

Meaning and Individual Temperament

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Abstract

Questions about the meaning of life elicit deep-seated disagreements driven by temperamental polarities, which in turn define fundamental attitudes, notably toward three questions: (1) How should we live in time? (2) Where does meaning come from? And (3) is there intrinsic value to suffering? Attitudes toward these questions come in two main packages I call 'Heavy' and 'Light'. In a polemical spirit, I sketch in this article some arguments in defense of the Light package. The temperaments associated with each package are more or less likely, in extreme circumstances, to engender behavior one might label as heroism or as terrorism. The main difference is that a hero, but not a terrorist, might espouse the Light package and have a sense of irony.

This ascetic priest, this ancient sorcerer and warrior against apathy, had clearly triumphed, his kingdom had come; men no longer grumbled at pain, men panted after pain: 'More pain! More pain!'

— Nietzsche

The Meaning of Meaning

What does *meaning* mean? Although we speak of a life, an activity, or a relationship as being more or less *meaningful*, the term's natural home would seem to be in linguistics, where it applies to words, sentences, and utterances, and where it is subjected to studies that reach forbidding heights of technicality. At the most basic level, the contribution to the meaning of any term or phrase depends on the set of alternative terms that might appear in its place. To quote the philosopher of language Paul Ziff (1960):

The significance of what is said depends on what is not said. The utterance actually uttered stands in with and takes its shape from what is not but could without deviation be uttered. The fact that 'excellent', 'splendid' and the like are available and yet not employed serves to determine the significance of 'That is a good painting'. (p. 147)

Here is a simple example. What is the meaning of the word *cat*? The first part of the answer is given by the alternative contexts in which it could appear: its distributive set. Members of that set include *The ___ is on the mat* and *___ got your tongue?* but not *door ___ lapsed*. A second part of the answer is given by specifying, for any member of that distributive set, its contrastive set: what else could intelligibly have taken its place in that same frame: *The dog is on the mat* would work, but not *The please is on the mat*.

The meaning of a term, then, is given by its associations and its contrasts.

But what could all of this have to do with the meaning of life? Are we dealing with two entirely different words that just happen to be homonyms, like the *bank* where you keep your money and the *bank* where you might moor your boat?

I think not. Just as the meaning of a word in my idiolect is determined by its associations

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and its contrasts, so it is with the meaning of an element of my life. What a person, an event, or an idea means to me depends on the ways in which it is associated with all the other persons, events, or ideas that matter to me. It also depends, perhaps in more subtle ways, on all the other persons, events, or ideas that might instead have taken their place.

This simple analogy allows us to make sense of the familiar claim that love gives meaning to life (Frankl, 1963). This isn't just because love feels good. Love is not, as one might unreflectively assume, an emotion or feeling. It is a complex condition in which the beloved is at the center of a web of concern (Pismenny & Prinz, 2017). If Cecily loves Ernest, pretty much any emotion you can think of might be triggered in Cecily, depending on Ernest's situation and his relation to her: joy in his presence, sadness at his failure to call her, anger at someone who has offended him, and so forth. In other words, love's contribution to the meaning of life derives from the rich web of connections it establishes between you and innumerable beliefs, expectations, desires, feelings, and emotions. States and attitudes that are likely to be aroused in situations involving the beloved form a unique pattern. That pattern differs from those that would result from similar situations involving other people to whom you are not related by love. The 'web' of your relationships looks like the sort of graph you might find by googling *semantic web*. Such graphs provide a metaphor for the intricate bonds linking your endeavors, the people you care about, your commitments, and your attitudes. The totality of those bonds, I suggest, makes up the meaning of your life.

Before proceeding, an important qualification is in order. The analogy between semantic meaning and life meaning captures only part of the latter. The existence of a network of associations and contrasts does not guarantee that you will care about any of it. Plausible recommendations about how to live—relate to people rather than things, enlarge your goals beyond selfish ones, shun excess, favor experience over the acquisition of material objects, and so forth—can never guarantee that the neurotransmitters affecting your synapses will continue to do their job. Those wise recommendations can increase the probability that you will experience your life as meaningful, but there is no sure remedy for the simple failure to care. The capacity to care is a presupposition of meaningfulness: it is not infallibly enabled by it. Furthermore, the kinds of objects we are connected to in our personal, idiosyncratic webs of meaning are not interchangeable. In terms of a mathematical measure of connectivity, an obsession with gadgets might be technically as complex as a concern with the myriad determinants of human welfare; but the narrow confines of the former, as well as its low connectivity with matters of urgent importance to the rest of humanity, would lead us to rank it far below the latter in terms of meaning. The importance of some other measure, then, is not excluded even when it is ignored in what follows. Indeed, I assume it to be uncontroversial that some concerns are more inherently important than others. To be controverted, however, is of the essence of 'existential' concerns. Among those, some consist of polarities of values, about which many of us tend to have opinions as unshakable as our justifications for them are feeble. Three such polarities are my topic in this essay.

