A few philosophical ruminations on the human condition and choosing to live well

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Abstract

The notion that life is meaningful through *choosing* to live *well* has historically received substantive attention in various philosophical circles, notably the ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and more recently several of the existentialists. In some respects, the idea of choosing to live well is a "thematization" of two widely-recognized, independent components of a meaningful life: happiness and authenticity. I develop this notion of choosing to live well by exploring, developing, and relating these conceptions of happiness and authenticity. By appealing to a very basic account of human nature that has found favor among a great number of people, I show how happiness and authenticity complement each other as conditions for the possibility of living meaningfully.

Key words: Plato, Aristotle, existentialism, happiness, authenticity.

Resumen

La noción de que la vida es significativa gracias a la *elección* de vivir *bien* ha recibido históricamente atención sustancial en varios círculos filosóficos, principalmente entre los antiguos filósofos griegos Sócrates, Platón y Aristóteles, y más recientemente de varios de los existencialistas. En algunos aspectos, la idea de escoger vivir bien es una "tematización" de dos componentes independientes, ampliamente reconocidos como propios de una vida significativa: felicidad y autenticidad. El autor desarrolla la noción de escoger vivir bien explorando, desarrollando y relacionando estos conceptos. Por medio de la apelación a una explicación muy básica de la naturaleza humana, aceptada por gran número de personas, se muestra cómo felicidad y autenticidad se complementan una con otra como condiciones para la posibilidad de vivir significativamente.

Palabras clave: Platón, Aristóteles, existencialismo, felicidad, autenticidad.

Suppose a respected professional, a trusted friend, or a family member approached you and claimed that life is a meaningless waste of time. Would you think this person was joking? Would you be shocked, perhaps indignant? Would you seriously doubt this person's well being? I suspect some of us would be inclined to wonder why any reasonable person should think such a thing. Anyone who has ever waited in a long line at a grocery store or a government office only to be redirected to the back of another long line, or anyone who has spent time sitting in rush hour traffic will undoubtedly agree that at least some of life is a tremendous waste of time. Of course most people accept that life is worth living, but surprisingly few have an easy time explaining precisely what makes life meaningful, and of those who have ready answers a surprising number vehemently disagree about what constitutes a meaningful life. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once remarked, "people are deceived about

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the knowledge of obvious things" (McKirahan, 1994, p. 117). Could it be that the answer to the question of the meaning of life is really something quite obvious but we persistently fool ourselves as we approach it?

In this essay I shall discuss how certain basic assumptions about the human condition inform a conception of a meaningful life that emphasizes the *choices* people make in the *activity of living* their lives. Notice first that I have shifted the question from the meaning of life to the meaning*fulness* of life. The distinction is subtle but important: I wish to avoid burdensome and restrictive questions like "Why are we here?" and "What is the purpose of life?" and so forth—typical ways of asking about the meaning of life. Undoubtedly these are interesting questions to ask, but formulated as such they suggest some natural or divine plan or meaning for humans which if humans were clever or pious enough, we would be able to raise the curtains of ignorance to behold the final Answer. The beauty of considering the topic from the vantage of the human condition is that it focuses the conversation on what is universal and present to all humans, regardless of culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, and socio-economic status. I do not wish to preclude the possibility that there may be various particular ways of living a meaningful life within a general conception of what makes life meaningful.

The notion that life becomes meaningful through a person's choosing to live life robustly—in other words, through *choosing* to live *well*—has historically received substantive attention in various philosophical circles, notably the ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and more recently several of the existentialists, all of whom have significantly influenced my own philosophical development. In some respects, the idea of choosing to live well is a "thematization" of two widely-recognized, independent components of a meaningful life: happiness and authenticity. To this extent, I doubt anyone would find the general view I shall present here surprising or scandalous. However, I also doubt that, say, the Aristotelian conception of happiness or the existential conception of authenticity are ones many people would find intuitive. My project is to develop this notion of choosing to live well by exploring, developing, and relating these conceptions of happiness and authenticity. By appealing to a very basic account of human nature that has found favor among a great number of people, I shall show how happiness and authenticity complement each other as conditions for the possibility of living meaningfully.

Some problems with happiness

Often when I ask my students for a word that they think best characterizes a meaningful life they say *happiness*. Clearly happiness is a prime contender for making a life worth living—after all, is there anyone who truly resists the desire to be happy? I suspect those who live miserably are people who would rather be living happily. Or they seem to live miserably but actually find happiness in living what appears to others to be an unhappy life, or they are simply ignorant of the greater possibilities in life for happiness. So, I shall take it, loosely speaking, to be axiomatic that all people desire happiness.

