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The Value of Sleeping

Abstract

Should you take a pill that gives you all the health benefits of sleep and allows you to stay awake? I argue that you shouldn't. I propose three reasons why sleeping, conceived of as a socially and culturally embedded human activity, is valuable. First, there is aesthetic value in the rituals that typically precede sleeping; second, there is interpersonal value in the intimacy that stems from sleeping with other people; third, there is ethical value in mere presence and in retreating from consciousness. In order to fully support my argument, I situate it within a conception of goodness that embraces the fragility of the human condition and the limitations stemming from our corporeal nature. I conclude with some practical implications of my view.

Keywords

Sleep; everyday aesthetics; intimacy; human goodness; consciousness.

The Value of Sleeping

"And sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow's eye,

Steal me awhile from mine own company."

A Midsummer's Night Dream (3.3.451-452)

"For I think that if one had to pick out that night during which a man slept soundly and did not dream, put beside it the other nights and days of his life, and then see how many days and nights had been better and more pleasant than that night, not only a private person but the great king would find them easy to count compared with the other days and nights."

Apology, 40c-d.

A famous philosopher once told me that if he could take a pill and skip sleeping, he would. I replied: "How could you?! I love sleeping!" He objected that I couldn't possibly love *sleeping* itself, since we're unconscious during sleep—what I loved must be the rest that sleep brings. But if the pill in question could bring the same beneficial effects, why wouldn't I skip this time-wasting activity? I muttered something about the pleasure of lying in a warm cozy bed, but I didn't press him further.

Years later I experienced the grueling fatigue of caring for a baby that wakes up every few hours. I understood why sleep deprivation is used as torture (see Sharuk 2021; warning: not a reading for the faint of heart). I kept thinking about that pill, coveting it: I could achieve instant rest and take care of my baby's needs at the same time! Yet, the best part of finally being able to sleep through the night again was not the rest that sleep brought, but rather the sweetness of being able to go to sleep and knowing I wouldn't be woken up by a crying baby. Being a mother also unveiled novel sleeping-related joys, the most luminous and simple of which is the sight of one's baby peacefully asleep.

Now that my children have been proficient at sleeping for years, I still love sleeping as much as I can, and I remain unconvinced by the idea of a pill that allows one to skip sleeping altogether. Pinpointing exactly what is valuable about sleeping seemed like a worthy philosophical project. As I searched for extant philosophical literature on the value of sleeping, however, I came up mostly empty-handed.[1]

[1] The very limited work on the topic (e.g., Corey 2006; Wu 2014; Dahm 2020) lies outside of the analytic tradition within which I'm situated. Cressida Heyes is working on a series of papers on sleep, but her project differs both in method and scope from mine.

While philosophers have investigated what sleeping and dreaming imply for the study of consciousness (for a review, see Windt 2020, 2021), there doesn't seem to be a systematic philosophical inquiry on the possibility of valuing sleeping itself, perhaps indirectly confirming the skepticism I was initially confronted with. After all, philosophers, of all people, really value conscious mental activity! (Although notable exceptions seemingly include Socrates, if we take the passage from the *Apology* in the epigraph at face value.)

Even if one were to object that perhaps the famous philosopher is an outlier and that the lack of literature on the topic is not indicative of skepticism about the value of sleeping, there would still be value in identifying *why* we shouldn't be skeptics, especially in light of worries expressed by scholars who see modern sleep practices are an expression of an increased societal acceleration that might be detrimental (see for instance Rosa 2003; Williams 2011; Hsu 2014).

In this paper, I will argue that sleeping, even in the absence of dreaming, is a source of a plethora of interpersonal, ethical and aesthetic value.[2] My inquiry is meant to be a starting point and is far from being exhaustive. I start by briefly presenting the robust evidence on the health benefits of good sleep, and a recent defense of its political relevance (section 1). I show that these lines of defense of sleeping focus on *sleep as source of rest*, and fail to illuminate what's valuable about *sleeping as a socially and culturally embedded human activity* (section 2). Therefore, I propose three reasons why sleeping, thus conceived, is valuable. First, there is *aesthetic* value in the rituals that typically precede sleeping (section 3); second, there is *interpersonal* value in the intimacy that stems from sleeping with other people (section 4); third, and most importantly, there is *ethical* value (broadly construed) in

[2] Several colleagues have brought up that the arguments I make have parallels in discussions on the value of eating. I think that is entirely correct (with meal replacement products being a sort of equivalent to the rest pill), but for reasons of space I won't discuss this analogy.

mere presence and in retreating from consciousness (section 5). In order to fully support my argument, I situate it within a conception of goodness that embraces the fragility of the human condition and the limitations stemming from our corporeal nature (section 6). I conclude by sketching some practical implications of my view (section 7).

1. Health and Political Benefits of Sleep as Source of Rest

Even though philosophers have mostly snubbed the topic, many popular articles have sung the praises of slowing down, taking naps during the day and getting a good night of sleep (e.g., Power 2017; Karlis 2019; but this is not only a recent trend, see Simmons 1986). However, such praise is based on a very different argument from mine.

It's scientifically uncontroversial that sleep is an essential physiological need that has to be satisfied in order not just to survive but to thrive. The biological function of sleep actually remains surprisingly elusive in all animals, but it's been suggested that sleep plays a role in optimizing energy allocation (Schmidt et al. 2017). Whatever sleep is for, we know it's extremely useful to beings like us. Prolonged total sleep deprivation causes severe psychological harm, including depression and psychosis, and physical harm, including brain degeneration and death. Chronic sleep restriction may not be fatal, but a complete list of its effects is very long, and ranges from cognitive and emotional deficits to physiological ones. Banks and Dinges conclude their review on the many adverse behavioral and physiological consequences of sleep restriction by saying that "adequate sleep duration (7–8 hours per night) is *vital*." (Banks and Dinges 2007: 526, my emphasis). There is also increasing consensus that short naps during the day are beneficial for most people (for an accessible article that links to the relevant research, see Fry 2020).

