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DOWNSHIFTING AND MEANING IN LIFE

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Abstract
So-called downshifters seek more meaningful lives by decreasing the amount of time they devote to work, leaving more time for the valuable goods of friendship, family and personal development. But though these are indeed meaning-conferring activities, they do not have the right structure to count as *superlatively* meaningful. Only in work – of a certain kind – can superlative meaning be found. It is by active engagements in projects, which are activities of the right structure, dedicated to the achievement of goods beyond ourselves, that we make our lives superlatively meaningful.

We in the West are very wealthy and getting wealthier. But the rise in our living standards has not been matched by a rise in our happiness.[1] Increasingly, people have responded to this 'paradox' (as Easterbrook would have it) by looking elsewhere for value in life. Perhaps deep satisfaction is not to be found in the pursuit of material comfort, but in intrinsically *meaningful* activity. Accordingly, many people are reorienting their lives, away from the pursuit of wealth and toward the pursuit of meaning. They are reducing the number of hours they work, changing their jobs, working from home, or giving up work altogether. In each case, they are trading income for time to pursue goods they regard as worthwhile.

This movement, the voluntary simplicity or downshifting movement, is gaining in strength almost daily.[2] Yet philosophers have said nothing about it. Indeed, it is not a very large exaggeration to say that philosophers have nothing to say about it. As a group, we seem no better, and perhaps rather worse, equipped to assess or comment upon the choices of the members of this movement then sociologists or psychologists or even the public at large.

[1] Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse* (New York: Random House, 2003).

[2] On downshifting, see Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), and Robert H. Frank *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (New York: The Free Press, 1999). Frank reports a 1995 survey in which 28% of respondents claimed to be downshifters.

In some ways, our apparent inability to make a contribution here is rather surprising. Downshifters seek more meaningful lives: who but philosophers ought to be best equipped to tell them where meaning is to be found? After all, outside the academy philosophy is frequently identified with the quest for the meaning of life. Of course, we insiders know better. We know that few philosophers take the question of the meaning of life seriously; indeed, perhaps as a hangover from the days of logical positivism, many do not even regard the question as meaningful. Yet, on the face of it, there is no reason to think that it should prove more intractable than such questions as 'why be moral' or 'what can we know'. These questions, too, need to be analysed and refined before they can be answered, but this has not prevented us from spilling many gallons of ink on simultaneously disentangling the sub-questions into which each can be broken down and defending answers to them. If we devote similar time and intellectual energy to the question of the meaning of life, there is no reason not to hope for similar success.

In this paper, I shall attempt to make a start on addressing the question of the meaning of life, as it pertains to the practical concerns of downshifters. I shall not have the presumption to present a full and final theory of the meaning of life, but I will argue for something nearly as ambitious: an account of the structure that central activities in our lives must have, if they are to be *ideally* meaningful. On the basis of this account, I will argue that the downshifters are half right. They are looking for more meaning in their lives, and they are frequently finding it. But to the extent they seek superlative meaning, the highest, most satisfying, kind of meaning to which we can have access, they are looking in the wrong place. Though superlative meaning cannot be purchased, and therefore is not attained through the pursuit of wealth, it is paradigmatically achieved through work: not just any kind of work, but work that has the requisite structure.

I.

One potentially fruitful way to approach the question of the meaning of life is to sketch paradigmatically meaning*less* lives, in the hope of discovering what they lack. Richard Taylor suggests Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to an eternity of toil, represents

the archetypically meaningless life.[3] Sisyphus's task is to roll an enormous boulder to the very top of a hill, at which point it rolls back down again. His life is the epitome of meaningless because it is so pointless; Sisyphus achieves nothing, changes nothing, has nothing to show for his endless labours. Because his life lacks a *point*, it is meaningless.

It is very plausible to think that this is the core of the question of the meaning of life: when people ask for the meaning of life, they ask for its point. And we might hope to understand 'point', as it is used here, in terms of the goals pursued and achieved in a life. Sisyphus's life lacks point because his labours fail to add up to anything. But lives do not acquire meaning just in case they achieve goals. Allow Sisyphus to achieve his aim, and succeed in depositing the boulder at the top of the hill: his life does not thereby acquire a point. A Sisyphus condemned to pile up boulder after boulder, on top of an ever-growing mountain of rocks, would hardly be less to be pitied.

