

The Structures of Meaningful Life Stories

As Estruturas de Histórias de Vida Plenas de Sentido

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Abstract

Life's meaning is a matter of how we live in this life. Whatever meaning a life has for the creature whose life it is ends when bodily death occurs. When someone dies the meaning of their life is over for them, in first person. But the meaning of a life for others, for those in relation with the dead person, does not end when a person dies. Our lives, be they good or bad, leave effects, ripples – memories – on others who are different because of us, and future generations who will feel the effects of our being – certainly after long enough time, without ever knowing that we existed. This is all the meaning we can reasonably expect a human life to have. But many people think that this much meaning is not enough, that for life to be truly meaningful there must be something that makes for eternal or transcendent meaning.

Keywords: Meaning, Ethics, Philosophy

Resumo

O sentido da vida depende de como se vive esta vida. Qual seja o sentido que uma vida tem para a criatura que a vive, ele termina com a morte do corpo. Quando alguém morre, o sentido daquela vida se extingue para si mesma, em primeira pessoa. Contudo, o sentido de uma vida para outros, para aqueles em relação com a pessoa falecida, não terminou quando ela morreu. Nossas vidas, sejam boas ou ruins, deixam efeitos, ondas – memórias – em outros que se tornaram diferentes por nossa causa. Gerações futuras sentirão os efeitos da nossa existência – possivelmente após um tempo suficiente, sem saber sequer que existimos. Este é todo o sentido que se pode racionalmente esperar que uma vida humana tenha. Entretanto, muitas pessoas pensam que este sentido não é o suficiente, e que para a vida ser de fato plena de sentido, deve haver algo que garanta um sentido eterno ou transcendental.

Palavras-chave: Sentido, Ética, Filosofia

The Budster

What can a human life mean given that we are finite animals living in a material world? It so happened that an hour or so after I started writing this paper for a talk on that very question that my ex-wife Joyce called to make a date. The early morning date was to put our beloved 15 year old dog, Bud, down – “to sleep,” as we say.

Bud's hind legs had been going for several years due to an irreversible nerve disease common among shepherd crosses. More recently

the spinal degeneration had started to lead to occasional loss of bowel control. Also, Bud's hearing was starting to go.

We were watching things closely to make sure we let him go before he began to suffer. And he was beginning to suffer. We were worried about physical pain and we were worried about Bud's psychological well-being.

Dogs behave as if they experience shame, and we were worried that Bud was embarrassed by losing bowel control and about his difficulties

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standing up. Joyce and I talked on the phone the previous Monday and agreed that the time seemed to be getting close. The next morning, as I was preparing to go teach my ethics class, Joyce called.

Kate our 17 year old daughter was driving off to school and Bud, who normally moved out of the way of cars, was nudged by Kate's car. Kate, not surprisingly was hysterical. Joyce asked her to go off to school, explaining that we would take care of things. And Joyce and I met at the Vets. X-rays revealed that Bud's front shoulder was dislocated. There was arthritis in the front end, and his hindquarters, as I have said, were pretty much shot. There was no hope for a walking life.

Bud's mind seemed clear and his pleasure at Joyce's and my presence was also clear. He was given morphine and we decided to wait to put him to sleep, given that he was not suffering, until we all had time to visit him and say goodbye. Kate was reassured by us and by the Vet that the accident was not her fault and that, in any case, it was Bud's time.

There were emails and calls back and forth to our son, Ben, who was in College in San Francisco. Ben had said goodbye to Bud in August before he left for the West Coast, feeling pretty certain that it was "goodbye for good". We decided as a family to use the week to remind each other of Bud-memories – funny and silly Bud episodes, thoughts about his distinctive character. What emerged – and I wasn't surprised by this – was a story of a life in which there were tales of Bud himself, about his character and personality and stories about both what he had *meant to us* and what we had *meant to him*. He is gone now – only two hours gone as I write these words.

The first point I want to make is that the meaning of Bud's life is not over even though his life is. What do I mean by that? I simply mean that he has changed us – his family – by being in a relationship with us. His life has affected the life of our family as a whole, and of each of us individually.