A distinct but related take on the importance of good sleep has been recently provided by Jonathan White (2022). He provides a compelling defense of the idea that good sleep is a matter of

justice, insofar as bad sleep causes social and political inequality. White details the many ways in which people fail to sleep well, distinguishing between short sleep, irregular sleep, and desynchronized sleep (e.g., the one of shift workers). Being sleep-deprived tends to correlate with other forms of systematic socioeconomic inequality (even though there are plenty of exceptions, such as medical doctors) and to exacerbate them. White argues that poor sleep doesn't just correlate with other disparities (for instance those caused by gender, race and class differences) but that it also detracts from people's ability to bear with difficult circumstances and to improve them, which makes poor sleep a "corrosive disadvantage—one the presence of which yields further disadvantages" (White 2022: 488). But there is another source of this "sleep cleavage", dividing the well-rested from the sleep-deprived, namely genetics: people have different *chronotypes*, that is, they have different internal circadian rhythms, and when there is a misalignment between their biological clock and their imposed work-rest schedule, dire health consequences follow (Arendt 2010). There are many other social and material harms associated with short, irregular, or desynchronized sleep that White describes in his lucid, evidence-based analysis, most notably lack of civic and political engagement in an exhausted population, which then becomes more easily manipulated by authoritarian rulers.

White's discussion of what he calls *circadian justice* is nuanced and persuasive, and his proposal for a *polyrhythmic model* of sleep, where different biological needs are respected and people are free to choose a schedule that works for them, fascinating if ambitious. White acknowledges that a new "polyrhythmic order would need to be underpinned by the intelligent design of laws and public policy" (506) and would imply a radical restructuring of societies, from housing arrangements and urban spaces to a complete reconfiguration of institutions.

White's discussion of circadian justice is much richer than I can do it justice here, but what matters for my purposes is that it doesn't ultimately individuate what's special and valuable about sleep*ing* itself.

2. The Rest Pill

In the previous section, I've reviewed the literature showing that good sleep is essential to our mental and physical health and thus crucial to the flourishing of society. But these data and arguments ultimately point to sleep's value *insofar as it is a source of rest*. Achieving this outcome without the "time waste" of sleeping, and the difficulties that stem from accommodating this biological need, is indeed what makes the pill idea appealing in the first place!

Sociologists of sleep have documented the changes in sleeping patters with the advent of industrialization and electricity. For instance, A. Roger Ekirch writes: "with the growth of industrialization, Western societies, geared to higher levels of productivity, efficiency and consumption, became increasingly time-conscious. Once grounded in the cycles of the natural world, time became an ever more precious commodity, one capable of regulation by the growing precision and affordability of clocks and watches. For mounting numbers of people, sleep represented, at best, a biological imperative or, worse, a necessary evil best confined to a single interval" (Ekirch 2015: 170).

Ekirch is known for arguing that "segmented slumber" was the common practice for most of human history (2005, 2015). He details how pre-industrial families slept in two major intervals of nocturnal sleep, 'first sleep' and 'second sleep', which were bridged past midnight by an hour-long interval of wakefulness in which individuals meditated, had sex, and talked (2015, 152). While there is no scholarly consensus that segmented sleep is cross-cultural, we do know that sleep patterns are subject to cultural and societal changes (Reiss 2017, 33-35).

The thought experiment of a pill that eliminates sleep completely might sound far-fetched, but experimentations aimed at reducing sleep deprivation is not just the purview of producers of caffeinated beverages and bedding companies, but of many drug companies and, unsurprisingly, researchers working for the military. The US Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA)

in 2002 prioritized reducing sleep deprivation among soldiers and in 2007 stated that the "capability to operate effectively, without sleep, is no less than a 21st century revolution in military affairs" (as cited in Reiss 2017: 208). While eliminating sleep has so far proved impossible, the drug *modafinil* emerged from this project as an effective stimulant that has been marketed in several Western countries under different names and which is used not only by soldiers but also by civilians such as shift-workers and, illegally, by students cramming for exams (Reiss 2017, 209-210).[3]

So, imagine that there was indeed a pill that could make us skip sleep altogether After the few seconds it takes to swallow it, we would get all the benefits of a full night of sleep. Should we take it?

An initial answer against taking the pill is that we'd alter our current way of living too radically, depriving the economy of many industries (Mooallem 2007 calls it the "sleep-industrial complex"), from the makers of beds, linen, pillows, pajamas, and related paraphernalia to sleep consultants and clinics, producers of stimulant beverages, and more. But many radical changes have been enacted in the history of humanity, albeit not as quickly as this one would be. Stone tablets and carriages, steam locomotives and floppy disks went out of fashion, but new technology supplanted them, and new occupations arose. There have been many technological revolutions, and humans have evolved and arguably thrived in virtue of them.

A second answer might be that if we didn't sleep at night, we would have 7-8 hours (more for children) in our days where we would need something to do, including eating at the very least a fourth meal. Such a sweeping re-configuration of society might lead to economic growth just on its own, but could also be negative in only partially foreseeable ways. For instance, workers would be

[3] A well-documented review of the military's "war on sleep" is Saletan 2013, which isn't, however, a scholarly source. A search on modafinil on PubMed produces about 2000 entries: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=modafinil

expected to work more, with poorly-paid workers being encouraged to take on more jobs for the same low wage, thus increasing current economic exploitation.

In response to this concern, however, one could argue that the pill would actually put an end to circadian injustice: if no one slept, the many inequalities and disadvantages discussed by White wouldn't arise. While exploring what a sleepless society could look like is an exciting project, I won't pursue it here. My scope will be more modest: to understand what may be valuable in the activity of sleeping for people who're likely to be reading this essay, that is to say, relatively unexploited individuals in contemporary industrialized societies.

