

Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem*

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Not so long ago it was common to find philosophers telling us that the question of life's meaning was itself meaningless. Students who came to university keen to study the meaning of life ended up learning only about the meaning of words. These days the commonplace is somewhat different: the question of life's meaning is a real question (of course), but contemporary philosophy has neglected it together with many other questions that really matter to people.

In a way this is quite true. Recent philosophy has not been very good at addressing the question of life and its meaning in any kind of direct way. This is true of both its 'analytic' (i.e. 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American) and its 'continental' (i.e. post-war French) varieties. One will get no more illumination about how to give meaning to one's life from reading Derrida than from reading Davidson. It's just not one of the things that recent philosophy has been very good at.

Of course, the question of the meaning of life – or of how to live a fulfilled life – is not the only question for philosophy. But it is a central one, and its recent neglect is curious. Philosophers these days scratch their heads and ruefully recognise that the question is intelligible. But they realise they have missed the bus, and some are trying hard to catch up. And if Owen Flanagan is right, the question is all the more pressing for us today. This is because of the supposed truth of naturalism: the doctrine, inspired by the discoveries of natural science, that the world is entirely material and contains nothing supernatural, nothing which transcends the physical phenomena. How can my life have any meaning, Flanagan asks, if I am just a 'short-lived piece of organised muscle and tissue' and 'when I die I am gone forever?'. The

assumed contrast is with a traditional theistic view, according to which our lives are given meaning 'from the outside', as it were. The purpose of our lives derives (say) from the purpose God has given it, and acting in accord with God's will results in everlasting life.

Yet, as Flanagan convincingly argues, this kind of theism is incompatible with a naturalism which says that the material universe is all there is. Some might react by questioning naturalism, but that is not what Flanagan does. He accepts naturalism and so has the problem of explaining how our lives have meaning, given that such meaning cannot have a transcendent source. This is what he calls 'the really hard problem'. The title alludes to David Chalmers's description of the problem of consciousness (the 'hard problem'). If explaining how sensory consciousness fits into the material world is hard, then (the suggestion is) explaining how meaning or significance fits into the material world is even harder. If the only way life can be given meaning is from the outside, then it seems that either naturalism is false, or life must be meaningless.

Flanagan's aim is to argue that life can be meaningful even if there is no transcendent deity, no life after death and nothing but the material world. Most of his book consists of more-or-less systematic descriptions of various attempts to give meaning to life that are consistent with naturalism. He recognises that people give meaning to their lives by participating in what he calls the 'spaces' of art, science, technology, ethics, politics and spirituality (oddly, he has little to say about love and friendship).

'Spirituality' might look a little out of place in this humanistic litany. But, inspired by his interest in Buddhism and discussions with the Dalai Lama, Flanagan argues that someone can live a religious life of a sort, and experience a certain kind of

spirituality, even if they reject the cosmological views of Christianity and other religions. This is what he calls 'spirituality naturalised'. Although Flanagan is right to emphasise the non-cosmological aspects of a lot of religious belief and practice (something neglected in a lot of the recent 'anti-God' literature), I find this label disingenuous. It's also misleading: if you are a naturalist, then you should have no more place for the spiritual than you have for the spirit.

Flanagan, however, is one of those atheists who like to match the theists drink-for-drink when it comes to debates about value. Like Richard Dawkins, who recommends 'rejoicing' in the godless world, Flanagan (who has a similar attitude of 'joyful optimism') thinks he can recommend a kind of spirituality even if he does not recommend the spirit to go with it. A thoroughly disenchanted atheist, however, will see this as merely trying to ape the supposed values of theism. Too much rejoicing and enthusiasm all round, methinks.

In acknowledgement of the Aristotelian origins of his search for meaning, Flanagan calls his book a study in 'Eudaimonics'. The idea is not, of course, that taking a course in Eudaimonics will help to make your life meaningful. Rather, Eudaimonics is supposed to be part of a description of what can make up a meaningful life. When considered in this way, many of Flanagan's claims have a lot of plausibility. Flanagan is surely right to say that to ask about 'the' meaning of life is the wrong way to go about things; there are many realms of meaning and no reason to think one is prior. And his lucid descriptions of the value of Buddhist ethics and meditation make the book quite distinctive.

Nonetheless, I found myself wondering what Flanagan's eudaimonics has to do with his really hard problem. The really hard problem, recall, was about what gives life meaning if there is no transcendent reality, if we are just a few dollars worth of

chemicals organised by natural selection. Suppose one is moved by this problem. Then how can it possibly be part of a solution to it to describe the circumstances under which people actually *are* happy and fulfilled? After all, it cannot be denied that people find all sorts of ways to give their lives significance, and that people find fulfilment in many ways. In some cases these may be based on metaphysical illusions – such as the belief in life after death – but it is a kind of fulfilment for all that. All these ways must be consistent with naturalism; for if they were not, their mere existence would refute naturalism – which they clearly do not. The fact that my grandmother obtained comfort from her religious beliefs and died at peace with herself says nothing about the truth of atheism. So whatever the other merits of ‘Project Eudaimonia’, it is hard to see how it would comfort someone who is genuinely troubled by Flanagan’s really hard problem.

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