But, now the work comes. What do we *mean* by happiness? Responses to this question typically include *pleasure*, *contentment*, *satisfaction*, *tranquility*, and even *giddiness*, among others. However, there are several reasons for rejecting any of these as the sole constituent of a meaningful life. The 18th Century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1989) seriously questioned whether any of these psychological states could claim title to the highest *good*, since one can imagine thoroughly bad people experiencing pleasure, contentment, personal satisfaction, etc. Would we really be comfortable with the idea that a thoroughly bad person was in fact living a meaningful life simply because he lives a pleasant life? I think for similar reasons one should be hesitant to think that any of these psychological states could be by itself *sufficient* for a meaningful life. Imagine a person injecting himself regularly with enough morphine to sustain a warm euphoria but which renders him mostly immobile and intensely passive.

The contemporary philosopher Robert Nozick (1989) has expressed a number of reasons against thinking that happiness conceived as pleasure, *et al*, is sufficient by itself for living a meanin-

gful life. Typically when we talk about pleasure we think of it, implicitly at least, as an internally "felt" state that we can quantify. That is, pleasure is something that we feel, and we feel pleasure in varying degrees, just like we feel pain in varying degrees. For example, the pleasure we receive from performing well on a test or reading a challenging novel is perhaps quantitatively less than drinking beer at a baseball game. In fact, the 19th Century philosopher John Stuart Mill (2001) argued that such examples not only show us that pleasure is felt in different degrees but that some pleasures are qualitatively better than others. There seem to be quantitative and qualitative dimensions to pleasure.

Nozick (1989) is concerned about this emphasis on pleasure in evaluating the meaningfulness of a life. First, if it's only the amount of pleasure that mattered in life we could never choose between two different lives that contain the exact same amount of pleasure in the end, but radically differ with regards to when the pleasure emerges. In one, a person experiences a constant, gradual increase in pleasure through life; in the other a person experiences a constant, gradual decrease. The amount of pleasure in both lives would be the same either way. But nevertheless we still prefer the former to the latter. So, there must be something more to life than the amount of pleasure one experiences.

And even if we grant that a life of increasing pleasure is the good life, Nozick (1989) argues that there is still a problem with pursuing a particular mode of life simply for its "felt" qualities. Nozick imagines a clever scientist inventing a machine, an "experience machine," that could produce whatever experience the person entering the machine preferred. Should the person want to experience the life of a prominent world leader or a microbiologist who finds a cure for infectious diseases, or even a supermodel or rock star, the machine could create it in a virtual world. The machine life would feel just like the real thing, perhaps even more intense. The catch is that the volunteer could never return to her original life in the real world and upon entering the machine would not remember anything of her previous life.

So, the question is, Would you get into the machine? Would you encourage your best friends to enter the machine? Would you place your child into the machine? Of course the point of such thought experiments is to get us to realize that there's something about the value and meaning of life beyond its felt qualities. One's life in the machine is faked. The people one meets aren't real. The effects of your actions are only apparent. Nozick's (1989) conclusion is that there does seem to be something to a meaningful life aside from the feelings we get from pleasure, satisfaction, tranquility, contentment, etc. What could it be?

Happiness and living well: The wisdom of a few ancient Greek philosophers

The ancient Greek philosophers had a number of int eresting insights into the nature of happiness, and although modern philosophers and scientists have debunked much of archaic Greek thought, the Greeks' sundry views on ethics, especially with respect to virtue and happiness, remain worthy of serious consideration. The ancient Greek word for happiness is the mysterious word *eudaimonia*. Aristotle claims that *eudaimonia* is the highest good and the *eudaimon* life is a pleasurable life, but *eudaimonia* is not the same thing as pleasure, nor do we pursue *eudaimonia* for the sake of pleasure. As Aristotle says rather poetically, pleasure completes happiness like the "bloom on youths" (Irwin, 1999, p. *NE* 117b33) by which he means that pleasure is a good which attends upon our living happily, like the attractiveness of youth attends upon youthfulness and makes the youth an object of desire. But pleasure is not *the* good.

Aristotle famously proclaims at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Irwin, 1999) that all creative and constructive arts, intellectual investigations, and practical activities such as decision-making seem to aim at some good, and he says because of that fact people have rightly considered the good to be that at which all things aim. Aristotle is compelled to make a case for this claim; he says:

"Suppose, then, that a) there is some end of the things we pursue in our actions which we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for other things; and b) we do not choose everything

because of something else, since c) if we do, it will go on without limit, making desire empty and futile; then clearly d) this end will be the good, i.e., the best good" (Irwin, 1999, p. 1094a18-22).