In the next three sections I consider three reasons that support my hesitation towards taking the pill: first, because there's aesthetic value in the *rituals* that typically precede sleeping and which would unlikely precede taking a pill; second, because there's interpersonal value in *co-sleeping*, that is, sleeping with other beings; third, and most importantly, because there's ethical (broadly construed) value in *mere presence*. There is a fourth reason that I won't explore: because there is (mostly but probably not exclusively) epistemic value in dreaming. Dreaming is a complex topic that deserves a separate treatment.

A couple of provisos before we continue.

First, I distinguish "sleeping" as opposed to "sleep", which is the term used in the empirical literature reviewed in the previous section. Sleep is a state, whose value is reduced to achieving rest: like satiety or comfort, we can imagine rest being achieved through means other than the activity of sleeping. "Sleep" also usually denotes an unconscious *state* we *fall* into, out of biological necessity. "Sleeping" helps us focus on *active* and *intentional* aspects of this experience, including the first aspect of sleeping that I discuss in the next section: the fact that we *go to sleep*.

Second, a note on methodology. One could insist that, military experiments notwithstanding, my thought experiment is unrealistic, artificial, and arbitrary: I'm asking the reader to imagine a

radically different world in which people don't have to sleep and then appeal to aspects of the world as we know it. Surely a world where the pill is possible would be unrecognizable to us in many other ways!

I feel the pull of this objection. All philosophical thought experiments have limitations. Yet, there is a reason we still use them: most notably, they help us isolate *relevant variables*. This thought experiment is meant to jumpstart our reflection, by inviting us to search for what's special about sleeping as an activity versus its outcome of rest (when all goes well). But, as the discussion proceeds, the reader will notice how I will be less and less attached to the details of the experiment and how I will not attempt to generate endless variations of it, because ultimately I don't think those details really matter. Similarly, while I try to separate different kinds of value (aesthetic, interpersonal, and ethical), it will become apparent how artificial that separation is.

The pill thought experiment is but an excuse to stimulate an analysis of the value of sleeping as *a socially and culturally embedded human practice*. We cannot understand the value of sleeping as a human activity without examining it in the context of our hardwired psychological tendencies, our current biological limitations, and our actual social and cultural mores. In other words, why does sleeping matter *for beings like us*? I say more about this topic on section 6, but I should say at the outset that I am open to the possibility of a human future where we value radically different things and where sleeping has lost all its value. Maybe one day humans will be immortal, perhaps thanks to becoming one with machines—I don't wish for that future, but some do, and what I say here will likely be unappealing to them. To each their own utopia.

3. The Value of Sleeping Rituals

Falling asleep can be a natural, biological process that doesn't require social ornaments. Children, especially young ones, fall asleep without intending too, and some adults do, too (sometimes, falling

asleep unintentionally or even unwittingly is a sign of sleep-deprivation, but it need not be). But most of the time people *prepare* for going to sleep. For some, this preparation is simple and quick: going to the bathroom, brushing teeth, and undressing or changing into loose and more comfortable clothes, such as shirt and sweatpants. For others, it's a proper ritual including activities such as: a bath or long shower; a multi-step facial care treatment; brushing teeth, flossing and mouth washing; changing into special sleeping clothes, such as pajamas or nightgowns; meditating, praying, or reading a book. Some people like to fall asleep away from their bed, perhaps watching TV, but often do so as part of an established and sometimes intentional habit.

There are likely gender and cultural differences. Many of the rituals described above are common only in industrialized countries and perhaps more likely to be done by women than by people of other genders. Some of these activities sound luxurious, but I don't mean to suggest every sleeping ritual requires material wealth, even though they require time—a precious commodity itself.

No matter the length and complexity of one's pre-bedtime routine, it's worth noting that having one is highly recommended in sleep hygiene advice, because it helps the brain transition from a diurnal mindset of action to a nocturnal one of inaction.[4] It induces relaxation, and letting go of one's physical and mental energy.

Some sleeping routines also benefit our relationships, most obviously those we do with young children: reading a favorite book, singing a lullaby, chatting about the day or cuddling in bed with them can be the best part of one's day. While reading aloud to adult partners has mostly fallen out of fashion, many of us comment on the news or share bits of gossip while browsing social media on our smartphones before falling asleep—a modern sleeping ritual that's discouraged in

[4] See, for example: https://www.healthline.com/health/sleep-hygiene#relaxing-routine For a critique of contemporary western sleep guidelines and advice, see Reiss 2017.

sleep hygiene advice, and yet one that increases intimacy and bonding. (I'll come back to these relational benefits in the next section.)

But sleeping rituals are valuable independently of their positive effects on falling asleep, on achieving good rest, or on our relationships. They are replete with pleasure and *everyday aesthetic* value (see Saito 2023 for a review). Immersing myself in the scent emanating from freshly-laundered linen, while feeling the cool and smooth texture of ironed sheets was my favorite aesthetic pleasure when I was a child, albeit not one I get to experience often now that *I* am the person in charge of laundry…[5] But there are so many others: enjoying the relief of shedding clothes worn all day long, and wearing pajamas; savoring the fresh mint taste on clean teeth; making the pillow nice and fluffy before resting the head on it; dimming or turning off bright lights, one's tired eyes grateful for this prelude to soothing darkness. (Again, the details may vary depending on one's age, gender, class, culture, and so on. But any ritual will have a peculiar aesthetic quality.)

