

## *Morality and a Meaningful Life\**

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What does it takes in order for life to have meaning? In offering an answer, I hope to capture an intuition that I suspect many of us share. On the one hand, it seems too strong to say that it is impossible for an evil person to lead a meaningful life. On the other, we should like to think that a morally decent human being—not a saint, mind you—is in virtue of being such more favored to lead a meaningful life than an immoral person is. It would be utterly disturbing if it turned out that a person’s chances of leading a meaningful life increases the more immoral her or his life becomes. So even if it is true that Adolph Hitler lead a meaningful life we want this to be a fluke rather than a natural outcome of his being the evil person that he was. Conversely, if it is true that Mother Theresa lead a meaningful life, we want this to flow rather naturally from the kind of moral life that she lived. We want to be surprised that someone like her does not lead a meaningful life, though we probably want to stop short of saying that such a person is guaranteed to do so.

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\* I am very grateful to Thaddeus Metz and Ward Jones for wonderful comments upon an earlier version of this essay.

Did Hitler live a meaningful life? Given the enormous power that he came to wield and the enormous impact he upon the world, why is it not a forgone conclusion that he did? It is not enough to intone that he was an utterly evil man unless we also have an explanation for why being evil is naturally an impediment to leading a meaningful life. As I shall indicate in section III, the explanation is I believe tied to the way in which Hitler was an evil person. More precisely, then, the thesis that I should like to defend in this essay is that the sentiments characteristic of being moral are a deep aspect of being psychologically healthy and the moral person is favored over the immoral person to lead a meaningful life.

David Schmitz writes that “One of the best things I ever did was to coach little league flag football”.<sup>1</sup> In any account of the meaning of life needs to have room for just this sort of activity giving much meaning to an individual’s life. Though leading a meaningful life does not require that everything has gone, or is going, well for one, it seems to require that those activities that are a

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<sup>1</sup> “The Meanings of Life,” in David Schmitz (ed.), *Robert Nozick* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). I shall return to this example at the end of this essay.

defining feature of one's identity give one purpose and a reason to go on.<sup>2</sup> Thus, good parents or good spouses can certainly lead meaningful lives, as can prime ministers and bishops.<sup>3</sup> It would be a mistake to advance an account of leading a meaningful life according to which only the well-placed in society or the especially talented are likely to lead a meaningful life. My aim in this essay, then, is in keeping with these reflections; for being psychologically healthy and leading a moral life are not at all the purview of the well-placed in society or the especially talented.

After some remarks about being favored in the section that immediately follows, I shall attempt to show, using the work of P. F. Strawson, the way in which being psychologically healthy is more morally normative than one might suppose, thus providing

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<sup>2</sup> Recall Bernard Williams's expression "ground projects," in his essay "Persons, Character, and Morality" in his *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Many of these have been admirably addressed by Thaddeus Metz in "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (2001). See, in particular, his essay "The Immortality Requirement for Life's Meaning," in *Ratio* 16 (2005), in which he argues against the view that immortality is necessary in order for life to have meaning. For an important discussion concerning why the very topic of the meaning of life is not much discussed in philosophy, see Metz's essay "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (2002)

the argument with a bridge to the claim that being moral favors leading a meaningful life.

### I. The Idea of Being Favored

Horseracing illustrates the very nicely the idea of being favored.<sup>4</sup> Roughly put, horse A is favored to win over horses B and C if given A's health, A's running abilities vis à vis the running of abilities of B, then it is more reasonable to expect that A will win than it is to expect that either B or C will win. From this, it does not follow at all that horse A will in fact win; for all sorts of unforeseen variables may come into play. Although the same, one can be warranted in asserting that horse A is favored to win; and insofar as this claim is warranted, the claim is hardly trivial. If horse A was heavily favored to win over C, but horse C in fact wins, this is called an upset. Significantly, though, an upset does not imply that it was a mistake to think that the horse that lost was favored to win. Hence, an upset does not imply that the horse that won is the better horse. It could turn out, for instance, that horse A did not win because its rider mistakenly pulled back at the wrong moment.