Aristotle is appealing to a fairly straightforward conception of human motivation. Humans are motivated by desire for their own good, and our own good is the ultimate end of all our actions, whether or not we reach it. Here's the basic intuition that Aristotle thinks is right: Suppose you see me standing on the street corner in the rain. You stop to ask me why I am standing in the rain, and I say I want to catch the bus uptown. You ask why I want to ride the bus uptown, and I respond that I want to get to 87th Street. You wonder why I should want to do that. And I say that I want to visit the art museum there. And you, being surprisingly persistent here in the rain, ask why I want to visit the museum. As my irritation increases, I snap back something about wanting to see the Caravaggios. And you ask why I want to see the Caravaggio paintings. And so on, the questioning proceeds. Eventually, though, somewhere down the line I am simply going to reply that I desire to do all of this because of ____. What might that final answer be?

Aristotle claims that the one thing toward which all my desires are directed, this final end, this end that I choose for the sake of itself and not for the sake of anything else, the end that quiets all your nagging questions, is *happiness*. Happiness is the ultimate "question stopper." The reason I desire to look at Caravaggios is that ultimately it somehow contributes to my overall happiness. Moreover, since happiness is the final end and the *only* final end of any action, if there were no possibility of happiness, none of my actions would have any point or *significance*. All my desires would be futile without some ultimate goal.

Here is a good place to take stock of the assumptions about human nature Aristotle is making. Obviously if humans were not creatures with desires, Aristotle would not have much of an argument. Desire is certainly an immediately recognizable component of our nature. Stones and boards lack desires, computers and car engines lack desires, but humans obviously have them. Our capacity to desire is one characteristic that separates us from all these other entities. But, of course, simply having the capacity to desire fails to characterize human nature completely, since many nonhuman animals have desires, too.

Human desire is complicated or enriched, depending on one's perspective, by another fundamental component of human nature which the Greeks famously recognized as the single capacity that distinguishes humans from the other animals: *reason*. Humans are *rational* animals. We might broaden the sense of "rational" to include the ability to formulate beliefs, think abstractly, calculate, make decisions, conceptualize, introspect, deliberate, theorize, etc.

Both Plato and Aristotle had a great deal to say about the human "psyche" or "soul," and their understanding of human nature is inextricably bound to their psychology. Outside of religious and perhaps a few other contexts, there is not much talk about the existence of souls anymore. We locate the source of mental activity in the brain and we explain that activity in terms of highly intricate electrochemical transmissions across complex neural pathways. These cerebral events function according to causal laws. On the logico-semantic level of explanation, we describe the thought processes as proceeding according to the rules of logic and syntax and possessing semantic content, similar to the way we describe the operations of computer programs. On the contemporary view, the mind is ultimately some sort of physical functionality of the brain. However, whether one is a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a contemporary philosopher of mind, or a cognitive scientist everyone more or less agrees that humans are by nature *rational* creatures with desires. As far as questions about a meaningful life are concerned, the vocabulary of folk psychology remains inherently useful.

Another fundamental component of human nature is that humans are emotional, passionate beings. We can experience a wide variety of emotional states, ranging from sadness, despair, hatred and anger, to joy, amusement, love, and empathy. The ancient Greeks were keenly aware of the emotional component of human life—there would be no great Greek comedy or tragedy without it. Plato goes so far as to argue for a distinction between the rational, emotio-

nal, and "appetitive" capacities (Grube, 1992). The original argument is lengthy, but the gist is pretty clear. Imagine on a hot day while jogging I develop an intense thirst for a drink of water. I see a vending machine and imagine the pleasure of drinking an icy-cold soda, but then think that it would be in my best interest to avoid drinking something syrupy and sweet on a jog. Whereas my desire pulls me towards the soda, I reason that I ought to avoid satisfying my desire. Plato concludes that desire must be different from reason.

Plato gives similar arguments for the difference between the emotional and appetitive faculties, as well as the emotional and rational faculties. For example, imagine having the torturous desire to smoke cigarettes, yet becoming angry with oneself for wanting them. Or imagine a child experiencing anger and frustration because she is unable to determine how to sneak the cookies off the shelf. Young children have not yet developed the ability for complex, abstract rational thought; nevertheless, they are perfectly able to experience desire and a range of emotional states. Human nature then reveals itself at the most general level as "tripartite": humans have the distinct capacities to reason, emote, and desire. I propose then that we agree with the Greeks and take this complex of faculties to be fundamental to and characteristic of human nature.

Aristotle understands happiness in terms of living well. This conception differs considerably from the "easy answers" like contentment and satisfaction I listed earlier, yet understood properly it squares better with the above conception of human nature. One of the salient features of the ancient Greek conception of goodness is that the good as they see it must satisfy the condition of being good *for* the individual. Living a happy life is something that is psychologically and intellectually beneficial to us, and we achieve such a life by embracing and honing the various facets of our nature across time.

The key to understanding this Aristotelian conception of happiness lies with his view of virtue. The Greek word for virtue is *aretê*. Our contemporary use of the word 'virtue' remains infused with various American pragmatist and Victorian Age conceptions, like industriousness and purity. On the other hand, the Greek sense of *aretê* is something closer to "excellence," a quality which can be shared not only by artifacts and artisans but also by humans, and so we might think of *aretê* as a quality or set of qualities that makes something an outstanding member of the group to which it belongs (Nehamas, 1998).