Sleeping rituals are particularly apt to elicit appreciation of everyday aesthetic value for two reasons. First, while the "everyday" part of everyday aesthetics need not be taken literally (Saito 2023), that sleeping rituals are *in fact* daily does provide an advantage: every day we can choose to pay attention to ordinary, familiar and routine activities and revel in their quiet, comforting and simple pleasures. Second, appreciation for this type of aesthetic qualities is often said to require defamiliarization from the familiar. Sleeping rituals ask us to slow down and this feature is likely to cause us to pay the careful attention required to "reveal a surprisingly rich aesthetic dimension of the otherwise mundane, non-memorable, ordinary parts of our daily life" (Saito 2023)

[5] This is not an idiosyncratic preference, see https://www.sleepfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSF_Bedroom_Poll_Report_1.pdf

However, one may raise the objection that we could develop a ritual around taking the pill, thus showing that it's not sleeping itself that is valuable.

My answer to this objection is multi-layered. First, while pre-pill rituals are conceptually possible, they are unlikely given human psychology and the way rituals develop in societies. Think about our *current* pill-taking habits: taking a pill is a prosaic and pragmatic affair, devoid of meaning, especially when it's a daily activity. Furthermore, the *whole point* of taking this particular pill is to save us the "bother" of sleeping and thus save time, so I am particularly skeptical that the person who would be inclined to take the pill would be the kind of person who wants to indulge in rituals before taking it.

Second, most sleeping rituals are shaped by the fact that sleeping takes up several hours: that's why, for instance, we brush our teeth, clean our face, apply moisturizer, and wear loose clothing—either to prevent issues arising from prolonged lack of consciousness, as with teeth decay or tight outfits, or to take advantage from it, as with skin products that need time to act. It wouldn't make sense to develop complex rituals before taking a pill—an activity which lasts seconds, and which would make our resting time unnecessary.

Finally, sleeping rituals are most pleasurable, and valuable when they *themselves* take time and slow you down: going to sleep is about winding down, shifting to a different rhythm, moving away from the mindset of doing, and toward the mindset of simply being. (I'll come back to this idea in sections 5 and 6.)

A related, and in my view stronger, objection is that, once we don't have to spend time sleeping, we can engage in *other* rituals and activities that are replete with value, aesthetic or otherwise (some of these activities could even happen *in bed,* and be preceded by rituals similar to the ones we currently engage in—that is, we would have going-to-bed rituals as opposed to going-to-sleep rituals). I have a two-pronged response here.

First, there can be value beyond sleeping rituals: many people have shared with me that they enjoy *falling asleep* (the sensation itself of slipping out of consciousness, or of being in the liminal space between wakefulness and sleep) or they enjoy sensations and experiences that *precede* falling asleep, such as closing one's eyes and seeing images that often appear in one's mind in the moment; some even claim that they do experience and enjoy sleeping itself—that is, they find that there is a phenomenological quality of sleeping that can be pleasurable—although I personally don't share this view. There are also aesthetic experiences connected with *waking up*. Just like with falling asleep, we find again pleasures connected to liminality, such as the peculiar enjoyment of re-emerging into the world, especially after a good night of sleep, and also simple everyday joys: the warmth under the blankets; smelling the coffee brewing in the pot.

The second response is one that I'll reiterate also later: for most of this paper, I do not claim that the value stemming from sleeping is a necessary constituent of *eudaimonia*, or that this value is absolutely irreplaceable. Many sources of value are special in their own right but not so unique that they cannot be replaced by something else. Think for instance of sports (either in general or specific ones). We find both instrumental and intrinsic value in practicing a sport (it's often good for our health, and it's fun and enjoyable) but also as a spectator (it makes us connect with people, and again it's fun and enjoyable). The value domain ranges from prudential (they contribute to our well-being), to moral (they help us cultivate the virtue of sportsmanship, see Devine and Lopez Friar 2023), to aesthetic (both practitioners and spectators can experience much beauty in sport). So, there is immense value in both practicing and witnessing sport—yet, acknowledging this value doesn't imply that one cannot flourish without sport, or that most of the value that typically stems from sport cannot also come from, say, art. (One could argue that sport does have a peculiar sort of value that nothing else has. I do propose that sleeping is *in some sense* irreplaceable in section 6.)

Similarly, I aim to cast light on the particular ways in which sleeping is valuable in ways that have so far gone uninvestigated and unappreciated, and caution people who might be attracted by the idea that sleeping is just a waste of time. Nothing I say here implies that everyone should appreciate the value of sleeping rituals, or that one should engage in as many sleeping rituals as possible, and so on. (However, I do think that some of their value comes from their being performed "every day", and thus that if we performed these activities only occasionally we would lose the comfort that comes with repetition.)

In the next section I highlight a second type of value—interpersonal as opposed to aesthetic—that typically and non-coincidentally stems from sleeping, again, as a socially and culturally embedded practice.

4. The Value of Sleeping Together

"[S]leep inherently is a social and inter-corporeal phenomenon"

Valtonen and Närvänen (2016: 372)

Humans are social animals who live in communities and who, until recently, rarely slept alone (Williams 2011; Glaskin and Chenhall 2013; Valtonen and Närvänen 2016; Reiss 2017). In the past, everywhere in the world, it was customary for people to sleep together, not just in the same room, but in the same bed, for lack of space, or increased warmth or protection (not just against human aggression but alleged supernatural ones, see Lohmann 2013). And this custom was not just for families: "For most of human history, privacy as we know it did not exist. Bedmates were many, as they provided security. Children, parents, even entire houses or kin-groups would bed down together. The social norms of the bed were flexible and constantly changing. Bed companions could change from one night to the next. Bed sharing with strangers was very much part of traveling, whether by land or by sea, right into the nineteenth century in both Europe and America, and in

some countries it still continues" (Fagan and Durrani 2019: 6; for co-sleeping in different cultures, see, among others, Worthman 2011; Glaskin and Chenhall 2013; Reiss 2017). Even now, most people sleep with others: parents, siblings, children, romantic partners, pets, and even friends at times. Most often, parents still sleep with their small children, and sometimes older children too, especially outside of Western countries (Jenni 2005; Mindell et al. 2010; Worthman 2011; Jeon 2021). Romantic partners also often sleep together. In a US survey in 2022, 70% of respondents declared they sleep with a significant other.[6]

Of course, some people prefer sleeping alone, and sleeping alone may well have its peculiar value (it may be particularly joyful, for instance, when one is freed from duties of care or has recently ended a partnership that created suffering; see Hislop and Arber 2003 on the gendered nature of sleep disruptions in middle-aged women). However, historically humans have slept with others and have valued doing so, and still do. Sleeping together can itself also be ritualistic: in cultures such as the Asabano people in New Guinea sleeping with visitors is a form of hospitality and in Maori culture communal sleeping is a sacred act that follows the death of a relative, among other practices (Reiss 2017: 25). (As the discussion proceeds, it will become more and more difficult to analytically keep distinct different kinds of value, and I think that is all right.)