So concrete results do not suffice to give our lives a point. As David Wiggins suggests, the life of the farmer who grows more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs is hardly less pointless for achieving concrete outcomes.[4] Indeed, this seems to be precisely the kind of intuition motivating many downshifters. They may be high-achievers, in the sense that they hold down prestigious jobs and accumulate a great deal of wealth. Yet they feel their lives lack point, of the requisite kind. So what kind of point must lives have to qualify as meaningful?

Wiggins suggests that lives lack meaning when they fail to connect with concerns beyond the mere animal life of the individual organism.[5] A life has point when it is oriented toward goals which transcend the limits of the individual, goals which are more valuable than the subjective concerns of any one person. It is point, of this kind, that is missing from the life of Sisyphus, Wiggins's farmer, and from the life of the wealthy executive whose life seems void of significance.

We might therefore suggest that a life is meaningful just in case it is devoted to (or is unified by) the pursuit of goods which tran-

[3] Richard Taylor, 'The Meaning of Life' in Oswald Hanfling (ed) *Life and Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1987), pp. 39–48.

[4] David Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life', in *Needs, Values, Truth* (3rd Ed). (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 100,

[5] Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life', p. 102.

scend the limitations of individuals. Indeed, those (few) philosophers writing on the question of the meaning of life today have tended to converge on something more or less like this account.[6] For John Kekes, for instance, a meaningful life is (*inter alia*) a life devoted to the pursuit of projects with which the agent identifies, and which are not pointless or trivial.[7] For Robert Nozick, meaning in life lies in transcending the limits of the self: a meaningful life connects with values beyond the self.[8] Susan Wolf succinctly encapsulates this consensus account of meaning: 'meaningful lives are lives of active engagement in projects of worth'.[9]

This definition has much to recommend it. Indeed, it seems to be this definition of meaning that makes best sense of downshifters' complaints that their lives were meaningless. They were engaged in activities which had *a* point – they accumulated goods, made a difference in the world – but the point was not sufficient to confer meaning. Their activities were essentially 'regressive and circular', in Wiggins's phrase:[10] they did not have a point beyond themselves. Downshifters change their lives to restore meaning to them: they do so precisely by engaging with goods beyond themselves.

A meaningful life is, therefore, one devoted to (the promotion of) goods beyond the self. This definition is supported by the fact that it offers a cogent explanation for why it is that people often claim to find meaning within certain activities, and not others.

[6] That is to say, *naturalistic* philosophers have tended to converge on this account. Unsurprisingly, God plays an essential role in accounts of meaning advanced by many religious philosophers. Theistic accounts of life's meaning are defended in John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge 2003), and William Lane Craig, 'The Absurdity of Life Without God', in E.D. Klemke (ed) *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 40–56. I shall have little to say about these accounts, except to note that they do not satisfactorily explain how it is that our connecting up with God's purposes is supposed to make our lives meaningful. If we are to play a role in God's plan that He has prepared for us, and which He could carry out without our help, how does that confer meaning on our lives? Children do not have meaning conferred upon their lives when they play a part in projects carefully prearranged for them by adults.

[7] John Kekes, 'The Meaning of Life', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXIV (2000), pp. 17–34.

[8] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 594ff.

[9] Susan Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997), p. 209. Note that Wolf and Kekes combine a subjective element, in the form of active engagement or identification, with the objective element of significance in order to articulate a criterion for meaningfulness. The subjective element seems essential, on any account, but it is not controversial and I set it aside here.

[10] Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life', p. 100.

Meaning is found in scientific activity and in art, in family and community, in political activism and philosophy, sport and religion. In each case, we engage with something that transcends ourselves, with goods which are not merely subjective but (at least) intersubjective. These goods come in many shapes and forms: moral, aesthetic, scientific, cultural and so on. They all have in common that they are real goods (with at least what Wiggins calls 'ordinary anthropocentric objectivity') toward the achievement of which humans beings can sensibly work.[11]

The fact that so many reflective and talented philosophers have converged upon this account of meaning in human life, together with the fact that it is precisely meaning of this sort which satisfies the quest of downshifters and other meaning-seekers, requires us to accept its adequacy. Meaning really is available to us through engagement with goods beyond our individual lives. However, many reflective people do not find this account of meaning in life fully satisfactory. They hanker after something more. It might be, of course, that they seek something which human beings cannot have: this might be an urge best dealt with by therapy, philosophical or psychological. But if I am right, a more satisfying kind of meaning is available to human beings. Moreover, it is available within a thoroughly naturalistic framework.