Aristotle's interpretation of excellence is inextricably tied to his notion of *function*. He claims that all artifacts, skills, as well as living beings have characteristic functions or activities, those capacities and characteristics that set them apart from other types of thing. For instance, a knife has a function, i.e., that capacity or feature it possesses insofar as it is a knife and which no other entity has. Obviously the function of a knife is *to cut*. A good knife cuts well and a good knife can cut well only if its appropriate excellence or virtue is present, namely, sharpness. The same holds for occupations and skills. For instance, a carpenter's function is to build or assemble things like shelves or houses. In order to perform this function well, there is a certain set of characteristics the carpenter must acquire, and whatever these qualities are would be the *aretai* or "excellences" of carpentry. So, an *aretê* is simply whatever quality or set of qualities an entity possesses in order to perform its function in the best way possible.

Aristotle claims that humans themselves have a characteristic function that he justifies by appealing to his conception of human nature:

> Now we take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be the soul's activity and actions that express reason. The excellent man's function is to do this finely and well. Each function is completed well when its completion expresses the proper virtue. Therefore, the human good [i.e., *happiness*] turns out to be the soul's activity that expresses virtue (Irwin, 1999, p. 1098a12-17).

Just as with a knife or a carpenter, humans insofar as we are rational, thinking, deliberating creatures require the presence of a certain set of virtues or "excellences" in order to perform this function well. So, the association of virtue and function amounts more or less to a perfection of our human nature.

Aristotle adds to the above account that happiness is this activity that expresses excellence across a complete life, because "one swallow does not make a spring, … nor does one day or a short time make us happy" (Irwin, 1999, p. 1098a18-19). Since the vicissitudes of life can include dramatic swings between living well and living poorly, pronouncing on the quality of one's life would be similar to pronouncing on the quality of a book before one has finished it. Honing our natural human function by the complex development of human excellence places us in the best position to live well. The activity of living well over a complete life is what Aristotle defines as the human good, and that good is what he identifies with happiness.

Aristotle's understanding of reason as our characteristic function is not limited to the abstract rational thought we associate with doing mathematics or physics or philosophical contemplation. Indeed a significant portion of our lives is under the direction of the everyday employment of reason. Reason allows us to navigate our way in our daily "goings about." We seek the assistance of reason to size up various social situations and environmental contexts in light of our emotions and desires, to weigh our options, deliberate, communicate, remember, choose, and interact. This ability is then sharpened by the development of the various virtues; our "success" at being human is inextricably tied to the development of excellence/virtue (Nehamas, 1998, p. 77).

Aristotle divides human excellence into two categories. On the one hand, there are the intellectual excellences among which he lists knowledge, understanding, and something he calls *phronesis* or practical wisdom. We learn these through education and training. On the other hand, there are the various moral excellences among which he lists courage, moderation, truthfulness (genuineness), and justice. A person acquires the moral virtues through practice, similar to the way one acquires the ability to play the piano by practicing regularly.

Developing these various excellent states of character is difficult and time-consuming. Becoming, say, a truly *moderate* person involves trial and error and practice at performing moderate acts—in other words, we must work at being moderate in order to become moderate people. Because I return home from school, mix a cocktail, have a sensible dinner, and then spend an enjoyable evening reading and talking with friends, does not make me a moderate person. I could just as easily attend a wedding reception the following day and eat and drink well beyond my means. So, I practice at performing moderate acts, and with time, patience, and effort I shall become a moderate person. The intellectual virtue of practical wisdom provides us with the ability to know our limitations and size up a situation in order to determine the right amount of, say, desire for pleasure, as well as the ability to recognize the appropriate time to express this desire and the appropriate objects towards which to express it and the right motive with which to express it. So, the development of this intellectual excellence is essential for the development of moderation and the other virtues. Those who do in fact become thoroughly excellent humans through the acquisition of the various virtues over a lifetime will be in the best position to have lived well.

Aristotle's contention that there is a natural human function is packaged with his metaphysical assumptions about essence and his teleological account of natural causality. However, the lessons I wish to draw regarding happiness or living well do not require one to accept his metaphysical worldview. What I find intriguing about Aristotle's conception is the notion of happiness as a special sort of *activity*. Satisfaction, joy, pleasure, and contentment are psychological states in the sense that one can be satisfied one month and unsatisfied the next, one can feel joy one day and grief the next. Moreover, we could perhaps live pleasurably in the experience machine without actually *doing* an y thing. Happiness, on the other hand, involves the peculiar activity of expressing the various virtues or "excellences" across a complete life. Happiness is the activity expressing our actual nature in the best way.