Three Existential Questions: Heavy and Light

Among the most richly linked elements figuring in the complex web that makes up your life's meaning are certain beliefs, assumptions, and convictions that underlie your priorities and your attitudes to life. These are likely to determine your most important choices: what goals to pursue, what constraints should be observed when pursuing them, and what to regard as important or trivial. Three contrasting pairs of such fundamental attitudes occupy me here. Each pair presents

starkly contrasting answers to an existential question.

I begin with a condensed statement of each question.

On time. The ancient Greek sage Solon enjoined us to ‘call no man happy until he is dead’.² Can a life find meaning only as a whole? Must any meaningful life be driven by an overall purpose? Or should we heed those who would have us always be ‘living in the present’?

On transcendent meaning. The second question is often heard posed in theological terms: Is it possible to be good without God? The classic statement of the principle that lies behind it goes back to Plato’s *Euthyphro*, which for present purposes I will generalize to ask: Does the meaning of life ultimately depend on a transcendent, extrahuman source? Or does all meaning ultimately derive—perhaps as a kind of projection—from our own desires, preferences, and emotions?

On the value of suffering. Is there inherent value in suffering? Or is suffering just what common sense deems it to be, the very paradigm of evil? This question, like the last, has its origin in theology, but admits of a secular variant.

About all three of these questions, passionate convictions are found on either side. My contention here is that these disagreements are essentially temperamental. What I mean by this is admittedly speculative. I do not invoke any scientific theory of temperament or claim to present repeatable scientific evidence.³ I aim, rather, to highlight some fascinating empirical questions that should be explored, both about the genetic and cultural determinants of temperament and about its role in the formation of fundamental attitudes. For present purposes, I am using the word *temperament* to designate a lacuna, inspired by the anecdotal observation that attitudes to my three questions are almost never influenced by arguments based on fact or reason. When temperament is involved, changes of mind are rare; when they occur, they have the aspect of conversions, best understood not as changes of mind, but realizations of some truth about one’s own mind that was there all along. Such conversions resemble the process by which some people discover that their gender does not fit the one assigned to them at birth. Sometimes, to be sure, such a discovery might be mistaken. No domain in life is proof against illusions. When the perception is authentic, however, the attitudes in question must result largely from tendencies that have their roots in each individual’s genetic makeup and unique biography.

On my three existential questions, most of us will have some ready reasons to offer on behalf of one answer or the other. But whatever side one favors, it is virtually impossible to avoid begging the question—assuming the very conclusion one is attempting to establish. In the absence of objectively compelling arguments, conviction must be attributed to something other than reason.

The three questions are closely related: A coherent package of attitudes can result from selecting one answer among each alternative. In our current cultural environment, the more common package is one I refer to by a term introduced by the novelist Milan Kundera (1984). I call it the Heavy package. It consists of the following choices:

(1) We should husband time by living according to a rational plan. The envisaged future is, for most of our lives, weightier than the fleeting present; so we should mostly (though within reason, of course) sacrifice immediate gratification for the sake of later, deeper forms of

² This story is repeated many times in ancient sources. It appears to come originally from Herodotus, Book 1, Sec. 32, in which it is expressed thus in Macauley’s translation: ‘But before [a man] comes to his end it is well to hold back and not to call him yet happy’ (Herodotus, n.d.).

³ Scientific inquiry into the nature of temperament and its relation to personality has, however, been abundant. See, e.g., Allport (1961); Buss & Plomin (2014); Friedman & Schustack (2016).

satisfaction. The only life worth living, in the words of the title of a best-selling book, is the ‘purpose driven life’ (Warren, 2002).

(2) If that is indeed the way we should live, it might also seem obvious that—as argued in the book just cited—the only reliable source of value is a transcendent one, preferably one that is objective and absolute, independent of the vagaries of human preferences and of the whims of any particular person or group. Such a source is typically identified with God.