Why do some people find this account of meaning as conferred through engagement with valuable activities beyond the self less than fully satisfying? There are, I think, two reasons. The first is that the solution can be seen, from a certain perspective, merely to reproduce the problem. As we saw, one way in which lives can fail to be meaningful is if they are focused around activities which are, in Wiggins's phrase, 'regressive and circular'. Engaging with goods beyond the self was supposed to provide us with a way of breaking out the circle of self. But this account of meaning seems merely to substitute a larger circle for a smaller. It opposes the farmer, who grows more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land

[11] Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life', p. 137. An anonymous referee reminds me of Thaddeus Metz's recent objection to this account of meaning. Metz claims that conceptions which hold that meaning lies in connecting with values beyond the animal self imply that Taylor's subjectivist answer, the most widely read discussion of the question, is not merely false, but not a theory of meaning at all (Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (2001), pp. 146–7). This is a bullet I'm prepared to bite: sometimes an answer to a question is so wrongheaded that it seems better regarded not as simply false, but as failing to answer the question at all.

to grow more corn, to the parent who acquires meaning from raising children who shall acquire meaning by becoming parents in turn. Why should this kind of circle be any more significant than the first? Engaged in this kind of activity, we are devoting ourselves to a life which is as pointless – insofar as it does not have a point outside itself – as Sisyphus's. As Taylor expresses this objection, the only difference between us and Sisyphus is that while he himself goes back down the hill to put his shoulder to the rock once more, we leave this task to our children.[12]

A circular life, a life which has no point beyond life itself, is a pointless life, no matter how large the circle of this life. This is one objection to the account of meaning we have sketched. Taylor's remarks on Sisyphus suggest a second reason for dissatisfaction with the account. Imagine that Sisyphus was allowed to engage with goods beyond himself. As we saw, merely allowing him to pile rock upon rock is not sufficient to restore point to his life, since it would not allow him to engage with a real good. But allow Sisyphus to use the rocks he gathers to build 'a beautiful and enduring temple' and his life acquires meaning.[13] Temple building, it is plausible to think, is a valuable activity, one with a value that transcends our individual lives. Whether we value it for its religious meaning, or for its symbolic affirmation of human striving in a godless universe, or for its architectural beauty, it is clear that engaging in this activity is paradigmatically meaningful. Sisyphus the temple-builder pursues a valuable project and thereby transcends himself.

However, there is a serious problem with this Sisyphusian solution. Perhaps, so long as Sisyphus is engaged in his temple-building his life *seems* meaningful. But now imagine the temple completed. What then, Taylor asks? 'What picture now presents itself to our minds? It is precisely the picture of infinite boredom!'[14] So achieving our goals cannot in fact confer meaning upon our lives. But what possible use is the pursuit of a goal, in the hope thereby to attain meaning, if we recognise that its attainment is meaning*less*? Surely a meaningless goal cannot somehow transmit meaning up the line, to the activities which are devoted to it.

[12] Taylor, 'The Meaning of Life', p. 45.
[13] Taylor, 'The Meaning of Life', p. 41.
[14] Taylor, 'The Meaning of Life', p. 46.

Some people might be tempted to argue that this is precisely the case; that the meaning of life is to be found in activity, and not achievement. We must pursue valuable goals, if our lives are to be meaningful, but they need not be goals which would continue to add meaning to our lives if we accomplished them. There is something – indeed, as we shall see, a great deal – right about this response, but there is something odd about it as well. For one thing, as several philosophers have noted, meaning is outcome related.[15] If we do not or cannot make progress in pursuing our projects, they shall not confer meaning on our lives. So if achieving our goals would threaten the meaning of our projects, then we are caught in a curious position: both needing to make progress and yet always aware that nothing will fail here like success.

Moreover, the very awareness that we must fail in our most significant projects threatens their value. Think of the noblest, most meaningful goals that we can pursue, such as the fight against poverty and oppression. Are we to say that we are fortunate because we *won't* achieve these goals? Reflection on the idea that our lives are meaningful only because, and so long, as our most important goals are out of reach seems to strip them of meaning.

Consider, in this context, a famous crisis of meaning: that experienced by John Stuart Mill. Mill had devoted his life, as he tells us, to the pursuit of good works, and for a time he received sufficient fulfilment from these activities. However, in a state of depression, he asked himself the fateful question with which we have been grappling:

> it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: 'Suppose that all your objects in life were realised; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be

[15] See, for instance, Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life', p. 98; Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, p. 67.