One point of agreement between us and Aristotle is that humans are *biological* creatures. Humans are organic, living things like plants—an apt comparison since it nicely illustrates what Aristotle has in mind for happiness. Consider an

average houseplant. There is a certain set of external factors that must be present in order for a plant to flourish. For example, it needs the right amount of sunlight, water, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide. If the plant has these elements, it will be in good stead to grow and thrive. Of course, having these conditions present will not guarantee the plant will flourish, but it certainly cannot be in a position to do so without them.

Aristotle thinks of humans similarly. There are a variety of "external goods" which humans require in order to be in a position to flourish. He mentions among others things money and having good children, but I shall not dwell on these. Rather, it is the development of the internal goods—the virtues or excellences—that places humans in the best position to *flourish*. If humans in our capacity to desire, emote, and reason successfully acquire the characteristic human excellences, in other words, hone our natural abilities, we will be in the best position to flourish. Happiness or living well amounts to human flourishing (Cooper, 1986). In the experience machine, we would not be perfecting our nature through virtuous activity across time. The feeling of flourishing does not amount to actual flourishing.

Human flourishing and the activity of putting one's life to work

Aristotle's interests lean more towards the ethical, but there are obvious important conclusions regarding the meaningfulness of life to draw from his thoughts on happiness and human excellence. Surely Aristotle's contention that flourishing across a lifetime is something desirable and worth pursuing for its own sake is intuitively reasonable. Humans naturally desire to flourish, though we may not always be aware of this particular desire. In this section, I shall explore one way we might adopt this notion of happiness along with the associated fundamental assumptions about human nature to construct an account of what makes life meaningful.

At the center of Aristotle's notion of happiness is activity, and flourishing is the best activity across time. One can see how meaningfulness emerges from this activity by conceiving of one's life as something to be employed, put to work, so to speak, engaged, lived. Consider, for example, how *things* in your everyday life take on significance. Think about the tools in an average household toolbox. There is probably a wrench, a hammer, a screwdriver, maybe a chisel, electrical tape, etc., and if it is like my toolbox, there is a giant plumber's wrench rusting away at the bottom next to an odd assortment of washers, screws, nails, and dirt clods. Now suppose you have reached into the tool box a number of times for the hammer or screwdriver to fix something simple or hang a picture, but you have never delved into the bottom of the box—you don't need to: what use do you have for a plumber's wrench? In this respect, the plumber's wrench has no significance for you. The wrench is no different in that regard than the dirt clods; it simply exists as an object occupying space in your toolbox. But then one day the bathroom sink springs a leak and you need a tool to fix it. You think to yourself, "Ah! I have a plumber's wrench." At that point, when you reach for the wrench and you subsequently *engage* in the activity of fixing the sink, the wrench and the activity of repair take on significance for you, a sort of meaningfulness: it is the tool you are using and the activity you engage in to fix your sink. The tool and activity becomes meaningful through engagement.

Our position in the world can be just as insignificant and meaningless as dirt clods or the plumber's wrench in my tool box, but that is not such a depressing thought if we realize that it is possible to employ our lives, analogously to the way we employ a tool to accomplish some task or engage in a particular activity, and by doing so we bring our lives out of an undifferentiated state. A human's life need not be empty, insignificant, and meaningless.

Our lives are full of examples where the meaningfulness of an activity depends upon an individual's appropriating it as her own by taking an active interest in it, by throwing herself into the activity and making something of it, doing it well. For example, some students find it difficult to make it through college because they never fully engage in the activity of being a college student. They fail to take the

special sort of interest that directly involves them in the college experience, and so being a college student never quite becomes truly meaningful for them—it is no more and no less than another event in their lives, no different from simply passing time. Others develop an interest in the activity of learning and throw themselves into collegiate life. Those who graduate from college having sufficiently challenged themselves are typically the same ones who find the college experience to be completely meaningful.

In this respect, the so-called life challenges that have such a profound intellectual and emotional effect on us are similar to physical challenges. Without some sort of physical activity, the body gradually fades into its least common denominator; it becomes *less than* it can be. With increased effort under favorable conditions, the body maintains some degree of physical health. Of course everyone's optimal body performance is set differently according to genetic variations: ten miles of jogging may be optimal for some, while a slow walk down the block and back the best for others. However, without *any* activity none of the physical possibilities are realizable.