The idea of being favored holds in numerous

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<sup>4</sup> I draw upon and refine the account of being favored developed in *Living Morally: A Psychology of Moral Character* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), chapter 7.

contexts quite different from horseracing. Children in homes where both parents have graduate degrees are favored to have a better vocabulary than children in homes where neither parent has attended college (were the positive correlation between education and vocabulary holds). The explanation for why this is so is well-known; and does not need to be repeated here. A child raised in the second kind of home environment may turn out to have a much better vocabulary than one raised in the first. We understand, though, that this exception proves the rule. So the warranted claim that a given outcome is favored is a very significant claim, though it clearly stops short of being a guarantee.

Now, the idea of being favored expresses the likelihood of an outcome where, owing to the nature of things, there is a positive correlation between possessing a given set of features and realizing the outcome in question. Thus, given the nature of the game of basketball, it is no mystery that height is an advantage. If everything is equal between A and B, save that B is 20 centimeters taller A, then one needs to have an extremely interesting story to make sense of A being the better basketball player. If it turns out that A is the most remarkable shooter to come along since the very beginning of the game, then precisely what we understand is that A's height disadvantage,

vis à vis B, is more than offset by his shooting skills. Hence, in virtue of A's remarkable shooting skills, he turns out to be a better basketball player than B. Yet, these shooting skills do not guarantee that A will be a better basketball player than C, since it turns out C has B's height in addition to coming very close to have A's remarkable shooting skills.

With all sports luck is involved. For instance, one has to be in the right place at the right time. And there is no way to guarantee that. When we have a competition between a group all of whose members have roughly the same fit, then luck itself is undoubtedly a significant factor with respect to which member of the group will win. Such is the case with horse racing. With the home environment, by contrast, it is hardly luck that the child raised by two parents, both of whom have a doctorate, will have a larger vocabulary than a child raised by two parents both of whom lack a college education.

Sometimes, there are respects in which life can be rather like a horse race, in that there is fierce competition between individuals with similar fit with respect to the goal to be obtained and room for only a few to attain the goal. Often enough, fortunately, life is more like a home environment in that one person's doing well does not thereby

preclude another person's doing well. All children could have a home environment that favored their having an excellent vocabulary, although this is clearly not the case. We naturally think that one person's leading a meaningful life is most unlikely to be an impediment to another person's doing so. The account of being favored offered here is compatible with all individuals being favored to leading a meaningful life, although in fact this is manifestly not the case.

## II. On Being Psychologically Healthy

Recall P. F. Strawson's ingenious argument, in his essay "Freedom and Resentment",<sup>5</sup> to the effect that necessarily we distinguish between things capable of intentional behavior and things that are not. I offer two scenarios to illustrate his point. Scenario 1: A branch falls on Jasmine's car, utterly destroying the car's front windshield. Scenario 2: The 26 year-old man across the street deliberately destroys the front windshield of Jasmine's car because he is madly jealous of her success. Strawson's sublime point is that we necessarily distinguish between these two cases. If she is psychologically healthy, Jasmine cannot resent the branch, whatever she might think about it or do to it.

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<sup>5</sup> *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): pp. 1-25.

But she can certainly resent the 26 year-old. Resentment, however, is a moral notion. As a psychologically healthy individual, Jasmine would certainly experience resentment towards the 26 year-old. And if she did not, then (with the exception of the proviso mentioned below) we would actually find that troubling. Expanding upon Scenario 2: suppose further that seconds after Jasmine's car is towed away for repair, a huge branch falls; and, given its trajectory, it would surely have destroyed the car's windshield. Needless to say, this will not be a reason for her not to experience any resentment towards the 26 year-old. She cannot say, "Well, the windshield was going to be destroyed, anyway. It makes no difference at all whether the damage was done by the branch or the 26 year-old". The general point here is not defeated by the truth that it is possible to be committed, on religious grounds, to forswearing all resentment. This is because forswearing resentment when it comes to branches is conceptually incoherent, and bespeaks of being psychologically troubled. What is more, forswearing resentment is not a performative utterance. Insofar as a person has the wherewithal to forswear resentment, this surely involved enormous cultivation.