But the second point is that Bud's life no longer has any *meaning for him*, and this is because he is dead. There is a kind of meaning

that the life of a conscious creature has *for* that creature only so long as they are alive. The meaning of the life *of* a conscious creature *for* that creature ends when its consciousness ends.

But the *meaning* or *significance* of that conscious creature's life does *not* end with its death, at least not if it was in relationship with other creatures, creatures whose lives have absorbed and incorporated the effects of the relationship. We might say that the meaning *to* or *for* the creature itself ends with death, but the meaning or significance of its life for those it was in relationship *with* does not.

Does the meaning of a life for the others with whom it was in relation ever end – say, in Bud's case when we, his family, are all gone?

It probably does – *eventually*. But possibly not for a very long time. In our family's case, there will be future generations, children of Ben and Kate, more dogs probably, grandchildren, and so on. And Bud's life and its effects on us will affect these relationships, but probably, to be honest, in a diminishing way – in the way ripples in a lake diminish over time after a stone is thrown, although not nearly that fast. But certainly not in any interesting sense – *forever*.

The Meaning of Human Lives

I think the same applies to the meaning of a human life. That is, the meaning of the life for a living human being exists as long as the person is alive. And it ceases for *that* living conscious being with death. But the meaning of its life, in some genuine and broader sense – what I have been calling meaning *for* – does not end with its death – so long, that is, as the human being has been in relationship with others, which is almost invariably the case.

Two Kinds of Meaning

From what I've said so far it should be starting to become clear that I am interested in talking about meaning that satisfies two conditions:

1. There is the meaning or significance that a life has *to* or *for* the creature whose life it is.
2. There is the meaning or significance that a life has *to* or *for others* – to those it is in relationship with.

And I have said that the first kind of significance ends when consciousness ends, whereas the second kind does not – or at least need not – end with an individual's conscious death. So long, that is, as there are other conscious beings around still affected by the dead person's life. I should add that these others – consider the case of the relation one might have with an author whose books have been important – needn't have been known to the individual personally. That is, one can be in relation with others who one does not know personally.

Now one can talk, indeed one can talk sensibly, about the meaning or significance of the career of a hurricane, rock or a plant – say in terms of the effects it had on the earth, including on sentient beings. But one cannot talk sensibly about its meaning or significance in *both* of the latter senses – in both senses, conjointly, as it were. For satisfying the two conditions requires sentience on both sides.

A hurricane has numerous effects. But there is no meaning that its career has *to* or *for* the hurricane. If, however, the hurricane affects human lives, or the lives of other sentient beings, we can speak of its meaning *to* or *for* the sentient beings affected, even after it is gone. But again not of meaning to the hurricane itself, because a hurricane is not sentient. So a hurricane cannot satisfy condition (1) of meaning or significance – there is no meaning or significance of the hurricane's career *to* or *for* the hurricane. But it can satisfy the second condition – it can have meaning *to* or *for* the sentient beings it effects.

But the key point is that the meaning or significance of say Hurricane Fran or Floyd or Andrew or Katrina is not due to the fact that we were in a two-way *personal* relationship with the hurricane – it not being sentient. So, although natural events can and do have profound significance on how human lives go, they cannot satisfy *both* conditions of meaningfulness. Since I am interested only in cases where both conditions are satisfied, I will put the one-sided type of significance natural events have to one side.

Human and Nonhumans

Now let me say a word about the difference

between nonhuman and human animals and the kind of meaning their lives can have. A dog, like Bud, was conscious. John Locke famously asserted, and most philosophers agree, that the *identity* of a conscious creature consists in something like continuity of experience. Bud was the same dog over his 15 years because he was a continuous organism who had his own and only his own experiences. Bud also possessed, what it seems to me most dogs possess, both short term and long term memory. Perhaps when he went to sleep each night he was aware in some dim sense of what had happened that day. *Maybe*. What Bud almost certainly lacked, but what *Homo sapiens* certainly possess, is the ability to self-consciously survey their career, to put their life story, day-after-day, into some sort of narrative structure. I seriously doubt that Bud was able to tell the story of his life to himself, and this despite the fact that he had the life he did. In Bud's case, and in the case, of many, if not all nonhuman animals – chimps, bonobos, and Great Apes may be exceptions – they can't get a hold on their whole life in their own conscious mind. One missing ingredient is what psychologists call long-term episodic or *autobiographical* memory. Bud had lots of experiences, did lots of things, displayed a consistent loving personality. But this is something his family can think or talk about. It was not something Bud could or did hold in his head.