> As Anu Valtonen and Elina Närvänen put it in their rigorous 2016 study:
>
> "sleeping is a culturally regulated form of bodily existence that is situated in the domain of intimacy (Berlant 1998), affording a *specific*—and culturally legitimate—form of inter-corporeal and sensual intimacy. […] The sleeping body may thus be thought of as an iconic example of *everyday intimacy*. It also invites us to notice how involved transitional moments—

[6] https://www.sleepfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSF_Bedroom_Poll_Report_1.pdf

falling asleep, having dreams, and waking up—are central in understanding everyday intimate dynamics" (370-371, my emphases).

The authors go on to highlight the emotional, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of the intimacy experienced by sleeping bodies. Some of their observations are parallel to mine, albeit from a different disciplinary perspective: the authors are social scientists who operate in a marketing research context, and therefore their attention to sleeping rituals, for instance, is connected to the material objects that are involved in those rituals, which double as "consumption activities" (notwithstanding its ultimate practical aims, their analysis is theoretically sophisticated and beautifully expressed).

Valtonen and Närvänen's discussion focuses on the bed as "a key artefact that serves to organize, articulate and reinforce intimate social relations" (376), which may extend even to work colleagues (sharing a room at a conference may, in some cases, be a way to express and reinforce collegiality). Among other activities they mention slumber parties as bonding experiences between friends, but mostly focus on even more intimate practices and highlight the sensorially unique experiences that come from sleeping together. One is the auditory experience of hearing a bedmate's *breath*; another is the haptic one of *spooning*. (These activities can be intensely pleasurable but of course also unpleasant: sometimes we dislike sleeping with someone because they snore or kick us. And there might be conflicts between different types of value. More on this point later.)

Here, one might raise a version of a previous objection: many of the activities described so far are activities that happen when we're awake, and in which we could engage even more, if we didn't have to spend hours sleeping. My response is once again multi-pronged: first, there is a question of psychological plausibility, as with rituals. These activities are part and parcel of the experience of sleeping, and we would be less likely to engage in them, if we did not have to sleep. Second, unlike with rituals, some of these activities are actually experienced in a state of partial

consciousness. Most of sleeping doesn't consist in the total absence or presence of consciousness, due to the fact that sleepers undergo different cycles. As Jennifer Windt puts it, "there is a sleep architecture involving different stages of sleep that is relatively stable both within and across individuals" (2021). Presumably, there is an experiential difference between spooning with a partner while totally awake, in the initial stage of light sleep, during deep sleep, or in the REM phase (which is when we dream).

Finally, I contend that we value co-sleeping even when we don't have any memory or experience of the time in which we sleep. To see this, imagine that one partner took the pill and waited for the other to fall to sleep, then left the bed quietly, and made sure to come back to bed before the other partner woke up. Intuitions here may vary—and again, there are limits to this sort of thought experiment—but as someone who does value sleeping with one's partner, at least occasionally, this sort of scenario isn't equivalent to sleeping together. While it's surely better than *not* falling asleep and waking up with one's partner in bed, it's also not as meaningful: it isn't a shared activity and it feels like a pretense of some sort even if no deceit is involved. (Contrast this imaginary scenario with a real one described in Valtonen and Närvänen's study: a subject how she needs her husband in bed to fall asleep, even though he wants to stay up longer to watch TV or play computer games. As a compromise, sometimes he "pretends" to go to bed, but when she's asleep he resumes his activities. The wife says: "The idea that he is awake when I am sleeping creates a feeling of safety to me." (Valtonen and Närvänen 2016: 376). Here the person cares about the husband being present *only when she falls asleep*, and he's in fact there, so it's not quite a pretense and the meaningfulness of being together seems preserved.)

Furthermore, we attribute value to sleeping together with loved ones even when we do remember it and experience it as unpleasant, or as aesthetically disvaluable. When my children were little, they complained endlessly about their sibling not letting them sleep, or invading their personal

space, but they still chose to sleep in the same bed whenever possible. I sleep better by myself, but I'd be saddened by the prospect of never again sleeping with my partner. There are people who don't enjoy sleeping with a romantic partner, because of snoring, different working hours or ideal room temperatures, and who find comfort in sleeping with pets[7].

Bed-sharing and co-sleeping, then, sustain our intimacy and provide a sense of safety and comfort, and are a source of meaning. I suspect that may be why, even in times of relative sexual promiscuity, "staying the night" remains a special stage in a relationship. This fact seems to indicate non-instrumental value, connected with the meaning of sharing with another person the most vulnerable time in our day—the time in which we live unconscious and defenseless.

It's to the importance of such vulnerability that I turn to next. I'll argue that the value of sleeping itself derives from temporary absence of consciousness, which was initially hypothesized to be the source of its disvalue. It's precisely because sleeping subtracts us from the world that it matters and that it's precious.

