "Duty and Love," *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) Chapter 8, pp. 95-107.

care so much about something, then it seems to me a certain degree of ambivalence, or at least openness to ambivalence, is called for. To be sure, to worry too much about whether one's values are right can be neurotic, and ambivalence and the indecisiveness that tends to go with it, can be paralyzing. On the other hand, wholeheartedness in the face or the context of objective reasons for doubt, seems indistinguishable from zealotry, fanaticism, or, at the least, close-mindedness. That Frankfurt shows no concern for this as a problem suggests either that he thinks people cannot be wrong about what to value and what to care about or that being wrong about such things does not matter. But it does matter - or, at least, it may.¹⁸

The second issue on which, I would argue, Frankfurt's views suffer from his neglect or rejection of the relevance of objectivity is that of free will. As is well known, Frankfurt believes that freedom of the will - which, with freedom of action, is "all the freedom it is possible to desire or to conceive"¹⁹ - consists in the freedom to have the will that one wants (wholeheartedly) to have. Roughly,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁸ This is not an expression of ambivalence about my ambivalence about ambivalence. Rather, I mean to say that even if it would be unwarranted to say that everyone ought to care about whether their values are sufficiently worthwhile and right, there is nothing wrong with people who do care about this. For those of us who do care, therefore, if not for anyone else, it is reasonable to be ambivalent about wholeheartedness.

¹⁹ "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Importance of What We Care About, op. cit.*, p. 22.

it is the freedom to act from one's deepest, most authentic, or "Real" Self, as opposed to acting on desires that are not affirmed and supported by one's deepest level of reflection and feeling.

A problem with this, also well known, is that there are examples of people who meet Frankfurt's condition who do not seem intuitively to have free will - and certainly not to have "all the freedom it is possible to desire or to conceive." A person with paranoid tendencies, for example, or one with an obsessive concern for cleanliness might be perfectly content with her values, and consequently with the will (say, to maintain twelve locks on her apartment door, or to avoid public places where germs are rampant) that flows from these values and cares. Such people will have problems with the world, no doubt, but not with themselves. They may act wholeheartedly, exercising the will they want to have. But far from being free (or from having a free will), they seem to me to be examples of people who are trapped, constrained, shackled by psychological problems the very nature of which makes their problems (their shackles) impossible for them to see.

Incompatibilists take such cases to indicate an incompatibilist condition on freedom - something like the condition that people be able to create or control or

choose their own deepest selves. Like Frankfurt, I think this condition is unsatisfiable (and indeed, with Frankfurt, I do not think anything valuable would be gained if it could be satisfied). But in fact I think these examples show something else which a compatibilist can grant, and which when properly appreciated, may be able to explain away some of our incompatibilist impulses. Specifically, the problem with the paranoid and the cleanliness fanatic is not that they lack complete control of their deepest selves - perhaps we all lack that - but that what is in control, in their cases, are irrational forces that warp their victims' ability to appreciate what is true and worthwhile, that is, to see things aright. When we say, with Frankfurt, that freedom of the will is the freedom to have the will one wants, we take for granted that the one who is doing the wanting (the real self, as it were) is a sane person, able to understand and appreciate reasons (for example, reasons for valuing some things more than others) for what they are. The relevance of objectivity thus seems to me to lurk in the background of the problem of free will, as it lurks in the background of what to care about and of whether to be wholehearted.

Let me conclude with a highly speculative suggestion about why Frankfurt, a philosopher otherwise so insightful

and perceptive about what is important in our lives, should have a blind spot when it comes to the importance of objectivity. Though Frankfurt is generally silent about the relevance of objective judgments in our lives, he is not silent about another topic: the importance of morality. At the beginning of "Duty and Love," for example, Frankfurt confesses that "it seems to (him) that many philosophers...are excessively preoccupied with morality." "In my opinion," he goes on to say, "this pan-moralistic conception of practical normativity is mistaken."²⁰ As Frankfurt has also noted, philosophers have, in recent centuries, focussed relatively little on other spheres of practical normativity, and for this and other reasons, talk of objective value and worth tend to be associated or identified with specifically moral value and moral worth. My speculation is that Frankfurt's distaste for moralism and his view that morality is less central to our lives than moral philosophers tend to think is behind Frankfurt's avoidance of considerations of objectivity, of truth and goodness, too. But this seems to me regrettable.

If one focuses on what Frankfurt urges us to focus on - on what is important to us, what gives our lives meaning, what makes us the persons we are - one will see that there

²⁰ "Duty and Love," *op. cit.*, p. 4.

is much that is valuable without being morally valuable, much that is worth doing and caring about that is not morally worth doing or caring about. Nonmoral value need not have any universal practical or even emotional implications - that an activity is valuable does not imply that everyone ought to engage in it, or even want to engage in it. That an individual is worth loving does not imply that everyone ought to love her. Nor do claims about what is nonmorally good need to be cashed out in terms of what is good *for* anyone. There is much, for example, that is worth doing despite its being of no particular benefit to humankind.

These last remarks seem to me to be in the spirit of Frankfurt's philosophy. But they use a vocabulary of objective value and worth, which Frankfurt's own writing avoids. What I have tried to suggest in this paper is that if we want to get complete and adequate answers to the questions Frankfurt himself wants us to ask, we cannot avoid such language. We cannot in other words avoid the relevance and the value of objectivity.