Let me be clear about what Bud had and what he lacked on the memory front. Philosophers distinguish between knowing *that* and knowing *how*. I know *that* tennis is a game and I know *how* to play it (after a fashion). The first is declarative knowledge, the second is procedural knowledge. I also have many memories of tennis games I have played. I can tell you about them. I can do this because I have *episodic* or *autobiographical* long-term memory.

Bud, like all dogs, lacks declarative knowledge. He never knew *that* "FETCH" was a game, although he was good at playing it – at least when he was young. Nor did Bud possess long-term autobiographical memory. He therefore lacked the relevant capacity to think about or report to us or to the other dogs, the happy games he played. But clearly, as with his

eating habits, his greeting habits, his hand-shaking habits, and his game-playing habits he displayed possession of long-term *procedural* memory.

This leads me to be able to mark a difference – a difference that makes – between the kinds of meaning nonhuman and human animal lives can have. Humans have autobiographical memory and can produce narratives, nonhumans can't produce narratives. Humans can hold their own life stories and the life stories of others in their heads, nonhuman animals – again, chimps, bonobos, and Great Apes, possibly aside – cannot.

Identity

In terms of the distinction I have drawn between meaning from the first-person point of view, that is, meaning *for* and *to* the creature whose life it is, a sentient being like Bud didn't grasp the threads that made his life the life it was. However, his family – those he was in relationship with – can and have provided a narrative reconstruction of what his life was like. And in doing so, we have tried to give an account, a narrative, that fits the life he lived, but not quite – perhaps not even remotely – as he experienced it.

In the case of human animals we can and do satisfy both conditions in a strong sense. First, in virtue of being self-conscious *and* in virtue of having powerful, resilient autobiographical memories, we can and do have a story about who we are first personally. Our identity has and can take the form of a *narrative*. There is a story we know and can express that, while we are alive, has a beginning, a middle, and an up-to-now part, for us.

Second, others, especially those with whom we are in relation, know a good deal about our story, about who we are. How they see us will not of course always perfectly converge with who we think we are, with what we think we are like. Sometimes others see us more clearly than we see ourselves, sometimes they don't.

A person's identity is first and foremost a matter of conscious continuity and memory. Personal identity, the kind of identity persons but not dogs have, is revealed in narratives, in stories people tell about themselves. But since we are

not infallible, and because we like to spin our narratives in self-serving directions, it is good to be open to feedback from others about what we are really like.

How Meaning Connects with Identity

The first-person sense of personal identity involves narrative structure. The work of narrative structure is to make sense of a life. A good narrative, even if it is intended only for first-personal consumption – even if it is only intended for self-reflection – reveals and depicts not only important life events, it also reveals and depicts an individual's habits, patterns, traits of character.

Now meaning I claim, at least meaning in the sense under discussion today, involves focusing on the habits, patterns, traits, and values that amount to what we call *character*. A person's character is the site around which both first and third personal judgments of meaning, significance, and worth accrue. Now since traits of character are revealed in how one deals with important life *events* and *projects* – in how one deals with the weal and woe of one's beloved son as he deals with certain problems of adolescence; in the attention one gives to one's marriage; in the effort one displays in one's career – the *events* and *projects* of a life matter hugely to the meaning and significance of a life.

A person's character and the events and projects of her life are inextricably bound together. Thus we can say that the narrative through which identity is revealed gains its quality, its worth, its meaning, and its significance from the career of an individual as revealed in the quality of the character she displays in dealing with the events and projects of her life. Since many – but not all – of what I am calling “the events and projects” in a life involve choices – choices to marry, to have children, to work at perfecting one's artistic, musical, or philosophical talents, for example – character is revealed to some extent in the choices of events and projects not simply in dealing with them when they arise. However, given that we can't control much of what comes our way, we are often asked to reveal our characters in the face of situations we can hardly be said to have chosen.