> any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.[16]

As Mill saw, his personal crisis had significance beyond himself. It was, he thought, a 'flaw in life itself':[17] if significance in life *requires* privation, then the pessimists about meaning are right. Life has a tragic structure, in which the unhappiness of many is required for the complete and highest happiness of any. Call this Mill's test. An activity fails Mill's test for superlative meaningfulness if we can (a) imagine completing it, and (b) so completing it would strip a life devoted to it of meaning.

Though Mill reconciled himself to his predicament, he seems never to have adequately solved it. His solution, such as it was, seems to have consisted in refusing to confront it directly. The enjoyments of life, he tells us, 'will not bear a scrutinising examination':

> Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life. Let your self-consciousness, your scrutiny, your self-interrogation, exhaust themselves on that; and if otherwise fortunately circumstanced you will inhale happiness with the air you breathe, without dwelling on it or thinking about it, without either forestalling it in imagination, or putting it to flight by fatal questioning.[18]

Questioning is, Mill suggests, fatal to our finding purpose in life. We must throw ourselves into our activities so enthusiastically that we cannot wonder if they are really worth it. We shall thereby acquire meaning, even if the condition of our doing so is that our projects ultimately fail.

Thus, the account of meaning we have sketched is vulnerable on two counts. First, very many of the activities through the pursuit of which it (correctly) claims meaning is to be attained are scarcely less circular than paradigmatically meaning*less* activities. Second, it locates meaning in the pursuit of ends which, if attained, cease to provide meaning to our lives. Moreover, these two faults between them threaten to be sufficient to vitiate *all* our projects: if a project is not to fail due to circularity, it must have

[16] John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London, OUP, 1971), p. 81.
[17] Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 88.
[18] Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 86.

an end outside itself. But if it has an end outside itself, and that end is achievable (itself a condition of its pursuit conferring meaning) then we risk impaling ourselves on the second horn of the meaning-imperilling dilemma.

II.

Can we do better? Are we condemned to find meaning only at the expense of disabling our critical faculties? If we are to locate a source of meaning that will satisfy Taylor, and put to rest the doubts of Mill, it will have to have the following features: (1) it must not be circular, in the sense that it must have a point beyond itself. But (2), though we must be able to achieve significant progress in achieving its end, it must be such that either (a) achieving it would not strip it of meaning, or (b) though constant progress in its pursuit is conceivable, a final completion of it is not.

Might there be activities which have these features? I suggest that there are. Insofar as I understand it, I suspect that the theological solution to the problem of the meaning of life might be taken as satisfying these conditions. Communion with God, or the coming of the Millennium, is (conceived to be) an attainable goal, which is (somehow) intrinsically meaningful. The problem faced by the theological account (apart from making its essential presuppositions plausible) is in spelling out the manner in which these goals are meaningful. The debate over the extent to which immortality, or heaven itself, would ultimately prove to be as boring as Sisyphus's contemplation of his completed temple is, as I read it, in part a debate over the extent to which the theological account could make good on its claim to satisfy this second condition.[19]

The theological solution plumps for an intrinsically meaningful goal. I shall defend a solution which takes the second disjunct. There are, I shall suggest, valuable activities which are inherently open-ended – not because they aim for a goal that cannot be achieved, but because the goal they pursue is not fixed prior to the activity itself. Instead, the goal is gradually defined and

[19] On this question, see Thaddeus Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life', *Ethics* 112 (2002), p. 791.

more precisely specified in the course of its pursuit, so that the end of the activity is always itself one of its stakes.

The kind of activity I have in mind – what I shall call a project – is closely analogous to what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a practice. A practice, according to MacIntyre, is (among other things) a form of activity which has standards of excellence internal to it, in the course of achieving which our 'conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended'.[20] Practices are not projects, in part because the goods pursued through many of MacIntyre's practices are not important enough. Farming and sports are both practices for MacIntyre, but though these are (at least arguably) meaningful activities, they are not superlatively meaningful activities. Nevetheless, some meaningful activities with the structure of a practice do qualify as projects: projects are practices in which supremely valuable goods are at stake.

