

Review of *Doing Valuable Time* by Cheshire Calhoun

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Sadly, we're all going to die, so we have a finite amount of time at our disposal. How should we spend it if we want to lead a good and meaningful life? This is the question at the heart of Cheshire Calhoun's strikingly original *Doing Valuable Time*. As she observes, we are both evaluators who choose in the light of our values and take up attitudes towards what happens, and temporally oriented beings whose present is shaped by thoughts and implicit expectations regarding possible futures. The interaction of these two deep features turns out to have a rich variety of consequences for decision-making, meaning in life, the value of commitment, and attitudes like boredom and contentment.

For Calhoun, actively leading a life is a matter of spending one's time in ways that reflect one's values or normative outlook, whether it comes to life choices or just deciding what to do this afternoon. She distinguishes four different ways in which we might use this finite resource (14). First, and best, there is *primary spending*, using our time on things we think are worthwhile for their own sake, whether it is conducting research or watching movies. Second, there is *filler spending*, which consists of things we don't make time for, but are forced to do when we have too much time on our hands, such as when we're stuck in a waiting room. Third, decisions about what to do for its own sake often result in what she calls *entailed spending*, time spent on activities that support primary spending. If all you want to do is surf, the time you spend working at the burger stand or repairing your board is entailed spending. Finally, there is *norm-required spending*, which consists of spending time in ways required by some norm or another, such as filing one's taxes. Since filler, entailed,

and norm-required spending are often expenditures we'd be happy to dispense with, they may amount to wasting our time.

This distinction between different ways of spending time is key to Calhoun's view on meaningfulness. She distinguishes between two interpretations of the concept of meaningfulness. First, we might use it to *commend* the kinds of lives we find excellent or admirable. This naturally leads to views like Susan Wolf's (2010) and Thaddeus Metz's (2016) that link meaning somehow to objective, agent-independent value. Calhoun rejects such views. Among other things, she holds that according to them meaningfulness is not a distinct dimension of evaluation – the concept doesn't do any work that isn't already done by the notion of significance. She also thinks that objectivism implies the same kind of life would be the most meaningful for all of us.

Calhoun's preferred option is to use the concept of meaning to assess possible lives from a first-person perspective, to identify the options that survive reflection in the light of the agent's own values and are thus intelligible to them. On her *normative outlook conception*, "Meaningful living involves expending your life's time on ends that in your best judgment you have reason to value and thus reason to use yourself up on" (32–33). Assessments of meaning are thus fundamentally subjective, appealing to what the agent herself sees as reasons for living as she does (even if some of these reasons are "reasons-for-anyone" and thus serve to make it intelligible to others). The life of someone who is dedicated to collecting lint may be meaningless on this criterion, if she's acting under some inner compulsion, but if she herself endorses it, our intuitions of meaninglessness reflect only our inability to take her perspective (42). Another important consequence of Calhoun's focus on primary spending is that committing to a great cause that gives shape to our whole life but requires us to spend a lot of time on merely instrumental activities may make our life *less* meaningful than choosing more modest projects that allow us dedicate more time to

what we value for itself. Indeed, she argues in Chapter 4 that long-term commitments, understood as distinct from intentions and provisional plans, are optional from the perspective of meaning. While they may indeed make it more likely that one's life is *about* something and perhaps more meaningful from a global perspective, the potentially conflicting local perspective of meaningfulness of particular activities must also be taken into account (111).

Should we follow Calhoun here? I am not persuaded. For me, the most important criterion for an analysis of the relevant concept of meaningfulness is that it allows us to make sense of the existential concerns we express when we use the language of meaning. For a paradigmatic example, consider Tolstoy's (1882/1987) crisis when he began to reflect on the ultimate point of educating his children or improving the lot of peasants in a world without divine purpose. His worry wasn't whether he was spending his time doing what he had most reason to do by his own lights. He was, and he knew it. But what he had begun to doubt was whether those reasons were genuine – whether there really was a point to childcare or social justice, or anything at all. Nevertheless, his existential concern was an intensely first-personal one: he worried whether *he* had enough reason to go on. We might say he was concerned about the objective validity of his outlook. Others who don't harbor such doubts might nevertheless be concerned about their prospects of *success* in realizing some genuine value. In such concerns, the first- and third-personal perspectives are inextricably intertwined. I don't think that Calhoun's proposal can capture this.

What is more, Calhoun's alternative take on meaning arguably fails to capture a *distinctive* dimension of evaluating lives. It comes very close to notions like life satisfaction and especially value fulfillment, whose importance for living well Valerie Tiberius (2018) has recently stressed. So I still think that a distinctive notion of meaningfulness that fits the relevant concerns should be understood in terms of fittingness of attitudes like agential pride

and admiration, or elevation and fulfillment, which point towards successful engagement with value beyond ourselves (cf. Kauppinen 2012). That's why it's always possible for us to be deeply mistaken about the meaningfulness of our lives, and why the whole-hearted lint collector may still be an apt object of compassion. If our past and individual qualities make a difference to which objective values it makes sense for us to pursue, as they plausibly do, the worry that all meaningful lives are the same is out of place.