In any case, I want to say that for self-conscious beings of the sort we *Homo sapiens* are, when we ask questions about the meaning of life or judge that a life has been meaningful, we are almost always making a *moral*, or, at least, an assessment of what might be called the *normative quality* of the life. We are asking of ourselves, or of others, whether they or we are *good*. We are asking whether the projects they or we are pursuing are *important or worthy* ones and we are asking whether the *manner* in which they or we are pursuing these projects – assuming they have value – reveal *noble* character traits. We do the same, I claim, even for simply conscious creatures, one's that are not, in any deep sense, self-conscious. Notice in the quote with which I began – delivered just yesterday – Joyce writes that “Bud’s ashes lie along the front of the property where he used to guard the house like a *noble* lion – the place he would lie *to be in the sun* but also *to guard the property*”. Bud’s character is compared to a noble lion, his projects to guard the house and to be in the sun. Noble character and worthy projects.

I want to be careful not to paint an overly moralistic picture. So I need to explain that I am using “moral” in a pretty broad sense, but I think principled and understandable way. I especially don't want to be taken to be saying that all human *excellences* are moral ones. Artistic, athletic, musical, and philosophical projects are worthy ones, as are many careers – farming, clothesmaking, house building, as are many hobbies – gardening, working on one’s chess or bridge game, and so on.

What I do want to claim in saying that the meaning or significance of a human life is assessed primarily in terms of its *moral* quality is that when we assess the meaningfulness of the life of some individual – imagine he was a painter – we will need to judge first, that aesthetic projects are worthy ones, which is easy since any project that aims at *the* beautiful is worthy, since beauty has value, great value. And second, we will want to say that the artist was *dedicated*, that he worked *persistently* to improve his work, that he *loved* his work, and so on, where dedication, persistence, and love are

virtues. Thus, when at funeral eulogies we speak, as we often do of a person’s work or family accomplishments or her hobbies, we always do so, I claim, in a way that reveals and focuses primarily on moral qualities on virtues of character – the person was an extremely *conscientious* worker, a *loving* father and husband, she had a *passion* for bridge, she *loved* her vegetable garden and treated it with the utmost care and attention. Things like that. The assessment we give insofar as we are aiming to sum up a good life will focus on good character traits serving projects of value, projects that, as I have just said, don’t need in every case to be moral ones.

Sometimes what is said at eulogies is exaggerated. Sometimes, it is downright fictional. If so, the life wasn’t as meaningful as is being said.

This may not completely bad, that is, that eulogies sometimes, possibly often involve exaggeration, or accentuation of the positive without equal time for the negative. And the reason is this: the purposes of eulogies are complex. They serve two obvious functions: first, assessing and memorializing the life of the person who is gone, second, comforting his loved ones. It also seems to me that they serve a third, more subtle function, the function of providing some sort of moral lesson for the assembly. What I mean is something like this: the eulogist needs, in an impossibly short amount of time, to do the first two jobs, that is, to sum up a life in a comforting way, and, in addition, to provide the assembly with a picture of certain excellences, to an image of a life that expressed worthy traits and ideals to which all the assembled, in their own ways, might aspire. It is rare for an actual human life to *actually* have achieved the excellences at which it aimed, as well as rare for the deceased to have displayed virtue and nobility consistently in her quest for these excellences. Thus the work of providing the moral lesson, insofar as it requires painting a picture of certain *ideals* to which the person aspired but to which inevitably, in virtue of being human, she failed fully to achieve, may require accentuating the ideals and virtues *aimed* at over the *actual achievement* of these ideals.

Meaning and Morality

In any case, if what I have said so far is true, then the meaning of a human life is determined largely by its *moral quality* in the broad – but I hope not too watered down way – I am using the terms “moral quality”. It follows that if your aim is to live a meaningful life, you had better be tracking the moral quality of your life, all the way along. Most of us, don’t do this, we are too busy making ends meet, studying and working for success, and trying to position ourselves to be able to have nice things and live comfortably. But again notice that at serious moments such as a funeral eulogy, when a life that is over is being assessed, it would miss the point to talk about the number of Porsches or vacation homes the deceased had. If Porsches and vacation homes were really all he had, and especially if they were what his character led him to want the most, then he did not live a very good or meaningful life.