I am drawing attention to the fact that

Strawson's conceptual point has deep implications in terms of human psychology, in that there is an ineluctable normative aspect to psychological health. First of all, only the psychologically unhealthy can hold that there is no difference between trees, say, and human beings when with regard to the capacity to form intentions. Second, our feelings map onto that difference, in that justified resentment is tied to the recognition that a being has set out with the intention to harm one. As to the first point, while it is certainly true that animals can have the intention to harm, what seems to be out of the question is that they can have the judgment that the creatures whom they harm deserve to be harmed. Nor in order to cause harm do animals form and implement subordinate intentions (plans) over a long period of time. Animals do not, and cannot, form and execute the plan to move into a neighborhood, lay low for a few months thereby gaining everyone's confidence, and then take over. Human beings, however, can and do. This point is important because much of evil is not just about harming another, but executing a plan over time in order to inflict that harm.

Now, although Strawson's argument is quite perspicuous when the example is one of harm, it also applies to instances in which a person is made better off. The proper object of our gratitude is the

intentional behavior on the part of another to bestow a benefit upon us without anything in return. Anyone who thinks that the reason why apples grow on trees is to provide her or him with nourishment has deep psychological problems. People can be happy with regard to all sorts of outcomes. But the difference is this. Proper gratitude, unlike happiness, requires the belief that someone intentionally set out to bestow a benefit upon one; and that belief is not applicable to any and every outcome in which a person takes delight.

The foregoing considerations bring us to another aspect of the normativity of the psychologically healthy person, namely the phenomenon of trust. Although trust allows for behavior to be predicted, we do not have trust merely on account of the fact that we can predict a person's behavior. It is an abomination of the language to talk about trusting that a person will rape one, though one may be ever so warranted in predicating that the person will commit this heinous act against one. Some people are trustworthy; others are not. The psychologically healthy person does not regard people as trustworthy or untrustworthy no matter what the history of their behavior is. Just so, it is absolutely necessary that the psychologically healthy person make some judgments in this regard.

Needless to say, judgments about whether people are trustworthy or not are none other than judgments about the ways in which people are morally good or bad. So if making judgments about trustworthiness is an unavoidable aspect of being psychologically healthy, then it follows that making judgments about whether people are morally good or bad is also an unavoidable aspect of being psychologically healthy.

Thus far, I have argued that being psychologically healthy requires adopting some aspect of a moral stance towards others in terms of their treatment of one. I want now to proceed from the other direction, and show that being psychologically healthy requires adopting a moral stance towards others in terms of how one treats them.

Consider the fact that most people do not desire to kill another human being. Even in the heat of anger and rage and even in urban areas that dictate considerable prudence, most do not desire to kill another. The explanation for this is quite simple. Most people are raised in a sufficiently loving environment, and the basic attachments of the parent-child relationship are not just independent of the desire to kill, they are actually in opposition to it.

These basic attachments occasion general good will instead, which is underwritten by the fact that the richness of this relationship is not in any way threatened by the mere fact that there are equally rich parent-child relationships all around.

Support for this line of thought comes from a rather surprising quarter, namely the life of the typical serial killer. The serial killer is unnerving in her or his ability to kill routinely in a very calculating and unemotional manner. People often respond with more emotion to stepping on someone's toe than the serial killer does to taking a person's life. The serial killer calculates killing rather like someone might plan for a first vacation abroad. Interestingly, it turns out that most serial killers comes from a home of considerable abuse; and it is a characteristic feature of such homes that the bonds of attachment between parent and child go undeveloped, as a result of which the child becomes psychologically scarred. One of the manifestations of this is that the sentiment of goodwill does not develop in the systematically abused child.

Strawson, of course, does not discuss these matters. However, there is a deep harmony between what I have just pointed out and Strawson's views. For when the parent-child relationship is as it should

be the child experiences its parents not just as branches who happen to provide a good that the child needs, but as beings who intend its good. Thus, when things are as they should be it is to their parents that children become lovingly attached, and not the inanimate things around them; whereas this attachment does not form when parents have failed to have and act upon such intentions.