(3) On the third question, there is an answer that, while perhaps less obviously related to the other two, originates more specifically in a specific aspect of Christian theology. Or so I shall argue. The claim that suffering has inherent worth has an air of paradox. Common sense decrees that suffering, other things being equal, is in all cases something we would be better off without. Suffering is the very paradigm of evil.⁴ Common sense allows that it is sometimes inevitable, but suffering must be countenanced only where it is justified as a means, as when it results in learning, for example, or where it is justified by a retributive concept of punishment.

These three answers, constituting the Heavy package of attitudes, fit together most comfortably in the Christian system of thought. If God is the font of all goodness, then the source of value is indeed transcendent, external to and independent of human reality. A Christian will likely view a life as most meaningful when it is most fully devoted to that extrahuman reality. The value of suffering requires a little more explanation, but as I will explain, it follows from the peculiar character of Christian theology.

The package comprising the contraries of each of those three answers is what I dub the Light package:

(1) All we ever experience directly is the present moment. So we should live in the ‘Now’, making only minimal concessions to the probable consequences—uncertain at the best of times—of our current choices.

(2) The only source of value lies in our experience of pleasure and pain, joy and suffering. No supernatural or extrahuman source of value exists. Even when we are persuaded that we experience the supernatural, we do so as human beings who decide to interpret the experiences engendered by the states of our brains and our bodies as having an origin outside ourselves. In fact, our experience is conditioned by our genes and by the multifarious ways in which we have been affected by the past.

(3) The idea that suffering has inherent value seems paradoxical because it is indeed nonsense bred of desperation. If there is ever any value to suffering, it arises instrumentally, and the little of it goes a long way.

In what follows, I elaborate on and defend the answers comprised in the Light package while also attending to some objections. In favoring the Light, my conscience will clear me of the charge of partiality on the ground that some handicap is due to the underdog. Most of history’s sages as well as many contemporary gurus endorse the Heavy. Unlike most sages and gurus, I do not claim that any of these answers admit of compelling justification. Although I am, like many of those I oppose, inclined to adduce reasons in support of my answers, I prefer to regard those reasons as guides, aimed at helping us to attend to certain aspects of the world in the hope of *seeing* it in new ways. Reasons of this kind are never compelling. They work, instead, a little like the captions of ‘doodles’, such as the one of ‘a Mexican riding a bicycle seen from on

⁴ From which it follows that the will to cause suffering is also evil. This follows even though we should reject Kant’s contention that ‘the only thing good without qualification is a good will’ (Kant, 1785/2005). For a will can be assessed as good or evil only by reference to the goodness or evil of the state it aims at.

top⁵.⁵ By directing our attention to certain features of a situation, they make us see something new.

On Time

The contrast between attitudes to time most clearly illustrates the sort of temperamental divide that is also, though less obviously, responsible for the other two polarities.

It is easy to see that little can be said—without begging the question—for or against the injunction to live in the Now. Neither is there any compelling argument for postponing the satisfaction of our desires at the cost of present frustration for the sake of future benefit. The choice on offer here is arbitrary, much like a child's preference for eating the best dish first or leaving it for last.

So where to find earnest responses to my existential question? As a newcomer to the website of the International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM), I thought I might do well to turn to its contributors for answers. I was rewarded with some eloquent expressions of both of the contrasting attitudes to temporality. An essay by Professor Chen Yu-Hsi (n.d.) elaborates on the fascinating precept of *wu wei*, or nonaction, advocated by the Daoist tradition of Laozi and Zhuangzi. This tradition represents an important variant of the counsel to 'live in the now'. In the Chinese tradition, the paradoxical Daoist idea of *wu wei* stands in opposition to the Confucian idea that wisdom results from a strenuous cultivation of character in the context of hierarchic authority, in disciplined implementation of a long-term plan.

In the Western tradition, the 'heavy' attitude to time is nicely illustrated by the Christian ideal of lifelong religious devotion. It too is conveniently represented on the INPM site by an article by Tara Miller (n.d.), 'A Beautiful Life: A Model of Transcendence in the Life of Brother Lawrence'. Miller notes that Brother Lawrence, who spent a great deal of time cooking and preparing meals, did not enjoy cooking or preparing meals. In the light of the overall unified goal of his life, however, those dislikes are insignificant. Brother Lawrence found abundant meaning in a life devoted to a transcendent deity. I will come to that aspect in a moment; but first, let me avert to why a Daoist might object to the ideal of striving for a long-term goal.