The same point holds true of life challenges. Without engaging the various components of our nature we let ourselves slip into a sort of undifferentiated object-hood, but by engaging the various components of our nature we can maintain what it is that makes us fully human. As with the plumber's wrench, we bring significance into existence by putting our lives to work. Recall the range of capacities available to humans. Humans have the capacity to sense, feel, think, reason, cognize, reflect, introspect, love, etc., and we have the ability to recognize those things that individually interest us. Those capacities are the foundation of our lives. Meaningfulness emerges not just from activity but from activity constituted by engaging the various components of our nature and, as Aristotle suggests, seeking the excellent expression of such activity. A meaningful life emerges from challenging ourselves to develop our various capacities and find their limits; in doing so, we express our nature to its fullest extent and place ourselves in the best possible position to flourish. As we flourish, life emerges as meaningful in the sense that we are employing our nature; the more enhanced and varied the activity, the greater degree of meaningfulness. Humans can learn to read, write, converse, laugh, argue, create, play, learn, love, and so on. So why not at least attempt to bring those possibilities into their fullest actuality? Make reading one's own by reading some interesting books, writing one's own by trying one's hand at creative writing, etc. The list of possibilities is obviously extensive, and certainly no one can attempt everything—after all, there is only so much time in life and, more importantly, all the intellectual and psychological "volume knobs" which evolution has provided us are set differently according to particular genetic and socio-cultural factors (Wright, 1994). We all have various talents and distinctive abilities, and so an obvious practical entry into a fully meaningful life would be to recognize these abilities and pursue them, but this need not preclude anyone from trying something for which he may not have as great a talent as another. The point is that many people—at least those who do not face starvation or various other hardships—can certainly experience more than they do more intensely and thereby become *more than they are*.

Meaningfulness, then, cannot emerge about without activity, and the most meaningful activity is that of flourishing over a lifetime. Flourishing means living well, living robustly, and this phenomenon entails engaging the various intellectual, psychological, and physical components of our nature; these components become significant to us through their employment. And so the path to meaningfulness in life involves recognizing the facts about ourselves and taking an interest in our lives by *engaging* them. Even in the best of all circumstances, the comatose do not live meaningful lives.

Choice and authenticity: The wisdom of the existentialists

The idea that life becomes meaningful through living well or flourishing suggests that we have a *choice* in the matter. Viewed objectively a person's life might seem to embody the sort of meaningfulness I have outlined above, yet it still would

remain insignificant for the person living that life unless the person had *chosen* the various activities and thereby made them his or her own. The authenticity involved in making deliberate choices and taking responsibility for them is necessary for the possibility of life emerging as meaningful *for* an individual.

Aristotle claims that virtue or excellence is a "state that decides," and only those who make voluntary choices are people we consider responsible for their actions and thereby subject to praise or blame. Aristotle stops short of saying much if anything about the freedom and *authenticity* of choice. However, various existentialists of the 20th Century have had a great deal to say about freedom and its relationship to authenticity and responsibility.

Consider. Plants of course cannot make choices about how much sun they receive or when they get watered—it is not part of their nature to make choices. Plants fail to have thoughts about anything, so nothing can matter to them; they simply respond to their environments. On the other hand, it is part of the nature of humans to makes choices and decisions in response to our environments. The human sensory capacity stimulates our desires and aversions, and we have the innate ability to reflect on those desires, to weigh the pros and cons of fulfilling them. We can deliberate about how to satisfy the desires we deem worthy. We have hopes and anticipations, we rationalize and conceptualize. And we make choices accordingly. All these abilities are part of our nature. I can choose to read the Sunday paper rather than work in the garden; I can choose to go to the movies rather than painting the bedroom. Notice however that in either case the condition of my being in the position to make a choice is that I have the *freedom* to choose.

Freedom or free will is fundamental to the human experience. Without freedom we could never hold others morally responsible for their actions nor be held responsible for our own. In the absence of free will, all our actions are subject to some sort of determination beyond our control. Indeed if humans were not free it would seem to render the present discussion about the meaningfulness of life pointless—after all, machines, plants, and animals other than ourselves, all of which lack free will, do not live meaningful lives.

Although the thought that humans lack freedom may sound implausible given the implicit way we conceive of ourselves acting, there are a number of persuasive, contemporary arguments for such a view. If one were to accept, say, a behaviorist model of human development and action, one would be committed to the view that all human actions are conditioned and thereby determined by one's natural and social environment (Skinner, 1971/2001). The behaviorist explanation of my becoming a philosophy professor might include the fact that there were a certain set of behavioral reinforcements along my educational path which shaped and thereby determined my "choice" among professions. A hard-line behaviorist would simply deny that I could ever have chosen otherwise. A behaviorist must reject the existence of anything like freedom of action. And of course the notion of authenticity subsequently evaporates with our freedom.