My aim in this section has been to establish the normativity of psychological health, by arguing that the many of the sentiments that are characteristic of being moral are a deep aspect of being psychologically healthy. Thus, if there is a substantial connection between being moral and leading a meaningful life, as I shall try to establish in what follows, then we also have a like connection between being psychologically healthy and leading a meaningful life. In turn, these considerations underwrite the cherished view that leading a meaningful life is very much tied to the kind of person that an individual is rather than how accomplished a life the person manages to lead, since neither psychological health nor morality requires a life that can boast of extraordinary accomplishments.

### III. The Social Self

Human beings are quintessential social

creatures. This starts with language. As is well-known, Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, §243) noted that there is no such thing as a private language. Necessarily, what words mean for each individual is tied a linguistic community. Learning a language entails grasping what others mean when they use the words of that language. So we begin our development in life as social creatures, as we master the words that those around us use. But, of course, the social nature of a human being hardly stops with language. In fact, it does not begin with language. As I have argued in *The Family and the Political Self*,<sup>6</sup> it is only through social interaction that we, as human beings, come to have a sense of self in the first place. It is on account of being valued by parents that children come to value themselves. More precisely, it is through being valued by their parents that children come to see their activities as having meaning. Children, no matter how talented, cannot on their own come to value themselves or to see their activities as meaningful.

Human beings never outgrow the need for approval from others. The primary difference between children and adults is that, unlike children,

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<sup>6</sup> (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

(a) adults have a better sense of whether or not the actions merit praise or criticism and (b) adults are better able to judge the extent to which those who assess actions are competent to do so. This is easy enough to see. At the age of 5, children are hardly in the position to judge whether their performances are excellent and whether their instructor is even competent, let alone more competent than another instructor. To be sure, children compare notes and make all sorts of claims about one teacher being better than another. The claim, though, is not 5 year-olds do not make assessments. Of course, they do. Rather, it is that they are not competent to make them. By contrast, 18 year-old college students, who are still green in judgment about so many ways, are in a position to have make some clear assessments about their own accomplishments and to have a sense of how competent their instructors are. For instance, the typical college student can tell whether she or another student has asked a very searching question of a professor. Likewise, she can tell whether a professor has provided an absolutely stellar response to a touch question. College students can rightly make judgments along these lines without being an authority in the relevant area of intellectual inquiry. Needless to say, this is not true of the typical 5 year-old.

Now, recognizing that someone is competent to make certain assessments is one thing. Getting that person's approval is another. In fact, it is possible to want desperately a person's approval precisely because of one's keen sense of how competent the person is. College students and, especially, students in pursuit of advance degrees often find themselves in this very situation. Working with (one of) the best person(s) in a department is not just a way of getting ahead, which surely it is, it is also a way of getting (one of) the most desirable form(s) of approval available to in the department. This is what every psychologically healthy person generally wants.

Although approval never ceases to be desirable in and of itself, constructive criticism is preferable to empty praise. One of the indications of empty praise is that the behavioral investment of the person offering the praise never seems to match the words proffered by the individual. For example, it is extremely difficult to believe that someone is exceptionally talented and yet never manage to express that sentiment to a third party whom one respects. So if over several courses I told one of my female students that she is brilliant, she would have reason to doubt the sincerity of my words if no one ever said to her "You know, LT thinks very highly of



you". Given my silence here, it would, in truth, be understandable if she came to find my telling her that she is brilliant rather patronizing. Our behavioral investment has to match our words, except in that ever so rare instance when that is not a possibility.

In the psychological literature, approval is said to underwrite a person's self-esteem, which is the sense of worth that a person has based upon the ways in which the individuals has succeeded; and the literature on the importance of self-esteem in the lives of both children and adults is voluminous.<sup>7</sup> It is through social approval that psychologically healthy individuals have their self-esteem underwritten and see their activities as having value, and so as having meaning. For our judgment (a) that one thing rather than another is a worthwhile activity to pursue and (b) that our confidence that we are being successful in the pursuit of the activities in question is inextricably tied to community standards and

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<sup>7</sup> The idea of self-esteem was introduced by William James, *Principles of Psychology* ([1890] New York: Dover Edition, 1940), ch. 10. He defined self-esteem as successes over aspirations. While the substance of this definition has not changed, the idea has gone through considerable theoretical refinement. For a recent review of the concept, see Christopher J. Mruk, *Self-Esteem: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 2nd edition (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1999).

assessments. To be sure, the lines between one community and another can be very vague, and sometimes a person can choose to belong to one community than another. None of this, though, diminishes the importance of community assessments in the lives of individuals.