5. The Value of Retreating from Wakefulness

So far, I've presented two arguments against the rest pill, one connected to co-sleeping, and one connected to sleeping rituals. Both arguments point to a mixture of instrumental and non-instrumental (final) value and I hope that both discussions shed light on the value of sleeping as a social human activity, beyond the benefits that stem from rest. However, I've not so far defended the value of sleeping *itself*. One may be more clearheaded about what the tradeoff involving a rest pill would involve, and yet still think that the time spent sleeping, while not entirely wasted, is not worth its costs, all things considered. That's because, to reiterate, when we're awake there are many ways of

[7] 10% of respondents to the US survey cited above slept with pets.

increasing intimacy and bonding with loved ones, and of engaging in aesthetically valuable and pleasant rituals. Thus, one might argue that by taking the pill we actually *increase* the chances of engaging in valuable activities similar, even if not identical, to the ones I've described so far.

This response, however, misses one essential feature of what sleeping is about: it's a state of absent or limited consciousness, of not doing, of just being. This defining feature of sleeping shapes our sleeping rituals, as mentioned in section 3, and also explains why co-sleeping is different from any other bonding activity, as discussed in the previous section: for the most part we aren't fully conscious when we engage in sleeping together, and we value it nonetheless. We value just being there with another person. Valuing this *mere presence* is the core of the third—and perhaps most important—reason against taking the pill. When we sleep, we retreat, usually voluntarily (if by necessity) into a mostly unconscious state; we slow down and withdraw from a demanding reality.

The idea that reality is demanding may evoke critiques of unbridled capitalism, of contemporary hyper-productivity ideals which often end up producing exploitative practices—White's discussion of circadian justice is in part about rejecting those ideals and practices, and advocating giving people the opportunity and freedom to sleep better, longer, and according to their biological needs. However, that approach to thinking about the value of sleeping is fundamentally different, and in tension, with the argument I intend to make in this section.

As Benjamin Reiss observes: "For much of human history, sleep had profound spiritual meanings, many of which have been snuffed out as sleep was tamed in the modern world. Our society seems to have radically restricted its meanings to the realm of medicine, hygiene, economics, and psychology: we need sleep—and we need to do it the right way—to be healthy, productive, and well-adjusted" (Reiss 2017: 19). In the popular articles praising sleep to which I referred in section 1, productivity, creativity, and efficiency are regularly touted as the benefits of sleep. The many experiments aimed at finding the "perfect" amount of sleep are intent on making people *do more*.

Much studied is the "power nap", which, from its very name, is explicitly aimed at increasing efficiency, since it's a short nap that is most effective at "recharging" us (another evocative expression), at making us feel rested but not too sluggish to go back to work. Of course, creativity, efficiency, and productivity are important, and especially so when one is lucky enough to have a meaningful and rewarding job. I myself am a big fan of the power nap, and I do care about sleeping well for its rest-giving benefits. But focusing on sleep's instrumental value to produce rest risks obscuring recognition of the importance of its non-instrumental value, and is ultimately compatible with the desire to create a rest pill that gets rid of sleeping altogether.

Even when people aren't exploited in the workplace (and many people are, it's worth reiterating), being awake and conscious means facing a lot of stimuli; having a lot of thoughts and feelings; worrying about money, wars, diseases; being busy and engaged in activities of all sorts. And this is not just a recent concern, as is shown by Helena's words in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, cited in the epigraph: "And sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow's eye, Steal me awhile from mine own company." (3.3.451-452)

One might object that it's still possible to refrain from engaging in activities when one is awake (one could just quietly lie in bed), but merely deciding whether to do so can be exhausting. As I was sharing the ideas for this paper with another philosopher, she exclaimed: "Yes, when I am asleep, I don't have to *deal with people*! Even better, I don't have to *face the choice* of whether it's worth it for me on that particular day to deal with people." She went on to talk about how much she values the "nestling" that is involved in sleep and the idea of putting her brain to rest. Her spouse, who was listening in, added: "There is value in oblivion." Both of my friends are active people who appreciate the rich life they lead and the meaningful activities they engage in. Doing things is very valuable, but there is value also in not doing, and in just *being*.

One could object that being alone, but awake, also releases one from the company of people and that, furthermore, emphasizing the value of co-sleeping detracts from appreciating the value of sleeping alone. One could also worry that there's a tension here with the previous appreciation for rituals, which are doings. My response to both objections is a reminder that my approach is pluralistic: there is value in being alone and with people, just like there is value in being asleep and awake; there is value in "doings" and "being". I highlight what's valuable in sleeping, but these aren't values that everyone ought to appreciate all the time.

Importantly, the value of intentionally slowing down, pausing and withdrawing from reality isn't reducible to increased efficiency later on, and wouldn't be brought about by the rest pill, because that *sleeping takes time matters*. That's why it's particularly meaningful to take a nap, or to sleep in, when one thinks one cannot "afford" it, when one feels there are too many tasks that need to be executed. Sometimes, we need to withdraw and that goal is more important than getting work done. This sort of decision is now praised as a form of "self-care". This is a tricky notion, which at times seems to authorize self-indulgent behavior, and whose scope has bloated. But, more importantly, self-care is often presented as a means to propel us toward more successes and accomplishments. But the value of a nap sometimes is simply… to stop. Because *doing* isn't always the point. Being—breathing, lying without thoughts, without feelings, defenseless and unconscious—is enough and valuable in itself.

This notion may resonate with readers who practice yoga and mindfulness meditation, because importance of being versus doing is a *leitmotif* of a certain Western way of interpreting Buddhism. In many a yoga or meditation session, I've heard repeated appreciation for rest, stillness and related notions. The following passage by poet David Whyte exemplifies well this type of praise:

"Rest is the conversation between what we love to do and how we love to be. […]

To rest is to give up on worrying and fretting, and the sense that there is something

> wrong with the world unless we are there to put it right; to rest is to fall back, literally or figuratively, from outer targets and shift the goal not to an inner, static bull's eye, an imagined state of perfect stillness, but to an inner state of natural exchange."
> (Whyte 2015: 199)

Whyte continues to talk about *rest* as an overall fairly active state, a natural easy foundational state of authenticity, which involves different stages (stopping; "coming home" to the "body's uncoerced and unbullied [sic] self" (201); healing and self-forgiveness; delighting in giving and taking; "absolute readiness and presence" (201)), where "we are ready for the world but not held hostage by it; rested, we care again for the right things and the right people in the right way." (202).