One consideration in favor of giving the present more weight than the future lies in the fact that in the medium term, predictions are mostly useless. That thought is nicely expressed by a Chinese proverb: 'The old man on the frontier lost a horse'. Like most traditional Chinese proverbs, it encapsulates a story. This one goes something like this: When the old man on the frontier discovers that his horse is gone, all his neighbors commiserate. But he is not disturbed. 'Well', he says, 'maybe that is a misfortune, but you can't really tell—maybe it will be good'. As it happens, the lost horse turns up a few days later with a wild horse in tow. Now the man has two horses, and everybody congratulates him on his good luck. But again, he says, 'Well, who can say? Maybe it's good, and maybe not'. The old man's son undertakes to break the new wild horse, but he is thrown and breaks his leg. Once more the neighbors flock, this time to deplore his ill-fortune, and again the old man demurs. 'Who can say? Maybe it will turn out to be good'. And he seems to be proved right when the emperor's press gang comes and forces every young man into the army—except the son with the broken leg.

Life is, in the technical sense of the word, chaotic: there is no constant proportionality linking causes to their distant effects. In the oft-repeated illustration, the beating of a butterfly's wings in one part of the world can ultimately prove to be the cause of a hurricane on the other

⁵ See <http://www.folklore.ee/Doodles/Pildid/1884.gif>

side of the world. If the certainties on which long-term planning is based are delusional, what is the point of relying on such planning? That, I think, is part of the reason for the Daoist *wu wei*, which finds an echo in another book title that seems to offer advice diametrically opposed to that of the one mentioned above, namely, *Living Without a Goal* (Ogilvy, 1995).

In the face of uncertainty, particularly as it relates to the introduction of new technologies, another principle known as the precautionary principle is often invoked. This principle tells us that unless something is known to be safe it should not be tried. But how should we fix the relevant threshold? Besides, every form of protection entails risks of its own. In giving priority to the avoidance of risk, we risk forgoing greater benefits (de Sousa, 2010).

Although both effortful purpose and living according to nature in the style of *wu wei* find advocates among the authors represented on the INPM website, the two are not easy to reconcile. Nevertheless, the ideal of *wu wei* might seem to find an echo in the Christian Gospel: ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these’ (Matthew 6:28–29, ASV; see also Luke 12:27). In context, however, it is clear that this version requires not only a transcendent source of value but also a transcendent caretaker. Both responses to the question of our attitude to time and effort can therefore be fitted into a theistic framework, but only the Christian version requires it.

On Transcendence

This brings us to our second existential question. Must the source of meaning be transcendent, external to human psychology and subjectivity, or does it, on the contrary, arise only from that subjectivity?

The Heavy package that I have described as typically Christian posits the existence of a supernatural deity commonly credited with being the ultimate source of value. Ever since Plato’s *Euthyphro*, however, the source of meaning has given rise to a dilemma, about which, as with the other contrasts I have been concerned with, people tend to have equally passionate contrary convictions. In Plato’s eponymous dialogue, Euthyphro defines the *pious* as *what is loved by the Gods*. Socrates asks: Do the gods love it because it is pious? Or is it pious because the gods love it? More generally, the question applies to whatever is of value. Supposing that what is good is what God commands, does he command it because it is good? Or is *God commands it* just what we mean by *good*? If God’s command is good only in virtue of being commanded, then it is logically impossible for God to command anything bad. Yet surely, many people would say, if God commanded you to kill a child, that would not make doing so good. (In the Abraham story, the problem is avoided by the providential substitution of a sacrificial animal. But the Bible offers plenty of divine commands of murder, genocide, or enslavement that we now regard as obviously wrong. Faithful followers of the sacred book respond by reinterpreting the passages in question in such a way as to deny that such was truly God’s command.) On the other hand, if God commands only what is good in itself, his command is otiose. It means that God’s mediation is not required to make something good. Besides, if I rely on God’s values to determine mine, I must have already decided to value God enough to care about what he values. In that case, any values I adopt because God dictates them are merely derived from ones I have independently adopted. God as middleman does not earn his keep.

Nevertheless, again, the rejection of theism does not preclude favoring the Heavy package. A requirement of transcendence can be constructed without reference to a supernatural entity. So, at least, many philosophers who follow Kant (1785/2005) in being committed to the

transcendence of value without recourse to any deity have claimed. For Kant, the Moral Law exists independently of any human facts, with as much certainty as that of mathematics.

Others, however, have seen in this claim only a vestige of religious thinking. If morality involves commands which no supernatural being exists to proclaim, then it makes no literal sense to believe in any external originator of normative facts. For Nietzsche, as for Kant, morality essentially derives from self-legislation, that is, from a command issued by oneself. The crucial difference between the two is that Kant (1785/2005) thinks that the commands in question arise from pure reason, independently of any particular wants or desires expressing our natural dispositions. Nietzsche (1887/1998), by contrast, like most of his existentialist followers, regards the self-command as arising from and binding only the individual will.