In the following respect, the importance of community assessments to self-assessments is rather like speaking a language. To be a competent speaker of a language is to use words, sentences, and grammatical structure in the correct ways in general. Now, competency here is not settled once and for all. Quite the contrary, competency is continually reinforced each time a person speaks by others responding in ways that are appropriate to the speaker's utterances. Certainly, there can be untoward moments, but these actually have to be few and far between; otherwise, things become problematic. It would not take long for a person's sense of self to be called into question if, whenever, he politely asked for directions, people said while handing him one "Here is a pencil". A single instance of this can be ignored. Repeated instances would be traumatic, even for a person who had every good reason to believe that he is a competent speaker of the language. Notice, in particular, that if the person is psychologically healthy he could not

conclude, in the face constant behavior of this type, that they are all deranged. The very idea that there is no private language entails not only that we cannot just make up words as we go along, but that when we use words in the right way, people should respond in the right way. Anyone 20 year-old would know with as much certainty as one can have in this world that she is a competent speaker of her maternal language. Yet, a day of others responding to her in the way that I have described above would leave the person quite shaken.

It is perhaps no accident that Descartes concluded that the one thing of which he could be absolutely certain is the thesis "I think; therefore, I am". Most importantly, this belief is not fixed once and for all; rather, it is continually re-affirmed. Each instance of a person's thinking constitutes all the affirmation that she needs with regard to knowing that the belief that she exists in some manner or the other is *true*. Alas, it turns out that with respect to every other activity in which a person might engage, a person cannot, simply by rehearsing in her mind what she did, give herself all the affirmation that she needs with respect to whether or not she did that activity or she did that activity appropriately. As we have just seen, the proof of this comes from language itself. Ironically, steadfastly ignoring a person can be

less problematic than responding as if the individual had said something quite different than what she said. A person can have all sorts of idiosyncratic reasons for not wanting to speak to individual. Needless to say, it is hard to match the level of certitude that people have that they speak their maternal language competently. So if the confidence that a person has in this regard can be shaken should others routinely fail to respond in the appropriate manner to her utterances, then there can be no doubt whatsoever that this is so with respect to other activities that people might do. This brings out at once both the truth that human beings are quintessential social creatures and the truth that affirmation from others is of ineliminable importance to our sense of self.

Our activities in life are quite unlike our tastes in food. If we like a certain dish, then in terms of our finding the dish tasty it is irrelevant whether others like it, and how many do. Conversely, there are some foods that a person might find distasteful, although just about everyone raves about them. To be sure, tastes can be acquired; and this is often a function of what those around us do. The point, however, is that is that we do not need to look to others in order to ascertain whether we find something we eat to be tasty or not.

With our activities, by contrast, their significance is inextricably tied to their having been endowed with importance in some social context or the other. Dance is perhaps a most remarkable illustration of this. What is dancing but a series of bodily movements done in a certain way often in conjunction with rhythm occasioned by a beat. Still, it seems that dance is accorded some importance in every human culture, though surely it is not a conceptual feature of what it means to be human that dance is accorded weight by humans. We can imagine a culture of human beings not dancing at all. If not here, then on Twin Earth, as they say. Imagine, then, that on Twin Earth someone began dancing on the streets with the excellence of a Mikhail Baryshnikov in ballet or a Michael Jackson in popular dance. However, everyone merely looked at the individual and took him to be acting silly (at best) or utterly delirious (at worse). There is no admiration at all for his movements. Alas, dancing could have no meaning whatsoever in this person's life, though we on this planet have been known to give standing ovations over the masterful display of such movements. Our dancer is quite unlike a hermit who gives her life over entirely to studying scripture alone, say, and thus is thought to exhibit an excellence that few can attain. For there are social

norms in place that accord such a life great significance, though it is understood that few can be expected to live it. Nor is our dancer on Twin Earth like someone who embarks upon a project the success of which can bring him considerable acclaim, though everyone thinks that he is foolish for embarking upon such an endeavor. Instead, people on Twin Earth look at dancing rather like we look at vomiting—an activity that no one recommends.

