

Article

Replies to Critics

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Abstract: This article responds to the two replies, published in this issue, to my article “Ultimate Meaning: We Don’t Have It, We Can’t Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad,” published in the first issue of this journal. In the first reply, Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe present an internalist challenge to my account of value, and a relational conception of the self as a challenge to my premise that leading a life includes everything you do and aim at within the project, effort, or enterprise of living and leading a life. I respond to the internalist challenge by showing it does not succeed in inserting values into acts. I respond to the relational conception of the self by noting that, regardless of the nature of the self, the project of leading a life includes all the things you do and aim at within that project, effort, or enterprise. Thus, we can accept a relational account of the self and allow for other-regarding values but that does not change the location of our pursuit of those values: they remain located within the meta-project of leading a life, leaving the meta-project of leading and living a life with nowhere to reach for a point. In the second reply, Cowan argues against feeling sad about life’s pointlessness. In response, I argue that sad facts warrant sadness. I further argue that there are reasons other than happiness to value truth, including the very, very sad truth about the ultimate pointlessness of our lives.

Keywords: meaning; ultimate meaning; value; leading a life; happiness; truth

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I. The Ins and Outs of Value and Meaning: Reply to “Don’t Worry, Be Happy: The Gettability of Ultimate Meaning”

i. Values and Acts

The internalist challenge to my account of values that Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe present claims that when we run joyfully or play intimately, we are doing different things that have particular meanings tied up with the act itself and the attitudes we bring to it. They argue that, “some valued ends, such as these particular joys, [are] inseparable modifications of their activities.” I think this mischaracterizes the relationship between

acts and values. Value, however particularized, be it instrumental¹ or intrinsic, still lies outside of the act itself. Using the value as an adjective to describe the act is just another way of saying that the act is grounded by or aiming at the value. The value may be realized while doing the act, but that doesn't mash the value right into the act itself. When we stack blocks with our children, for example, the act is stacking blocks. We may be doing it because we value our children and the intimacy we have with them when we play together. In that case, the value of our children and the value of intimacy are the reasons for doing it, or the point of all that mindless stacking. That external valued end or grounding may lend the play a different flavor—an intimate one, and it may sometimes involve acting differently while you stack the blocks. Maybe you make eye contact, maybe you smile. Those different ways of acting have intimacy as its aim or grounding value, but they are still acts, not values. The act is the act (stacking, smiling, eye contact); the value (intimacy) is the external aim or ground of the act. If the block stacking is indeed intimate, or enhances intimacy, then you have a reason to do it; you have succeeded in your aims, perhaps. The stacking then isn't pointless, and it feels different; it feels intimate rather than intolerably dreary (if you're lucky!). It is pointful rather than pointless because it is aimed at or grounded by a valued end but that end is still external to the act. MacIntyre's arguments about the particular nature of various pleasures² may serve to show that pleasure is an under-described value. It might show that the pleasure one gets from vodka is not the same as the pleasure one gets from vodka with friends, but it doesn't show that the value that grounds or is aimed at by the act is internal to the act of drinking alone or drinking with friends. It does not show that values—abstract ideals—are part of or internal to the acts that aim at or are grounded by them, even if these values come in a multitude of shades and varieties and are sometimes realized while doing the act.

ii. The Boundaries of a Life

My argument against lives having Ultimate Meaning relies on the premise that the effort, enterprise, or project of leading a life includes its entirety.³ Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe argue against this premise by arguing against what they take to be my view of the self, and by presenting a relational alternative: "Other conceptions [of the self] exist, such as relational and narrative ones that take the self to be porous to others and the world, and that are better candidates for being meaningful."