Analogous ideas can be found in books such *Pause, Rest, Be: Stillness Practices for Courage in Times of Change* (Raheem 2022), whose author is a yoga teacher and activist who argues in favor of rest through restorative yoga and other ways of pausing and slowing down. However, in her book there are plenty of doings that she recommends, such as dancing, painting, and writing. Furthermore, just as with Jonathan White's proposal of polyrhythmic sleep, it's clear that for her and other authors arguing in a similar way (e.g., Tricia Hersey, author of *Rest Is Resistance. A Manifesto*, 2022) the point of rest is to get "recharged" and ready to fight for social change.

This Buddhist-inspired approach to social justice has become increasingly popular, partially in reaction to a capitalistic appropriation of both rest and meditative practices by big corporations (Cassidy 2017; Duffy 2020). Ronald Purser in *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (2019) pushes back against the misuse and misunderstanding of mindfulness meditation, in particular, claiming that it has been emptied of its deep, and potentially revolutionary, spiritual meaning and is used to reinforce the liberal status quo. But once again all of these approaches see rest as functional to more doing.

While this notion of rest is worth thinking about, and it's more complex than the simple biological one that the pill thought experiment relies on, it's also different from the kind of "sheer presence" that I've been articulating here, and their respective values are connected but distinct.

This difference is not only due to the fact that the approaches discussed above are contemporary Western re-interpretations of an ancient Buddhist practice, but can be seen also if one looks at the original meaning and role of *sati*, which is the Sanskrit name of mindfulness meditation. In mindfulness meditation practices one is invited to enter an altered state of consciousness through the monitoring of one's breathing and paying attention to the present state of the body and the mind (Bodhi 2011). This is a conscious and intentional process, whose aim is to observe one's thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental way and to let go of self-centered anxieties about achievement and to relinquish desire. In Buddhism, this type of state is instrumental to wisdom and ultimately aimed at elimination of human suffering. The instrumental value of *sati* is in this respect uncontroversial. There is less discussion in the literature of mindfulness's final value, but, if we define mindfulness as, e.g., "the feeling of being tuned in to the intrinsic intelligibility of the things themselves" (Čopelj 2022: 146), then arguably mindfulness is also valuable for its own sake.

While mindfulness and sleeping are very different activities, I contend that sleeping's value is *analogous* to mindfulness's value insofar as they are both experiences centered on the idea of presence and being. However, sleeping's final value is even *more removed* from an ultimate aim (such as the Buddhist goal of achieving enlightenment).

In this respect, my argument resembles (but is not the same as) those that have relied on the idea of the "experience machine" (Nozick 1974) to argue against theories that characterize well-being in terms of experiential states (as bearers of intrinsic welfare value) (Hawkins 2016). Somewhat analogously, some desire satisfaction theories of well-being argue for the value of satisfying desires independently from whether that satisfaction is experienced, which may even include posthumous

desires or achievements. My claim here is that, even in the absence of experiential qualities in sleeping (even though in actuality there may be many), we can value it finally, just like, for instance, we can value having been in the womb of our biological mothers even if we have no recollection whatsoever of that experience. In the next section, I expand the scope of my inquiry to provide further support for this claim.

6. The Value of Sleeping as an Expression of Our Humanity

In the previous sections, I've presented three separate arguments against taking a rest pill and pointed out the sum of instrumental and non-instrumental value that lies in sleeping rituals (and in experiences that take place just before falling asleep and upon waking up); in sleeping with other people; and, finally, in sleeping itself, ending with a suggestion that there is value in mere presence. This final claim may sound like the most outrageous of all, and yet might be seen as the most important one, since one could argue that all the other valuable aspects of sleeping could plausibly be obtained in other ways. I've already presented a response to those concerns, viz., that I'm not arguing for the strongest possible claim that the values that I highlight above are irreplaceable or necessary for flourishing, but only that they exist and should be considered trade-offs in deciding whether to take the pill. I've also remarked on the limitations of the pill thought experiment and reiterated that I'm thinking of sleeping as a complex socially and culturally embedded human activity.

In this section, I provide a supportive framework for the boldest claim that sleeping itself, as an instantiation of being present and completely inactive, is valuable for its own sake, in isolation from anything else. Being persuaded by this claim requires adhering to a certain picture of human flourishing and human goodness, one which isn't dominated by a never-ending push for doing and achieving. Of course, providing a *full picture* of human flourishing, not to mention a defense of it,

goes beyond the scope of this paper. So, I am going to draw from some extant approaches that provide support to for the picture I have in mind.

Michael Sandel (2007) has argued against various forms of human enhancement on the basis that accepting what's *given* to us, in all its imperfection, may increase our humility and social solidarity. He acknowledges that "[t]here is something appealing, even intoxicating, about a vision of human freedom unfettered by the given," (Sandel 2007: 99); nevertheless, he invites us to spurn such a seductive vision. It seems to me that a rest pill is a form of ultimate human enhancement, and thus one who's sensitive to Sandel's concerns would be hesitant to take it.

There is also an aesthetic argument that could be advanced here based on appreciating the beauty of alternating days and nights, and, relatedly, the beauty of seasonality. We are embodied creatures who live in a physical reality, shaped by the specific nature of the universe we inhabit: because of how our solar system works, the time in our lives and that of our fellow animals possesses certain rhythms. We seem to appreciate the differences between seasons, the interstitial moments of sunset and dawn, because transitions are meaningful to us in ways that seem hard to justify in terms of beneficial consequences.