Nothing could be of value, either negative or positive, in a world where there were no beings to care about anything. Conversely, the existence of beings capable of feeling pleasure, pain, joy, and suffering is sufficient to ground values. The relation of caring, and more generally of emotions, to value is a topic of intense contemporary debate among philosophers. But a core position can be regarded as a matter of consensus among many philosophers who reject the pure autonomy of moral norms. It is that some emotions, if not most or even all emotions, provide the raw material for our apprehension of value, including but not confined to our knowledge of what is morally right and wrong, good and bad in a broader sense, and most generally valuable or worthless (Tappolet, 2016). This position does not reduce to a sort of mindless voluntarism, according to which what is desirable is merely a projection of our uncritical desires. It might be captured by a formula favored by the exponents of the perspective, fashionable among certain cognitive scientists, known as enactivism: ‘all knowledge is for action’ (Stewart, Gapenne, & Di Paolo, 2010). From a biological point of view, this is little more than a truism. In the process of evolution by natural selection, no innate capacity would ever have been perpetuated among the members of a species, unless it provided—or was a side effect of something that provided—distinctive benefits measurable in terms of their own reproduction.

The importance of action and activity to our life is still best understood in terms of Aristotle’s insistence that happiness should be identified with activity rather than with passive experience, however pleasant. *Eudaimonia*, commonly translated as *happiness*, might in fact better be rendered as *meaningfulness* in the sense we are concerned with here. Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia* with a specific kind of activity that exercises capacities central to human nature and are therefore key to human thriving. He assumed that we have a definite human nature, consisting in essential characteristics that are both exclusive to our species and universal among its members. That assumption makes it possible for him to derive optimal norms of conduct, both intellectual and practical. The norms in question are those most likely to be conducive to a thriving expression of human nature.

The problem with Aristotle’s view, simply stated, is that there is no such human nature (de Sousa, 2000). The vast majority of our genes are shared by other primates and even by more-distant cousins in the mammalian class. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that everything important about human life could belong uniquely to humans. One can make a plausible list of capacities the frustration of which will impede thriving in most humans (Nussbaum, 2011), but an individual’s capacity to thrive through the exercise of specific potentialities is highly variable. Aristotle regarded intellectual contemplation as that uniquely human activity in which human life finds highest meaning. But much as I personally happen to appreciate the value of philosophical contemplation, I am not so deluded as to believe that every member of my species must share my taste.

We must therefore allow for the essential diversity that is embodied in the human gene pool as well as the enormous range of cultural possibilities realized on our planet. That means, among other things, that we must welcome all humans' reinventions of their own autonomous projects, incorporating any variant of the answers chosen to existential questions, including those I have been discussing. The concept of human nature can provide no conclusive guidance in the life of any single individual, for if that individual proves unable to thrive when following the norms recommended by the prevalent theory of human nature, that may just show that this supposed human nature doesn't apply to this individual (de Sousa, 1998).

On Suffering

I come now to our third existential question, regarding the value of suffering. No logical link necessarily binds the doctrine of transcendence to the idea that suffering has inherent value. In itself, this claim is entailed by neither of the first two responses in the package I have labeled as typically Christian. I shall try to explain why the theoretical link is both direct and independent of the other responses with which it is associated in Light or Heavy packages.

All cultures have some preferred attitudes to the inevitability of suffering. The Stoics, like the Buddhists, recommend minimizing suffering by becoming detached from most desires, particularly those the satisfaction of which cannot be controlled. They recommend an attitude of *apatheia*, or *ataraxia*—the absence of passion, resulting in the absence of suffering. There is nothing in those notions that can be interpreted as a positive view of suffering. Indeed, the desirable state for Buddhism is that in which rebirth no longer takes place, so that relief from suffering is guaranteed by the absence of life and consciousness (Thompson, 2015). Stoics, however, negate the value of pleasure and emotion as much as they stress the need to avoid suffering. In times and places where life is particularly hard—which means, alas, most times and places other than our Canadian island of relative peace and sanity—the rejection of passion and pleasure may well seem an acceptable price to pay for *ataraxia*. In contemporary Western society, where our states of mind are so easily given a medical interpretation, a similar choice is sometimes presented to those who suffer from bipolar disorder: endure the lows for the sake of the highs, or take a drug, such as lithium, which will level out your moods at the cost of both highs and lows. That stark existential choice provides a good illustration of the importance of individual temperament for surely no argument could claim the high road on this question.