This argument mistakes the subject that I am talking about. The pointless enterprise I argue we all engage in is the meta-project of running or leading a life. It is that project, effort, or enterprise, and not the nature of the self or a bare biological life, that I argue includes its entirety, including all of its values, and all of its relational and narrative aspects. Thus, Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe's argument that justice is external to oneself does not entail that, as you lead your life, working toward justice is something you do *outside* the

¹ Contrary to Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe's assertion, the fact that values are external to acts does not mean that values are instrumental, nor does it mean that people or acts become mere instruments. When I play with my child, the external value is the child, an end in herself. Nothing instrumental about it. Same goes for art: you paint because you value art, which is the non-instrumental value that grounds the act. No demeaning anything here. Your art is as elevated as it ever was. (Nevertheless, the value of art is within your meta-project of living and leading your life.)

² A.C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, 64.

³ Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe argue that this way of conceiving of a life or a self is biological. I don't see how this conclusion follows from anything I say about leading a life.

enterprise of leading your life. How can that be? Where are you doing this pursuit of justice? In which project does it have such an important place? In your side-life-job that is not part of the enterprise, effort, or project of leading your life? That cannot be the case because you have but one life to lead. Everything you pursue and everything you value are part of the life you lead, part of the meta-project of leading and running your life. You care about justice and you care about other people. So these other-regarding values figure prominently *in* the meta-project of running your life. You do your everyday valuable and meaningful things, like protesting or filing lawsuits, and those activities aim at justice, which is a non-selfish, other-regarding value outside the act of protest but still *inside* the meta-project or effort of running your life, regardless of the nature of the self.

Drawing an analogy to arguments for psychological egoism, Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe note that although our desires are internal, the content of our values and reasons for action need not be self-interested. They argue that it is analogously false to claim that “because our valued ends are our own they are therefore included in our lives,” and that this is “structurally similar” to arguing that, “because desires are internal, their valued ends must be one’s own.” I don’t see how that analogy holds, nor do I see it as applicable to what I argue. To put my view in terms most similar to this analogy, we can say that because our valued ends are valuable to us, we include them in the meta-project of running our lives. This does not seem structurally similar to claiming that because our desires are our own, our values are self-interested, nor do I anywhere claim or imply that our values are only self-interested. But it is consistent with my conclusion that because leading a human life includes its entirety—including all the values we may value—it has nowhere to reach for a valued end as a point for leading and living it.

Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe argue:

Weinberg is right that activities in pursuit of justice—organizing protests, sending open letters, giving speeches, etc.—are contained within my life in the sense that they are things that I do. But the end, justice realized in the world, is something external: the point of the political campaign, say, improving the lot of future generations, is something beyond myself, neither coextensive nor coterminous with my life. The same holds true of whole lives as well as their constitutive activities. The main point of a life can be realized externally.

This central argument of Turp, Hollinshead, and Rowe’s response misses the mark because nothing in the argument shows, or even tries to show, that we can have a valued end to the meta-project of running or leading a life. And that is a key claim, perhaps *the* key claim, toward my conclusion that Ultimate Meaning is impossible. What I argue is that your activities in pursuit of justice and the value of justice toward which those activities aim are part of your meta-project of running or leading your life. I don’t deny that a person can have other-regarding values and have an impact on the world. Thus, I agree that the effects of justice realized in the world may be external to the person, and that improving the lot of future generations has impact that extends beyond one’s lifetime but that does not change the location of your activities aiming at justice and the value of justice *within* the effort, project, or enterprise of leading your life.

I don’t argue that people are necessarily selfish or that all value is somehow solipsistic. I don’t argue that justice realized is somehow “coextensive” or “coterminous” with one’s life. What I do argue is that justice is a value located within the effort, project, or enterprise of running or leading your life. I argue that the project or enterprise of leading your life includes your relations with the world—that’s why you bother with all those other pesky people—and, in pursuing those relations, you may appeal to or aim at interpersonal

values or values that are not self-centered, values that are important in the meta-project of leading your life. But that will not give you an end-regarding reason, a valued end, for the meta-project of running your life, which is a project of its own. That separate project of leading a life, that you put so much effort into, has nowhere to reach for a point. To illustrate:

If you masturbate, you're doing something alone, probably for the valued end of pleasure. If you have sex with someone else, you are doing something relational, maybe for the valued ends of love, intimacy, and also pleasure (if you're lucky!). But in both cases you are still doing something well within the confines of living your life and the meta-project, effort, or enterprise of running or leading it. Expanding further out relationally—say, participating in an orgy—will not change this. You could even will your busy penis to science for the enlightenment of future generations and the betterment of posterity, which would be other-regarding, not self-centered, and have effects beyond your lifetime, but it would still be something you did as part of or within the effort, project, or enterprise of running your life. And that is how it all gets sucked in, so to speak. No matter what you do or aim at, it is all internal to the meta-project, effort, or enterprise of running or leading your life, leaving *that* project with nowhere to reach for a valued end, or point.

How bad is this? How sad should you be? Well, that depends in part on how much work, thought, or effort you put into running or leading your life. I think most of us put a lot of work into running or leading our lives and to do otherwise—to just live rather than lead a life—is to live more like an animal than a person. To be less of an agent is probably not the best prescription for meaning. Just as we want the projects within our lives to be painful rather than pointless, we have the same reasons to want the meta-project, effort, or enterprise of leading our lives to be painful rather than pointless. To discover that it must be pointless is therefore very, very sad, regardless of which term you use to label this meaning problem.

II. Sad Facts Warrant Sadness: Reply to, “Life Is Pointless—Good Point...and How Do You Feel about That?”

I am not in the happiness business. Philosophy deals in truths. A truth I think I have illuminated is that the metaphysics of meaning includes something very tragic, which is that we cannot have Ultimate Meaning. That is a sad truth. When something is sad, our sadness is warranted; when feelings match facts, we have a warranted emotional response to the facts. Cowan argues that feelings often come first—“Life is okay. As a result, it is okay for life to be pointless”—and then thoughts need not warrant any change of feeling. But that depends on the nature of the thoughts. If the thoughts reflect the facts, to decide on your feelings first and then argue that, therefore, the facts need not warrant a change in feeling is to deny that facts warrant feelings. That is unreasonable. Would it make sense for me to say, “Life is okay. As a result, it is okay that my child was kidnapped and killed today”? As a result of what? Of the unargued-for premise that life is okay, no matter what? That premise is in need of a defense.

That said, I am not in the sadness business either. The “should” I argue for is a should of warrant (by the facts), not a moral imperative. (Though, generally, responding to facts with feelings that the facts warrant does seem plausibly part of being moral. E.g., to witness gratuitous cruelty with bored indifference likely indicates some sort of moral failing.) It is not a practical directive intended to govern your feelings all the time either. So, sure, we should be sad to note that Ultimate Meaning is impossible for us—very, very sad, in fact, because that is the feeling warranted by the facts. But that doesn't mean that

instead of engaging with Everyday Meaning or enjoying some bourbon you should spend all your days crying in your soup over the sad impossibility of Ultimate Meaning. (But if you do, I will understand!)

Discovering the tragic truth about Ultimate Meaning can also come as a relief of sorts—like an itch finally scratched—because it makes sense of the niggling sense of pointlessness that many experience even in the face of Everyday Meaning. Understanding and insight are fulfilling aspects of truth, even tragic truth, which is part of why we seek it. To take up Cowan’s plane ride analogy, I don’t think I have opened the hatch to let frigid air into our long and pointless plane ride (though if that was the hatch to the bitter truth, I probably would open it). Instead, I have argued that the frigid air is already seeping into the plane because life is indeed pointless and many of us have a sense of that. As we shiver from the frigid air inside the plane, it can be valuable to know its source, even if we cannot do anything about it and even if acknowledging it warrants sadness.

Truth itself is valuable. Ignorance may be a kind of bliss, but because we are rational beings, agents capable of intellectual achievement, the pursuit of truth, and the courage to face reality, it is a bliss unworthy of us.

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