Notice that this sort of case reveals that a person can have led a comfortable, pleasant, even happy life, but not a good one. I am not saying that these things cannot go together, that is, a life of material comfort and pleasure, on the one side and goodness, on the other. It is just that having the first without the second does not make for a very good or meaningful life – these, as I suggesting, being the same. Whereas a morally good life without much in the way of material things and the pleasures they give can make for a highly meaningful life – both as judged first personally and third personally.

Death Bed Psycho-Drama

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was a concentration camp survivor. Before the Holocaust he was an orthodox Freudian. After his years in Dachau and Auschwitz, Frankl developed his own brand of psychotherapy, *logotherapy* – meaning-of-life therapy.

Reflecting on his own concentration camp experiences and those of other survivors, Frankl was led to wonder about what makes life meaningful even in the worst of times. Relationships of love, first and foremost, were his answer. Even though, unbeknownst to him – but not a surprise to him – his loved ones were

killed by the Nazis, Frankl was able to go on because of what they, and his relationships with them, meant to him – both in the death camps and after his release, through living in relation with deceased loved ones, as it were.

This led Frankl to develop a therapeutic technique called “death bed psychodrama”. For a patient with problems in living he would ask them to imagine themselves on their deathbed and to reflect on what mattered to them, what gave their life meaning. When engaged in this thought-experiment, meaningless things and aspirations fall by the wayside, and the really important things become visible. What sorts of things? One’s relationships and the quality of one’s character, one’s important projects, one’s worthy values. Imaginatively looking back, as if, from one’s deathbed leads almost invariably to acute division between what really matters and what doesn’t, what is good about one’s character and what needs work.

The situation involves imaginatively asking oneself to see one’s life for what it is and to imagine, as it were, going back to the life one is living with the sensibility of a eulogist, but in this case putting oneself in charge of the eulogy, of making sure the life takes or regains the direction for the eulogy to be able to the right sort of eulogy, the eulogy of a morally good life – one the spin doctors don’t have to spin too much.

I don’t want to suggest that you each do a death-bed psychodrama every night before you say your “Now I lay me down to sleep” prayer. But I do think that regularly reflecting in this sort of way on how one is living, and on what really matters is an excellent way to keep one’s eye on the prize. What’s the prize? A morally good life, a meaningful human life – these, as I am suggesting, being the same.

I want to say, in case you are wondering whether I am some sort of “goody-goody”, that I am not. I have done some very bad things in my life. I have hurt people I love, displayed disorders of value – caring for worthless, even, bad things, shown lacks of integrity, honesty, and respect for myself and others. Looking back from a reflective pose, even if not from the point of view of my imagined deathbed, helps me to be

better.

Although I have been focusing here on lives that are meaningful in the positive sense, all lives have meaning or significance. So although I am comfortable saying that bad lives lack meaning or significance in the sense under discussion. They do have meaning to the person whose life it is, he may even think his life is good, albeit mistakenly, and bad lives have meaning to those with whom the bad person is in relation.

Just as one can learn how not to be by being in relation with a bad person, so too one can learn to improve oneself by honestly facing one's moral deficiencies. That is, one can work to become better by being in relation with oneself, warts and all, and coming to think and deal honestly with the character one has, the character that has led one to commit various sins, crimes, and misdemeanors.

What Is Moral Goodness?

If a meaningful human life is first and foremost to be determined by its moral quality, a difficult question arises. What is moral goodness? This is a very tricky question, and I'll just say a couple things designed to up the ante for all us aspirants to a meaningful life.

First, I think that, by and large – again thinking about eulogies is useful – most of us have a pretty narrow, conventional sense of what it means to be morally good. A good person abides conventional morality and scores high points for being good, very good, to his or her loved ones. Such an individual will judge her life to be a good one and will be so judged by others.

But second, what if conventional morality sets its sights too low? Is it possible that what we in fact normally judge as a good life first- and third-personally might not be all that good? The answer, I think, is “yes”.