Wittgenstein's remarks regarding the impossibility of a private language go very deep, because they reveal the extent to which human beings must look to one another for approval. Our confidence in our mastery of a language is not set in stone once and for all. Rather, it is constantly reinforced by the behavior of others in response to our utterances. Lest we forget, utterances are but a form of behavior, as J. L. Austin's marvelous account of speech acts makes abundantly clear.

People can offer approval that is not deserved; and I have indicated how this can be a problem in the remarks about empty praise made earlier. It is also the case that people can refrain from offering disapproval, though it is deserved. For two reasons, this is typically not a problem. One reason is the simple fact that no one wants to be an object of

disapproval. The other is that, since approval and disapproval are not contradictories, the absence of disapproval is not thereby tantamount to approval. Its absence most certainly does not constitute praise. At best, the absence of disapproval is form of bare acceptance. Finally, in this vein I should mention that approval or disapproval can vary in weight depending on various factors, especially the competence or standing of the persons doing so.

Now, one sign of a psychologically unhealthy person is that an individual is so desperate for approval that the individual is unable to take constructive criticism. I shall limit myself here to constructive criticism that affirms the ends, but offers improvements upon the means to achieving those ends. People who cannot take constructive criticism of this kind are often their own worse enemy. They are egomaniacs, and such they cannot abide genuine friendships of the Aristotelian sort.

Although this is not the place for an in depth discussion of the nature of companion friendship, Aristotle's idea that a companion friend is like another self continues to resonate ever so well with us.<sup>8</sup> A companion friend identifies without our

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<sup>8</sup> See, among others, Neera K. Badhwar (ed), *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993)

good, and is committed to our flourishing with respect to it. Such a friend helps us to see the pitfalls that we do not see; and the friend draws our attention to the strengths that we fail to properly appreciate. Because a companion friend so identifies with our good and our flourishing, she or he has a profound grasp of the significance that our losses and victories can have for us. Sometimes, a companion friend can do better at giving articulation to these things than we can ourselves because we are too close the moment. Thus, a companion friend stands in sharp contrast to our associates. Typically, associates mean us no harm and they even display a measure of delight in our successes. Just so, they are not committed to our successes. Nor, generally, are they familiar enough with the intimate details of our lives to understand the significance that things have for us apart from the usual sorts of generalizations about losses and gains. Naturally, there is a measure of goodwill among associates, coupled with a basic

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and Jean-Christophe Merle and Bernard N. Schumacher (eds), *L'amitié* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005). Next to parenthood, I believe that friendship is a most remarkable way in which human beings are purely valued by another human being. Significantly, in the same way that the parent-child relationship is not sexual notwithstanding the deep valuing that flows from the parents to the child, friendship at its best need not be homoerotic.

of trust. However, it is with companion friendships that trust reaches its majestic heights. A would-be-companion friend gives the other exceedingly good and manifest reasons to believe that she or he can be fully trusted. Alas, an egomaniac is constitutionally unable to accord those reasons the weight that they deserve. Accordingly, there is an affirmation in life that the egomaniac goes without.

I remarked at the beginning of this essay that it is not a foregone conclusion that Hitler led a meaningful life. The remarks in the preceding paragraph shed some light on why this assessment of him might be correct.<sup>9</sup> Genius is no substitute for the experience of competent and loyal soldiers on the battlefield. Hitler's sense of self was so fragile that he could only understand loyalty as complete agreement with his assessment of things. Tormented

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<sup>9</sup> See George Victor, *Hitler: The Pathology of Evil* (Dulles, VA: Brassey, 2000). I am enormously grateful to Michael J. Montgomery for many discussions regarding Adolph Hitler and for recommending to me Victor's book. In her essay "La perte d'amis," in Merle and Schumacher, *op. cit.*, Annette Baier observes that a person who lives without friends occasions pity (p. 147). Hitler was both an evil man and a pitiful man because he did not know how to accord independent weight to being simply valued as a friend. I am indebted to Neera K. Badhwar for this way of putting the point. See her "Amitiés et sociétés commerciales" in Merle and Schumacher, *op. cit.* (p. 195, n.1).