Consider, for instance, the activity of philosophy, or, more broadly, the pursuit of truth in any area of inquiry. This is, it goes without saying, a paradigmatically valuable activity, inasmuch as truth is, like justice and the good, one of the highest values of which we can conceive. Moreover, it is a constitutionally open-ended inquiry, in the following sense: it is not even *conceivable* (so long as we understand what intellectual inquiry is) that it could fail Mill's test. The idea of a finished and entirely true system of knowledge is literally inconceivable beforehand, in a manner in which a temple is not. We can get a clear idea of what a finished temple would look like, but we cannot get a grip on what a completed system of knowledge might be. Certainly, we can imagine a very large encyclopedia, but its contents remain obscure. We develop the tools for understanding the knowledge we might develop as we pursue that knowledge, in such a manner that the future directions our understanding might take are, in principle, ungraspable by us in anything more than the most hazy outline. Since we cannot know what the final goal might be like, we cannot imagine completing our project, and therefore we cannot be shaken by the image of its completion.[21]

However, it might be objected that knowledge is a special case. Many other supremely valuable goods, like justice and the good,

[20] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2nd Ed) (London: Duckworth, 1985), p. 187

[21] Moreover, the truth might be *constitutively* open-ended. Insofar as a complete system of knowledge has to include the knower and her activity, it may be that it cannot be completed in principle.

are conceivable ahead of time. We know (roughly, at least) what a perfectly just society would look like, and therefore the project of pursuing justice fails Mill's test. My response is simply to deny that we do have a clear grasp on what an ideally just society would be like. Though we can certainly see how many of the gross injustices of our world might be eliminated, we cannot see how we would need to proceed from there. For instance, we cannot see, ahead of time, how cultural differences and equality are to be reconciled: not in detail, at any rate. Once again, the difficulty is a matter of principle: we shall forge the tools whereby to grasp the notion of justice in its details and as it applies to these questions only as we actually confront them. The pursuit of justice is a practice, in MacIntyre's sense: as we achieve it, it will become clearer just what it is we are aiming at.

Similarly, many other supremely valuable goods are inherently open-ended. The practice of artistic creativity, when it is carried out at the very highest level, is paradigmatic of such an open-ended activity. We have only to think of how the avant-garde movements of the Twentieth century would have been perceived by earlier generations of artists to see at once how the ends of art themselves evolve along with the activities which aim to achieve them. Like the pursuit of the good and the right, and the pursuit of truth, it is an inherently open-ended activity insofar as its ends are at stake within the activity itself. The ends of superlatively meaningful activities cannot be achieved, because as the activities evolve, so the ends at which they aim alter and are refined. Knowledge is not a special case at all, for the simple reason that pursuing any of our most meaningful goals is, *inter alia*, a cognitive activity: one which requires the discovery or invention of new conceptual tools and new and better theories. Because superlatively meaningful activities are open-ended in this way, they cannot fail Mill's test. We can make progress toward these ends, secure in the knowledge this progress does not threaten the meaningfulness of our projects.[22]

[22] Because projects do not have fixed goals, but ends which evolve as progress is made toward achieving them, they can satisfy another desideratum of an account of a meaningful life. People who ask after the meaning of life sometimes want to know what difference it makes that *they* live. As Nozick says, we want to leave traces behind us, so that our lives make a difference (*Philosophical Explanations*, p. 582). Moreover, we want these traces to be individual, in such a manner that if we had not lived, these particular traces would not exist. Now, if we can participate in a project, and help inflect its ends through our participation, then we can leave this kind of trace behind us. If the ends are not fixed, but

It is characteristic of projects that they are *hard*: they require concerted effort, intellectual and physical. Oftentimes they require great courage as well. Engaging in a project is work, in a clear sense of the word. So the downshifters are only half right. Meaning in life can be pursued in just the ways they have suggested. By cutting work hours, and thereby leaving more time for family, for friends, for the simple joys of a life which is less stressed and more in touch with beauty and the natural environment, we really can make our lives more fulfilling. But we cannot achieve *superlative* meaning in this way. Such meaning, the meaning which can be looked full in the face by the most reflective people without fear or flinching, is only to be found in work. Not, to be sure, necessarily *paid* work. Those of us who, like philosophers and (some) professional artists, are paid to be engaged in the pursuit of superlative meaning are especially privileged. But the pursuit of superlative meaning is necessarily work in that it will require sustained effort, concentration, attention, striving, and, perhaps more often than not, failing at least temporarily. It is only active engagement in projects which confers superlative meaning on our lives.