A rather different line of thought which seems to be committed to denying the existence of free will, too, is the functionalist theory of mind. As discussed in section 2, the functionalist claims that all mental events such as thoughts, beliefs, hopes, etc. are actually brain events. My thought that I am sitting in Texas on a hot summer day amount to a series of neural events in my brain fed by the physiology of my present sensory state, and since all neural electro-chemical processes are physical processes and thereby subject to causal laws, any particular brain state must have a sufficient explanatory cause that determines it. My brain events are really not much different in this regard than other events occurring in the physical world. When I am playing billiards and the cue stick successfully impacts the cue ball impelling it into the eight ball, which rolls across the table in a certain direction causing it to drop into the corner pocket, what I have just experienced is a set of causal relations leading to the ultimate effect of the eight ball resting in the corner pocket. If brain states are subject to the same causal laws as billiards balls, neural events have other neural events that cause them to occur, and those neural events have others, and so forth until we reach the level of sensory input and

make the causal leap to external causal factors. But nowhere in that series is there an "uncaused cause" which manifests itself as the freedom to choose otherwise in the course of events. So, in the end the functionalist faces an equally significant challenge to the existence of free will.

The jury is still out on the problem of free will, but the issue obviously remains philosophically interesting and important. However, if we are to accept the possibility of moral obligation and meaningfulness, we must continue to conceive of ourselves as having some ability to act freely in at least some cases, since without a conception of human freedom, the many ways we describe and interpret ourselves in our everyday "goings about in the world" would make very little sense. If I ask you why you met a friend for lunch rather than showing up for your scheduled meeting with me, and you respond with all honesty and sincerity that you decided to skip our appointment and meet your friend because she hasn't been feeling well, you are speaking with the implicit understanding that you had a choice in the matter. And none of what you say to me would make any sense if I didn't at least assume that you were free to make the choice. When you chose, you didn't mean that neuron 259x fired which caused neuron 25550n to fire, and so forth. What you meant is simply that you chose to do otherwise than you could have done, and you hopefully take responsibility for doing it. We presuppose in our everyday conversations that at least some of our actions are free, and for this reason alone, it is crucial to retain the notion of freedom.

Freedom, authenticity, and responsibility are at the core of Jean-Paul Sartre's (2001) existentialism. Sartre denies the existence of anything like human nature, and he is equally uncomfortable with any metaphysical notion of free will. Nevertheless, human passion, reason, and freedom play a pivotal role in his philosophy. Sartre claims that humans are radically free. We are free because there is no god to have established some particular nature and plan for us. We are "abandoned" in the world with nothing but our freedom. As he famously declares in his essay *Existentialism and humanism*, "We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free" (Sartre, 2001, p. 24). At every turn in life humans are faced with a choice. These choices range from the more mundane, like whether to wear gray or green socks, to the more significant sorts of "life choices" all humans make, like whether to go to college or join the military, whether to marry a loved one or reject him in favor of a career, whether to continue living in the face of a debilitating disease. And Sartre claims that we *must* choose; even choosing not to choose is nevertheless a choice. Indeed the realization that we are "alone" in the world, free, and without excuse creates terrific anxiety.

How we approach this freedom is perhaps the fundamental question for Sartre. The possibility of living a meaningful life is predicated by our ability to make deliberate choices and take responsibility for them. Sartre (2001) claims,

> If man as the existentialist defines him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. […] man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. […] When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. […] I am thus responsible for myself and for all men […] (Sartre, 2001, pp. 26-28).

When I choose to live, say, the life of a monogamous companion or a diligent employee or a "downwardly mobile" slacker (*Slacker*, 1991), not only am I thereby responsible for myself having made this choice and the consequences resulting from it, but I am creating an image of humanity as I would wish it to be. Sartre thus understands responsibility as having an added dimension which weighs heavily on us, yet our ability to fess up to this fact raises the value of authenticity: recognizing that one makes oneself what one is and what one would want humanity to be like through the power of choosing, subsequently making a deliberate choice, and taking responsibility for it.

Instances when we excuse ourselves for our actions or find ourselves doing what other people tell us to do and acting as if we had no choice in the matter, or times when we refuse to recognize something about ourselves and choose for ourselves a "living lie" are all cases of what Sartre (2001) refers to as "bad faith." Suppose one of your friends were to complain that she became an accountant because her parents, who were paying her college tuition, told her she must study something practical. So, having received her college degree in accounting, she resorted to finding the only type of job that matched her degree. She says her parents made it impossible for her to do anything else. According to Sartre, your friend would have fallen into bad faith in the sense that she is denying that she really had a choice in the matter. But, she certainly could have chosen to do something else if she didn't like accounting. Of course, the choice of a career in which she had no formal training may have made entry into the job market considerably more difficult, but, after all, life is full of difficult choices—that is what makes authenticity shine all the more brightly.

Consider a slightly different case of bad faith. Suppose I were to decide that in addition to my career as a philosophy professor I wanted to become the first professor to play professional basketball. Unfortunately, given my physical stature and substantive lack of physical dexterity, the fact is that I will never be able to play professionally even though I continue to tell myself that I can. Insofar as I lie to myself, I am acting in bad faith.