by the idea of not being taken seriously, he made it impossible for those most able to help him to realize his goals to do so because they could only tell him what he wanted to hear rather than what he needed to hear (which, alas, may be why he lost the war). In being so demanding of affirmation that he was great, he essentially made it impossible for those closest to him to provide him such affirmation in a most genuine manner, where the affective sentiments of affection and admiration operate to transform the moment. One can ask the following question: How meaningful can person's life be if he is so afraid of not being taken seriously that he cannot even appreciate the depth of the enormous power that he commanded?

Having shown the importance of affirmation in our lives, I turn now to establish the importance of this point with respect to being moral and living a meaningful life.

#### **IV. Living Morally and Living a Meaningful Life**

A most fascinating fact about the world is that although people introduce themselves in all sorts of ways, it is unheard of for anyone to introduce her- or himself as an immoral person. Even people who are quite obviously in the business of harming others often frame their behavior in noble ways. Suicide

bombers claim to be doing the work of the Lord; Hitler claimed to be doing the work of the Lord. In fact, none other than Thrasymachus, of Plato's *Republic*, extolled the benefits of having a reputation for being moral. The problem with announcing that one is an immoral person is that this is rather like serving notice to others that one will harm them if only the opportunity to do so with impunity should presents itself, which is a most effective way of insuring that everyone will keep their distance. As Thrasymachus clearly understood, nothing serves the exploits of an immoral person like having an unshakable reputation for being moral, because then one will have the trust of others in all sorts of ways.

In her seminal essay "Moral Beliefs," Philippa Foot argued that this state of affairs is harder to pull of than one might imagine,<sup>10</sup> because one must always be on guard lest a slip should reveal one's hand. Responding to Foot's essay, Bernard Boxill noted that it is easy enough to be quite immoral provided that the target of one's immoral behavior is other than one's own community.<sup>11</sup> He has a point. During American Slavery or South Africa's

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<sup>10</sup> *Virtues and Vices* (New York: Oxford University California Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> "How Injustice Pays," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9 (1980).

Apartheid, it would not have occurred to whites to do to other whites many of the wrongs that they routinely did to blacks. That is just how significant the line between blacks and whites was. In general, we know that ethnic lines can have a depth to them that boggles the outsider's mind. What is more, it is simply implausible to suppose that those who commit wrongs based upon racial differences could not, on that account alone, live a meaningful life. Thomas Jefferson owned slaves; yet, it is ludicrous to suppose that he did not live a meaningful life.

Fortunately, this problematic consideration is also quite instructive. Both Foot and Boxill have a point. Foot is right in holding that anyone who would treat any and every person immorally, if only the opportunity would present itself, will have a hard time making sense of her- or himself as a person. Boxill is right in noting that if a person's life is anchored in a community of individuals whom she or he can trust, then it is possible for that person, along with others, to participate in quite atrocious forms of evil. Socrates himself noted that there must be morality among thieves. It is typical to take this to mean simply that there needs to be a measure of trust among those who together are engaging in an immoral project. I think, however, that a more substantive claim can be made here, namely that

insofar as psychologically healthy individuals see their immoral behavior as meaningful, they must receive affirmation from others. This is because insofar as any psychological healthy person is able to see her behavior as meaningful, affirmation from others is essential.

Even the evil person needs others; and this brings us to a fundamental difference between the evil person and the moral person.

Evil destroys value. It destroys value by minimizing or eliminating entirely the ability of others to play an affirming role in the lives of others. Accordingly, evil destroys value by diminishing the role that others might play in contributing to still other individuals seeing their lives as meaningful. But to state the obvious, we cannot diminish the ability of persons to contribute to others seeing their lives as meaningful without also diminishing the ability of these very same individuals to contribute to our seeing our own lives as meaningful. If this is right, then evil is a hostile act not only in the sense that we make another worse-off which, of course, is bad enough. It is also the case that at the very least we hurt ourselves because we diminish a source of value that could affirm us.