Philosophers often discuss the question of what morality demands and how demanding morality is. One widespread view among ethicists is that it is much more demanding than conventional morality is. Imagine a life that abides the Ten Commandments? Is such a life a good one? In one sense, from the perspective of conventional morality, the answer is “yes”. From the perspective of many ethicists the answer is

“no”. And the reason is this: the Ten Commandments require restraint but not, as it were, moral activism. They tell one mostly what not to do, but say virtually nothing about what one ought to do. So add in the Golden Rule, “Love Your Neighbor”. The Golden Rule promotes activity. After all it says, “Do unto others”. But what exactly is it that it asks us to do unto others. The honest answer is that it is unclear. But there is a conventional way of interpreting the Golden Rule that asks that we be good to our loved ones, to members of our own community. It is interpreted in a way that asks us to love our loved ones, those we are already strongly disposed to love. Is this enough to make for a morally good life? Maybe not.

What I am calling conventional morality thinks of doing good beyond the bounds of family and community as “above and beyond the call of duty”, as what philosophers call “supererogatory”. To be sure, saints travel down the road of supererogation, but a good and meaningful life for most of us is thought *not* to be properly judged from the perspective of “what is above and beyond the call of duty”. Or so most think.

But might this be mistaken – a case of not seeing what morality really demands? And thus not seeing what makes for a truly meaningful life? I think the honest answer is “yes”.

Many traditions call upon people to live a life of universal love and compassion. Jesus and Buddha, for example, extolled us in this direction. What would living according to an ethic of universal love involve? At a minimum it would involve those of us who are well off giving much more to those who are badly off. I am talking not just about going out of our way to be nice to those worse off, or giving time in soup kitchens, I am talking about giving up resources, including substantial hunks of one's money.

I make a very good salary and I live better than I need to. If I were to live as I think I ought to I should scale back, as we say, and give about 50% of my after tax dollars to those in great need. I'd still be fine.

But you might ask: What about saving for my kids? Trust me they would be ok. They too have more than they need. But it is part of

conventional morality that one should care disproportionately for one's loved ones. So you might even think that if I scaled back and left my kids without the sort of inheritance that I can eventually provide them with that I would be doing something morally wrong. Indeed, conventional morality teaches this. Since I live largely within the sphere of conventional morality, I feel the threat of this sort of charge. And my kids might well think I was irresponsible, even uncaring if I went the route I am now suggesting might be good, better than the way I am now living. They too – my kids that is, after all, also live mostly within the sphere of conventional morality. I have raised them that way.

But the charge of wrongness, of irresponsibility, might well be mistaken. After all, it is just a matter of luck, a matter of complete cosmic serendipity, that I am a man of means. And it is equally a matter of luck, this time bad luck that those very badly off are so badly off. If morality is a matter both of *not* doing what is wrong but also of *actively working* to be loving, to end suffering, and to display compassion, then what grounds could there possibly be for setting the proper limits of such activism at the boundary of the walls of one's home, one's community, or, at the limit, at the boundaries of one's nation state?

I'll just leave this question, this worry, out there. As something worth worrying about. It is, I know, disquieting. It is intended to be. But I think it would be negligent of me to leave the impression that I think that a truly good life, a truly meaningful life, is one that simply satisfies the demands of common sense conventional morality.

Three Conditions of A Meaningful Life

Let me now revise the two conditions of a meaningful life mentioned earlier in light of my claim that meaning or significance come from moral goodness:

1. A life is meaningful if it is *accurately* judged to be morally good *by* the person whose life it is.
2. A life is meaningful if it is judged to be

morally good by *others* in a position to *accurately* assess the life of that individual.

Some people can't see their own lives clearly and third parties can be mistaken, so, in fact, a good life might not in fact be seen or judged to be the good life it is or was. So what I should do is introduce something like an "ideal observer" and say that a life is meaningful if it *should* or *would* be judged to be morally good by an "ideal observer".

But now I must add a disquieting third condition that emerged in the discussion of what moral goodness consists in and how demanding morality is:

3. A life is meaningful if an "ideal observer" would judge the life as morally good from the perspective of _____.

I could fill in the blank with the words "conventional morality" or I could fill it in with a much more demanding moral conception, one I, in fact, think Jesus or Buddha would think far better than conventional morality.

I will just leave the BLANK blank, fully recognizing that it forestalls the crucial question of what morality demands and thus leaves the question of what makes for a truly meaningful life open to further examination.