It might be objected, however, that the very fact that superlatively meaningful activities are so difficult disqualifies them as a locus of meaning. At least, so I imagine John Cottingham would argue. For Cottingham, activities which are exposed to failure cannot be meaning-conferring. The knowledge that the extent to which we can secure meaning is, in part, a matter of chance is, he claims, 'both psychologically indigestible and ethically repugnant'.[23] It is psychologically indigestible because we cannot hope to embark on so arduous a voyage without a reasonable hope of success; it is ethically repugnant because it is inegalitarian, requiring us to admit that only an elite can ever hope for the most meaningful lives.

I take the second objection to be more important than the first. Indeed, I take the fact that meaning-conferring activities are difficult and risky to be a positive advantage of my account. It is a platitude, but no less true for that, that worthwhile tasks are usually, perhaps always, difficult to carry out. A meaningful life is

(somewhat) open, then our individual contribution is not entirely replaceable by that of anyone else. Art is paradigmatically meaningful, in part because the extent to which individuals makes an irreplaceable difference in artistic activity is especially great.

[23] Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, p. 69.

a life of effort and striving, directed toward ends only partially within our control. The fulfilment we can attain through our partial successes at these tasks is very much the greater because we are all too aware that we might have failed absolutely.

Cottingham intends the second objection as an attack upon any secular account of the meaningful life, but it seems to have special relevance to the account I have defended. Almost all accounts of the meaning of life, including most theological accounts, will be somewhat inegalitarian, insofar as they lay down certain conditions upon meaning which are social, and therefore beyond the control of any one individual. If the meaning of life turns on accepting a *particular* god, for instance, it lays down social conditions and is to that extent inegalitarian. Even if it turns upon accepting the Good, some people will be better placed, due to circumstances beyond their control, to understand and appreciate the Good than others: the product of a particularly brutal upbringing in a depraved society will almost certainly be less able to appreciate the Good than those more fortunately situated.

However, there seems little doubt that accounts of the meaning of life can be more or less egalitarian, in Cottingham's sense, and that the account I have presented is less egalitarian than most. I have claimed that though ordinary meaning is available to almost all of us, through participation in the goods of family and the appreciation of art, through friendship and interaction with the natural world, *superlative* meaning requires much more: active engagement with projects. But engagement in a project, at a level which can secure sufficient achievements to confer superlative meaning, is available only to a few. For instance, only a very few of us can participate (as opposed to being interested spectators) in the project of the pursuit of knowledge (which, it goes without saying, must be much more than the random accumulation of facts if it is to constitute a project).

However, while it seems to be true that the proportion of any population who can be engaged in this project is necessarily restricted, because engaging requires (among other things) cognitive abilities, of a special sort, which are not merely extremely sophisticated but also (and this is the condition which makes participation necessarily restricted) extremely sophisticated *relative to* the population norm, there does not seem any such limit in principle to participation in many other projects. In particular, almost everyone could participate actively in the project of pursuing

justice, at least if society were so arranged that they had the time, the education, and the other prerequisites of participation. Though it seems to be the case that an enormous proportion of the world's population is cut off from the projects which might secure superlative meaning, including almost everyone in the third world, this does not seem a limitation built into the nature of things. In a more just world, in which resources, material and intellectual, were more fairly distributed, far more people could participate in projects, and thereby secure the superlative meaning that only such projects can confer.[24]

Meaning is, as the downshifters recognise, to be found in many aspects of human life. Their strategy, of leaving stressful and worthless jobs in search of more time to devote to family, friends and self-development, will often succeed in securing what we might call ordinary meaning. But superlative meaning is not to be found in turning from the world of work, here conceived of as effortful engagement in difficult practices. On the contrary, it is only in work, of the right kind and with the right structure, that superlative meaning is to be found. In our world, one of the most meaningful projects in which we can engage is the pursuit of justice, which is also the pursuit of the conditions under which superlative meaning can be made available to all.

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[24] An anonymous referee suggests another problem with my account: could not my objection to theological accounts of meaning, that eternal life would be boring, be turned back against it? If avoidance of boredom is a sufficient condition of superlative meaning, then what guarantee is there that someone engaged in a project will succeed in acquiring it? On the other hand, oughtn't we to recognise that ordinarily meaningful lives are frequently sufficiently engaging to escape boredom? This objection misconstrues the importance of boredom to my account. My claim was that theological accounts which hold that eternal life is intrinsically meaningful seemed open to the objection that such lives would *necessarily* become boring. But it does not follow, from the claim that it is an objection to X as an account of meaning that X would necessarily be boring, that any adequate account of meaning must attach to activities that cannot *possibly* be boring. In any case, avoidance of boredom is necessary for meaningfulness, but it is far from sufficient.