Thus, embracing the human limitation of sleep and appreciating the importance of pausing and withdrawing from reality and consciousness isn't just about refusing enhancement and acknowledging our human limitations, but also about positively *embracing* our natural, animal, embodied nature. We aren't machines, nor gods. We are animals, and like all animals we have bodies that require sleep. (I'm not claiming that we should appreciate these aspects of our nature simply *because* they are natural.)

Unlike other animal needs (such as feeding and reproducing) sleeping is essentially characterized by being unconscious and thus utterly vulnerable. It's from this vulnerability that the

peculiar intimacy of sleeping with others stems, and the tenderness of witnessing a loved one asleep (the apex of which is probably a sleeping *baby*).

Vulnerability is often defined by philosophers in negative terms, as for instance in George Tsai's discussion of vulnerability in intimate relationships, which presents it as "fundamentally a matter of exposure to potential harm" (Tsai 2016: 169). But we find a different approach in care ethics accounts. As Sarah Clark Miller explains: "In [a traditional] rendering of vulnerability, we are vulnerable to various things that might impinge upon our well-being […]. More recently, however, philosophers have emphasized that […] [t]he receptivity that our vulnerability signifies means we are open to a whole host of experiences—positive, negative, and many in between […]" (Miller 2020: 646). Among valuable experiences of vulnerability, Miller mentions aesthetic experiences and also interpersonal ones such as falling in love, which relates non-coincidentally, I think, to my previous arguments in favor of sleeping.[8] Another ethics of care scholar, Maurice Hamington, has highlighted the role of embodiment in relations of care and has discussed the importance of being open to risk-taking in interactions with others (Hamington 2015).

Outside of care ethics, a defense of a conception of human goodness that is necessarily tied to our animal fragility has also famously been defended by Martha Nussbaum (1986). She highlights how central components of our flourishing, most notably love and friendship, are dependent on factors beyond our control (such as the possibility of unrequited affection, or of loss and grief). But our vulnerability to luck is not something we can be happy *in spite of*, but *thanks to*.

My claim that sleeping is intrinsically valuable insofar as it involves experiencing radical vulnerability and mere presence is best understood within these approaches that focus on the

[8] Miller's article is a rich contribution to the moral foundations of the ethics of care, offering a nuanced map of conceptual relations between four key notions: need, vulnerability, dependency and precariousness.

consequences of our embodiment for value creation, based on the idea that "humans are ontologically caring corporeal beings" (Hamington 2015: 89).

To conclude, my final defense of sleeping is that it best signifies an essential and valuable aspect of our nature: when we sleep, we are first and foremost living beings—we are not, and ought not to be, machines in perpetual motion, constantly recharged and plugged in. Sleeping's underlying biological need is not a weakness to be remedied, or a limitation to be overcome, but a fact of our nature that gives rise to valuable interpersonal and aesthetic activities and is also valuable in itself. If we never slept, our lives would be deprived of an important source of meaning and goodness.

7. Practical Implications

In this paper I've considered good, sometimes even ideal, sleeping. Unfortunately, sleep isn't always a good experience, as alluded to in the first section when examining the dire consequences of sleep deprivation. Chronic insomnia plagues many people, often due to aging or stress, but also to factors like chronic illness or PTSD. Going to sleep, or trying to, can be literally and figuratively nightmarish. In that case, one could argue that wakefulness would be a very welcome reprieve indeed. (Analogously, if someone suffers from an eating disorder, they might benefit from something that allows them to skip eating, no matter the plethora of value of consuming food as a socially and culturally embedded human practice.) However, the other obvious alternative would instead be to look for a treatment that guarantees excellent sleep, and hopefully I've presented some reasons to favor this alternative.

But, because we focus so much on the health benefits of sleep, we neglect to think about poor sleeping in other respects. Jonathan White's analysis broadens the scope of our concerns to include issues of justice and political engagement, but there's much more to think about, especially once we start thinking about activities and experiences surrounding sleeping, and not just sleep itself.

If sleeping with others is an important source of intimacy and connection, for instance, perhaps as a society we should encourage more forms of co-sleeping. Elderly people, people without children, people who lost their partners, among others, may suffer from systematic loneliness and alienation, and the associated lack of co-sleeping would be an important source of suffering that should be addressed.

Having a pet is a simple solution. However, not everybody likes to or can sleep with a pet. Intergenerational living is becoming popular, and I wonder if, in the future, sleeping with people we aren't related to could become more common (obvious concerns about ensuring consent would need to be addressed). Perhaps, there could be "sleep workers", people who get paid to sleep with someone.

Furthermore, while there's a sense in which when we are asleep we are all alike, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, equally vulnerable and humbled by our lack of defense and need for rest, in reality we are clearly not equal: the rich and powerful are protected and comfortable in their sleep in ways the poor and powerless are not. Many people, including children, are deprived of dignity and safety in their sleep, such as immigrant workers sharing crowded and unsanitary dormitories in factories; camp refugees or people living in war zones; victims of domestic violence; unhoused people who live on streets or go in and out of shelters (on this topic, see Waldron 2006). Implications from everyday aesthetics come back here: as Saito (2023) writes, "everyday aesthetics challenges us to pay serious attention to the aesthetically negative aspects of our lives because of their immediate impact on the quality of life". Thus, we should be concerned not only by absence of shelter or danger, but also by sleeping arrangements that are full of aesthetic disvalue, that is, squalid, smelly, dirty.

That so many people are still deprived of safe and comfortable places for sleeping is something future generations will hopefully find incomprehensible and unacceptable. And, as

Jonathan White reminds us, it falls upon the well-rested to "arrest the spiraling effects of poor sleep" (White 2022: 509). I hope that this preliminary defense of the value of sleeping can also contribute to grounding practical efforts to ensure its enjoyment for all.[9]

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