Conclusion: One Last Disquieting Suggestion

You may well have noticed that my entire discussion has proceeded on the assumption that life's meaning is a matter of how we live in *this* life. I have assumed that whatever meaning a life has for the creature whose life it is ends when bodily death occurs. I said this much at least for our beloved dog Bud. I also think this is true for persons. When you die your life's meaning is over for you, first-personally. But remember I said that the meaning of a life *for* others, for those in relation with the dead person, doesn't end when a person dies. Our lives, be they good or bad, leave effects, ripples – memories – others who are different because of us, and future generations who will feel the effects of our being – quite possibly, certainly after long enough time, without ever knowing that we existed.

I think that this is all the meaning we can reasonably expect a human life to have. But I know from experience that many people think that this much meaning is not enough. Many people think that for life to be truly meaningful there must be something that makes for *eternal* or *transcendent* meaning. I don't see why.

Over 85% of Americans believe in a personal creator God and similar numbers believe in the immortality of the soul. I need to assume that 85% of the people reading this believe in God and personal immortality. I value politeness and I don't enjoy being judged irreverent or rude. But I value honesty more. So I will say this. I think that the hope or belief that one will find further meaning or to continue to live meaningfully in some sort of beatified state – *in some sort of non-earthly second career for one's consciousness*, despite being extraordinarily widespread, is a silly belief, unbecoming to mature, reflective people.

It isn't that I think that all aspects of religion are bad, I just think these two beliefs – in a personal creator God and in personal immortality are baseless. In 2,500 years of noble efforts to provide reasons for either belief, nothing remotely credible has been offered. Nothing. Nada.

That to one side, why should transcendent, eternal meaning matter? We are conscious creatures and consciousness naturally desires to propel itself into the future. We are also smart, smart enough to know that death is in the cards. But why is death bad, why is it something to be feared? Dying can be terrible. We have reason to fear it. And dying too young is bad too because you are cheated the chance to develop certain excellences. But with death, there is nothing to fear. You are just dead. Your career is over. But if you have lived a good life, you have made the world better. You have, as you die, something to be proud of. Surely, truth, beauty, and goodness exist whether there is a God or not. Furthermore, our kind of animal is uniquely positioned, thanks to evolutionary luck to discover these things and live lives with *the* true, *the* good, and *the* beautiful in our sights. Doing so is thrilling and noble. The best we can do.

Bud, our beloved dog, is gone. He is dead.

Bud no longer exists. Why do you or I think that nothing turns on there being transcendent, eternal meaning for the Budster? His life was as meaningful as a dog's life can be without either him or his loved ones – and certainly not you – thinking something was missing because the meaning his life had *to* him, and *for* those with whom he was in relation, is not shored up by something transcendent. Of course, it makes sense to have different meaning-of-life standards for human animals than for dogs or even chimps given that we are capable of living lives in conformity with *the* moral good and they are not. But it makes no sense to think that the reasons for aiming for a good life require transcendent ground. Goodness is visible to us in this world, and we have ample reason, again in this world, to seek it out, to draw it into our breasts. The meaning of life turns, I have argued, on doing so. You will flourish if you are good, but not if you are bad.

At many religious funerals, the priest or minister says “Eternal Rest, Grant Unto Him Oh Lord”. This is a nice thought – Eternal Rest. Think about it.

Bud was a good dog. He lived a meaningful dog's life. I wish everyone in this audience, and every person on earth, a good and meaningful human life. And then there will be eternal rest. Trust me that's the way it will be. And again I can't see what is remotely bad about that. If you have lived a good and meaningful life, then you will have lived a good and meaningful life. Being gone, no longer existing, being in a state of eternal rest can't change that. Nothing can.

Recommended readings

- Flanagan, O. (2009). *The really hard problem: Meaning in a material world*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Flanagan, O. (2002). *The problem of the soul: Two visions of mind and how to reconcile them*. New York: Basic Books.
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- Flanagan, O. (1991). *Varieties of moral personality: Ethics and psychological realism*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

- Frankl, V. (1997). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Basic Books.
- Locke, J. (1690). *An essay concerning human understanding*. Annotated by A. C. Fraser, 1959. New York: Dover Publications

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