To be sure, we do also talk about meaningful experiences or objects, where the relevant sense of 'meaning' has to do with deep emotional resonance or our sense of ourselves. Talk of engaging with what we value is more plausible here, but it seems clear we're not talking about the same thing as we do when we, say, worry about the purpose of our lives. It's a strike against Calhoun's substantive account that it allows activities like watching *The Wire* to count as meaningful in the *same sense* as brokering peace in the Middle East, assuming that both amount to primary spending of one's time. A related problem concerns *comparisons* of meaning. It makes perfect sense to say that Nelson Mandela's life was more meaningful than mine. To know it's true, we don't need to know whether Mandela spent more of his time doing things he valued for their own sake than I do, or whether he saw his political actions as norm-required. Even if I spend all my time on listening to podcasts that I value highly and thus find it 'meaningful' in the resonance sense, it doesn't follow that there's a chance that my life is more meaningful than his.

In Chapters 3 and 4 Calhoun turns to considering how our stance towards the future impacts on our present motivation. She emphasizes the importance of nonreflective but contentful anticipation of a certain kind of future that forms an implicit horizon of our activities – our “phenomenological idea of the future” (72). Without explicitly thinking about it, we typically expect the world to go on much as before and that we'll be around and capable of doing the kind of things we want. When we expect that there's space for

meaningful activities, we take an interest in our future. Calhoun labels this kind of attitude “basal hopefulness” (52), and investigates the various conditions that might undermine it and thus result in disengagement from actively leading a life. They include estrangement from one’s own normative outlook, as might happen when one loses religious faith, and the kind of demoralization that results from the loss in one’s own efficacy.

When it comes to particular projects, we sometimes realize that if we fail, we will have irredeemably wasted our effort. This may deflate our motivation so that we never even embark on the risky project. Calhoun argues that “practical hope” consists of adopting a phenomenological idea of the future in which one’s project is successful (86). When we’re hopeful, we tacitly envisage things working out, and this provides the necessary motivational boost.

In the two final chapters, Calhoun addresses the issue of how our temporal nature affects our attitudes towards the present. Her first target is the puzzle of boredom: why is it that we can be bored even if we think what we’re doing has a point or can do whatever we want? Why does boredom often result in meaningless or norm-violating activities, like carving a band’s logo on one’s desk? Calhoun’s answer starts with the thought that there’s a variety of ways in which we can engage with what we value: desiring, attending, acting upon, contemplating, or memorizing, among many other things. Her view is roughly that boredom consists in our inability to engage with our present situation in such ways (136). It has many possible causes. It could be that we don’t see our present activity as contributing to something we aspire to, so that our life’s trajectory seems to have stalled; or some norms, perhaps self-imposed instrumental ones, require us to spend time on things we’d rather not spend time on; or we’ve exhausted all the ways we can think of engaging with what’s at hand, though we genuinely value it; or we can’t settle on what to do with our free time. In such situations, it is intelligible that we may want to distract ourselves by engaging in

activities that don't even aspire to be productive, or that blatantly flout the norms we resent, for example. While Calhoun doesn't want to place responsibility for boredom on the bored, she does emphasize that ways of engaging with values can be learned via instruction and experience, and fostered by friends. I found this chapter particularly persuasive.

The final chapter addresses attitudes of contentment and discontentment with the always imperfect present. As Calhoun sees it, they are essentially comparative attitudes with a counterfactual element, which distinguishes them from satisfaction and dissatisfaction. When we're content, we focus on things being better than they could have been, while the discontented focus on their being worse than they could have been. What is decisive is thus not just how well we think we're actually doing, but also our expectation frame – for example, if I think that I'm entitled to faster service, I'll be discontent with what I get. While Calhoun is willing to allow individual variation in eligible expectation frames, she points out that some expectations are manifestations of vice. It is, after all, unreasonable to expect special treatment, or that luck always goes your way, or to compare one's lot only to members of some privileged group. She's thus not particularly sympathetic to first world problems. Instead, she argues that having more modest expectations is a corrective virtue that is often needed for appreciating the value of what we have in the face of our natural tendencies to focus on flaws and problems and to engage in upward social comparison (161–164).

All in all, Calhoun's book is bristling with novel insights, which must be acknowledged even by those who disagree with some of her substantive conclusions. Throughout, she highlights the importance of individual variety and seemingly small everyday things to leading a valuable and meaningful life. While the argument of the book could be more systematic and unified, it is essential reading for anyone who wants to spend their time better.

**References**

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