In Greek tragedy, suffering is a necessary consequence of the need to expiate guilt or shame. Consider, for example, the self-blinding of Oedipus in response to the discovery of his patricide and incest. Even if those crimes render the blinding necessary, still that doesn't make it good in itself. Suffering is, at best, a means to the restoration of justice (Dodds, 1968).

While preserving the primitive link between guilt, expiation, and suffering, Christianity brings to it a subtle yet momentous twist. It introduces the entirely novel idea that its ability to perform the function of expiation, of cleansing guilt, makes suffering good, not merely as a means, but in itself. The Christian is expected not merely to endure suffering, in the manner practiced or counseled by the ancient Stoics, but to actively to pursue it, in imitation of Christ's own voluntary sacrifice. The Christian is expected to welcome suffering and actually rejoice in it.

How does this come about? On this question, the resources of the INPM website serve us well again. Dr. Paul Wong provides an excellent example in an essay on *Salvifici doloris* (On the redeeming power of suffering), an Apostolic Letter by Pope John Paul II (1984). John Paul II extols suffering as a positive, meaningful experience, which lies at the core of the Christian faith.

Dr. Wong (2005) comments: ‘Suffering has meaning and dignity because of its redemptive power and spiritual significance in the context of the sacrifice and passion of Christ’. And that is indeed the message of John Paul II (1984), who in his Apostolic Letter begins by ‘assuming ... that throughout his earthly life man walks in one manner or another on the long path of suffering’, and goes on to argue, in effect that this is a good thing. He writes: ‘Suffering seems to belong to man’s transcendence: it is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense “destined” to go beyond himself, and he is called to this in a mysterious way’.

Quite apart from the obvious fact that humans are not the only animals that suffer, this is mysterious indeed. To highlight the mystery, consider the core story of Christianity: God entraps two innocent creatures into disobedience. Their ‘sin’ is motivated by the desire to acquire knowledge of right and wrong. (Such knowledge, one might think, would be a prerequisite to understanding why their disobedience was wrong in the first place. That’s a first mystery.) God then punishes not only his two original victims but the entire human race. (Second mystery.) After a few thousand years, God changes his immutable mind. (Third mystery.) He arranges to become human and be tortured to death. This, we are told, will ‘redeem’ the creatures he had (so unjustly) punished. (Fourth mystery.) Does this ‘redemption’ amount to removing the curse of suffering? No. On the contrary, suffering has now become ‘essential to the nature of man’ (John Paul II, 1984). Not only are we meant to continue to suffer, as before, but now we are supposed to rejoice in it, like the Apostle Paul, ‘because of all those whom it can help—just as it helped him—to understand the salvific meaning of suffering’ (ibid.).

The attribution of inherent value to suffering can be regarded as a clever strategic move against the most powerful objection to Christian theism: the so-called problem of evil. How can a perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God allow—indeed, perpetrate—evil? The question is rooted in the reality of suffering and its obviously evil character, but it is nullified if one can simply deny that suffering is evil in the first place. The doctrine of salvific suffering does just that.

Although this attitude to suffering is peculiarly Christian in origin, it is far from being exclusive to Christians. In one of its many forms I am not quite immune to it myself. I have sometimes described myself as a ‘philosophical manic-depressive’: As a philosopher, I care about seeing the world as it really is. I also believe that I see things more clearly and realistically when I am depressed—for which, as it happens, there is some scientific evidence.⁶ So when I’m depressed, I say: ‘Good! Now I see things as they are!’ And in celebrating the new clarity of my vision, I become elated. Which of course depresses me. And so on. Even Nietzsche (1908/2007), prophet of the death of God, comes close to expressing the idea that suffering somehow has intrinsic value when he professes that ‘what does not kill you makes you stronger’ (p. 9). Although that saying is often repeated, it is actually highly dubious—unless we are talking about antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which in any case don’t become stronger but survive because they were resistant in the first place. Sometimes, to be sure, difficulties overcome may prompt the development of more effective responses to adversity. But that doesn’t make the suffering any less bad in itself. The evidence is overwhelming that suffering is bad for you (van der Kolk, 2005): ‘The bulk of psychological research on the topic shows that, as a rule, if you are stronger after hardship, it likely is despite, not because of the hardship’ (Shpancer, 2010).