There are obviously many different ways people regularly live in bad faith, but those of us who spend our time living this way are taking time away from living a truly meaningful life; living a lie or living someone else's conception of a meaningful life is not making the activity of living meaningful for you. The challenge is to live an authentic life. For Sartre (2001), living authentically means realizing one's existential predicament, making deliberate choices, being truthful to oneself, and above all taking responsibility for one's actions. We construct who we are through these choices and the subsequent choices we make about how to comport ourselves towards the consequences, whether or not these consequences manifest themselves as those we initially anticipated or desired.

One point that both Sartre and the German existentialist Martin Heidegger (1962) recognize as a source of inauthenticity is the human tendency to fall in step with what other people do. Sartre's primary focus is on freedom and responsibility; Heidegger's remarks on inauthenticity arise from his conception of the basic temporality of the human predicament, within which arises the challenge to make one's activities one's own. He claims that this primordial condition of humans, or what he rather awkwardly calls the "Being-in-the-world of Dasein," is *care*, and by this he means that humans are beings who care about what they are Life matters to us (Heidegger, 1962).

Human life at this primordial level is like an event and as such it has a temporal structure. The living activity is directed towards the future, the next moment, the next week, the next year, ultimately towards death. And so, in our "going about" being humans, we are always, as Heidegger (1962) says, "ahead of ourselves." But we are also "thrown" into a world that has a particular socio-cultural and historical dimension. Each of us carries a history influenced by our cultural heritage. Someone born into a Catholic, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, or Protestant cultural context—whether or not that person accepts the particular religious doctrines—will carry bits of those values and perspectives with him. Finally, humans are always presently engaged in activity and are "with" other humans whether we are at work or home alone. Who I am and what I do make sense within the present socio-cultural setting. Whether I am teaching or working at home in my study, being a philosophy professor only makes sense within the context of a university system with students who are interested in learning philosophy and colleagues here and at other schools who practice philosophy and perhaps read my work and with whom I engage in philosophical discussion. When I am fully engaged in this activity, being a philosopher or teacher is completely transparent yet cognitively invisible to me. I am conscious of it and understand it in the sense that I am *doing* it, not necessarily in the sense that I can define it and reflect on it.

Humans let themselves "fall" into the activity of being whatever they are, whether a professor, carpenter, doctor, politician, friend, lover, or parent. The problem though is that falling too far in step with what people do as professors or lovers or whatnot moves us away from that mode of life which brings a human into a meaningful existence, i.e., that existence where I face up to what I am and what I can do. Falling too far can lead to inauthenticity in the sense that what I do slips from being "mine" and becomes a factor of other people. Suppose deep inside I really detest being a professor, but I let myself continue with the professorial life and spend my days going about being the professor people expect me to be—in other words, just doing "what one does." Eventually through routine and habit the nagging thought that I don't enjoy my job fades into the background of my daily activity. In fact, as I go about comporting myself "professorily," I seem to be perfectly happy. The problem as Heidegger (1962) sees it is that I am living an inauthentic life in the sense that I have not really made the professorial life my own; it is some other mode of life that I have adopted and with which I have slowly fallen in step. And so in the end, both Sartre (2001) and Heidegger (1962) come to recognize in their different ways the significance of authenticity in a meaningful life.

Conclusion: Making the choice to live well

Happiness and authenticity, as I have characterized them in this paper, are interrelated conditions for the possibility of a life emerging as meaningful for an individual. Humans must engage our lives through the deliberate choice to live well, through the choice to live actively and robustly. When I choose to pursue some activity, engage in it with verve and vigor, and take responsibility for doing so, the activity emerges as something substantively significant and meaningful *for me*. The constant affirmation of one's life choices or, in other words, the choice to continue with various life activities that contribute to our living well grounds the step into a meaningful life. Humans are centers of sensuous, creative, emotional, intellectual activity expressing a past in the present through choice, motivated by desire for happiness, i.e., the best activity. From this perspective, the meaningful life will perpetually be threatened by either (a) ignorance or the lack of knowledge concerning the best course of action; (b) laziness, escapism through, say, some addiction, or some degree of passivity, whether that amounts to following along with other people or simply not engaging one's life at all; or (c) fear, the inability to make the choice to live well. Ignorance, laziness, and fear (this need not be an exhaustive list) compromise our lives and reduce our ability to flourish and choose among possibilities; they detract from the possibility of choosing to live a meaningful life.

So, at the end of the day, when the long afternoon light fades from windows and darkness envelopes all, I imagine the playful philosopher Nietzsche slipping into our loneliest of lonely moments and whispering in our ears, "This life of yours with all its pains and joys and thoughts and sighs, these trees and this moonlight and this spider and I myself: Is this the sort of life you would will to live over and over, innumerably many times?" (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 341). I hope my few philosophical ruminations on the human condition and choosing to live well have offered a way of discovering an enlightened optimism in response to this heaviest of all weights.

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