⁶ The empirical research I cite focuses on a particular view of realism in trivial judgments: Alloy & Abramson (1979); Dunning & Story (1991); see also, for a more skeptical view, Stone, Dodrill, & Johnson (2001). For a compelling and more existential meditation on whether and how one sees more clearly in a state of true clinical depression, see Dollimore (2001).

Pope John Paul II (1984) stresses that an act of faith is required in order to overcome ‘the sense of the uselessness of suffering ... sometimes very strongly rooted in human suffering’. But if faith is ‘a gift of grace’ (Ephesians 2:8), that seems cruelly unfair, especially to those whom the creator has made temperamentally unable to believe at will. My own temperament is such that I am not capable of that act of faith. If I have not been granted the gift of grace ... well, perhaps a theologian has no need to insist that God is fair.

If meaning in life as in language is, as I have suggested, at least partly a matter of an abundance of connections, it makes sense to claim that suffering will be meaningful if I can somehow connect it to other things that matter in my life. Christians are not the only masochists, and we could probably learn much about the appeal of the idea of the value of suffering by reading about what sexual masochists say about the psychological satisfaction provided by being a submissive: the relief from the weight of making decisions, the joy of trust, the sense of freedom from the tyranny of one’s own desires—all of these seem to be extolled by apologists for religious submission and practitioners of sexual submission alike (Samois, 1987).

Such feelings are not the only motivation for the welcoming attitude to suffering promoted by John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter. Many others point out that one’s own suffering can promote empathy for the sufferings of others. That certainly makes sense, although from a logical point of view, it is not altogether coherent. For if indeed suffering is an occasion for joy, then another’s suffering would hardly deserve compassion. *Compassion* is not the right word for the emotion triggered by another’s bliss. In any case, this feature of suffering is irrelevant, for the facilitation of compassion could confer only instrumental, not inherent, value on suffering.

Those who insist that suffering is simply bad, and that nothing can ‘redeem’ it, are often met with the retort that pleasure and joy can be fully experienced only against the contrasting background of pain. Did I not begin by stressing that all meaning rests in part on contrast? Happiness and pleasure are most intensely felt when compared to their opposite. So if suffering is a precondition of happiness, only extreme suffering can enable the highest form of bliss.

But while relief from pain is in itself a source of pleasure, the relation between pain and pleasure is not symmetrical (Shriver, 2014). We need not assume that the contrast with a neutral state is insufficient to reveal the true value of pleasure, even though moderate unpleasantness might enhance an ensuing pleasure. A moderate amount of discomfort, rather than debilitating pain, would suffice to provide the required contrast.

If suffering can be brought into connection with other things, it will indeed, according to my simple definition, acquire meaning. But if one rejects the idea that suffering is somehow good in itself, one will be more urgently motivated to seek its alleviation, in both oneself and others. That urgency will contrast starkly with the attitude of those, like Mother Teresa, who believed in caring for the sick by glorifying their suffering instead of relieving it (Hitchens, 2012; Larivée, Sénéchal, & Chénard, 2013). And there are plenty of ways life can be meaningful without requiring suffering at its core.

I conclude, then, that the idea that there is inherent value in suffering is just another comforting illusion, adduced to deflect the force of the problem of evil. It is a kind of intellectual placebo. When a placebo seems effective, its comforting effects are as good as those of any chemically active drug. But from the point of view of the Light package, truth might matter as much as the comforts of illusion (Badhwar, 2008). No compelling argument exists to show that suffering is not just what it seems to be, something that might have accidentally beneficial results (as in the case of the man who lost his horse) but is inherently bad.

Heroism and Terrorism

In a famous lecture, J.-P. Sartre (1975) tells the story of a young man who comes to seek his advice: Should he join the Resistance or look after his mother?

He ... realised that, concretely and in fact, every action he performed on his mother's behalf would be sure of effect in the sense of aiding her to live, whereas anything he did in order to go and fight would be an ambiguous action which might vanish like water into sand and serve no purpose. (p. 355)

The dilemma shares essential features of the existential questions I have been considering: no argument could rationally justify one decision over the other, and yet the decision is momentous, with the potential to alter a life's whole meaning. The young man's question is reminiscent of that faced by Achilles: Should he choose a long and quiet life or a heroic short one? And given that one of the young man's choices involved joining the Resistance, which in some cases might have involved acts of murderous violence, we are reminded that what for some is an act of heroism might to others deserve the label of terrorism.

Although we naturally admire heroism and abhor terrorism, the two appear to share some psychological features. Scott Atran (2016), one of the most knowledgeable scholars who have studied terrorism, writes this about the followers of ISIS:

Another frequently heard view is that such attacks are nihilist actions by detached individuals who simply want to wreck society because they feel society has wrecked their own lives. This assumption ignores growing evidence that attacks like what occurred in Nice are almost always perceived by those who carry them out and who admire them as acts of personal redemption and collective salvation in the service of a world revolution. Again and again, we heard, among those who have been susceptible to ISIS's message, that realizing something close to true justice on Earth, and a right to enter Paradise in the effort to achieve that, can only come 'by the sword' and 'under the sword'.

Note especially the echoes of *Salvifici doloris* in the phrases 'personal redemption' and 'collective salvation'. Clearly, in many cases, acts of terrorism share with acts of heroism a commitment to some cause or value beyond themselves, a commitment so extreme that the agents are willing to sacrifice their lives (or those of others) for it. Is the difference between a terrorist and a hero, then, merely a matter of whose side we are on?

To be sure, we might say that many people celebrated as heroes save lives without taking lives. Not all heroes are war heroes. In a forthcoming book, Catherine Gildiner, a prominent psychotherapist, memoirist, and writer, celebrates former patients who survived horrendous conditions in childhood to become decent humans able to live normal lives. Such people are indeed heroes, but they are the fortunate exceptions. Too many do not make it: as we have seen, extreme suffering mostly causes lasting disruption in victims' very capacity to understand their life as a coherent narrative. This highlights the fact that those who are able to retain their essential sanity have somehow benefited from an innate constitution that has much in common with a 'gift of grace'. But in regard to those 'heroes' whose actions do also have immediate destructive consequences, those who 'give their lives' for a cause, can we find any difference between the terrorist and the hero, beyond the worthiness of the cause for which they sacrifice themselves?

The analysis of the Light and Heavy packages suggests an answer. If your temperament inclines you to the Heavy package, you might be a hero, and you might be a terrorist. If your temperament favors the Light package, you might also be a hero, but you will never be a terrorist. The reason can be captured in a simple phrase: a hero may enjoy a sense of irony, but

there are no ironic terrorists. Irony requires the recognition of the essential contingency of our convictions and our values (Rorty, 1979). Ironists are those whose fundamental commitments are flagged with an awareness of fallibility. Regardless of the strength of their convictions, they know they might be wrong. Equipped with the temperament required by the Light package, they will be unable to believe that suffering is inherently valuable in any way; they will be aware of being the authors of their own values and commitments; and they cannot be confident enough of any long-term goal to sacrifice others to those commitments. Those attitudes, in anyone of a sane mind, will likely preclude the murder of random victims for the sake of a possible entry into Paradise.

In short, someone whose temperament is on the Light side might act heroically. They might do so without thinking that what they do is of supreme importance ('I just did what anyone would have done', real life heroes often say). But someone who is a terrorist, by contrast, must banish doubts. They must believe that a sacred cause transcends personal motives and outweighs any amount of suffering—even if that suffering is not inherently good. And if the Light package is compatible with heroism but not with terrorism, this might be one argument in its favor.

Conclusion

The three temperamental polarities I have outlined together define contrasting conceptions of the meaning of life. In the conception I have dubbed the Heavy, our search—or thirst—for meaning can be quenched only by drawing on the supposed designs of some greater but fundamentally alien being; our lives must make sense as a whole, to the detriment of momentary pleasures; and meaning can be attained only at the cost of suffering. In the contrasting Light view, suffering destroys rather than creates meaning: rather than building links and associations between the important concerns of our lives, it concentrates our attention away from everything but itself. Furthermore, in the Light perspective, we live in moments of which we should strive to savor the intrinsic value; the meaning of those moments is given by nothing but the intricate patterns formed by our own hopes, desires, and projects, for ourselves and those we love.

My aim has been to suggest that our deepest existential commitments, those that are most central to the quest for meaning in our lives, are a matter of temperament rather than reason. I have focused specifically on whether long-term prudence is a wiser course than short-term improvisation, on whether value requires a source and justification from something transcending the reality of human experience, and on the curiously popular idea that there is inherent value in suffering. On all three, I have adduced arguments in support of the Light package, partly because I find them more plausible, and partly because I suspect that my audience is more likely to take a contrary position. But although I do find the arguments against the Heavy package more persuasive, it has also been my aim to illustrate the fact that such disputes cannot be settled by truly compelling arguments on either side. In either case, the emotional analogue of the network of associations and contrasts making up the fundamental nature of linguistic meaning with which I began—the rich web of our concerns and attachments—remains of paramount importance. It is how we bring meaning to a life which has none in itself.

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