As is well-known, philosophers have argued

at length that it is in the self-interest of persons to act morally. It seems to me that these arguments often fail to meet the very point of Thrasymachus's challenge, namely that there is nothing to be said living morally if in fact one can get away with living immorally. However, it turns out that the force of Thrasymachus's argument can be considerably blunted if not met entirely. Aristotle noted in the *Politics* that a person who has no need of other human beings is either a god or a beast. The very idea of leading a meaningful life does not apply to animals. By contrast, insofar as human beings are capable of leading a meaningful life, then they need affirmation from others. Not even a human being in possession of Gyges' ring escapes this reality.

What follows from all this? Of course, it most certainly does not follow that in order live a meaningful life every human being needs affirmation from every other human being. In the first place, no one in fact gets that. But we do need affirmation from some, and most of us can get that, which is Boxill's point. But here is the problem. Affirmation is, by its very nature, a very amorphous phenomenon. Countless are the ways that any given display of excellence can be appreciated by another. How a speech, for example, impacts the listeners in the audience depends upon a multitude of variables

that include both each listener's own history and the knowledge that each listener possesses about the speaker's history. It happens often enough that a listener is enormously moved by a speaker's words for reasons that are far removed from anything that the speaker has experienced or had in mind in making the remarks in question. There is also no way to know in advance which person will be moved or in which way the individual will be moved. There is no way to know in advance which configuration of experiences will occasion the affirmation that makes a dramatic difference to one—memorable affirmation, let us call it. From this it follows that whenever an individual so wrongs human beings that they are incapable of offering affirmation to others or, in any case, the individual holds that some individuals are constitutionally incapable of offering affirmation with regard to the things that he does, then that individual thereby reduces the chances of receiving memorable affirmation in her or his life.

Suppose that there are 100 people in a room any one of whom could offer memorable affirmation, but if Elmira allows that only 50 of them could, then clearly Elmira has reduced the chances of receiving such affirmation. Although it does not follow from this that Elmira will not receive such affirmation, it is

hardly trivial that Elmira has reduced by half the chances of receiving memorable affirmation. Suppose, then, Elmira is an X-ist (a sexist, an antisemite, a racist, or a homophobe), and half of the 100 people in the room belong to the group of people whom Elmira despises; accordingly, Elmira will not allow that memorable affirmation can come from of these individuals. From this, it follows that Elmira's X-ist attitude reduces by half the chance that she will receive such affirmation from those in the room. This is not shown to be false because as it happens Elmira receives such affirmation from someone in the room, to say nothing of the possibility of receiving more than one such instance of memorable affirmation. If Elmira is an X-ist and Melboa is not at all like that, and both are talking to the same room of people in an equally talented way, then it follows that Melboa is, owing to her admirable moral attitude, significantly more favored to receive memorable affirmation from the room of 100 people than Elmira is, precisely because she (Melboa) is receptive to being affirmed by those whom Elmira roundly dismisses as beneath her.

It is often said that people who are evil hurt themselves. For many this claim has seemed more rhetorical than substantive. However, if we assume that many, many forms of evil involve X-ist attitudes,



then the argument of the preceding paragraph establishes precisely this claim as a substantive truth. To be sure, evil people do not hurt themselves in the way that they hurt others. Nor do they deserve any sympathy or pity for what they do to themselves. Evil people do not cause themselves physical or psychological harm as such. Rather, it is simply that they reduce, by their very own evil behavior, their chances of receiving the kind of affirmation that they most want. Insight can come from any direction. So the sexist, by ruling out intellectual affirmation from women, essentially reduces the possibility of being affirmed by half of the population. To be sure, the sexist need not want for affirmation as such, this reality is compatible with him not receiving a kind of searching insight that only intellectual affirmation from a woman is apt to occasion. Likewise for the racist, the antisemite, the homophobe, and so on.

In two respects, the preceding remarks resonate with Robert Nozick's discussion of leading a meaningful life in *Philosophical Explanations*.<sup>12</sup> First, I have said something about just how it is that the evil person disconnects from many others. Moreover, I explained why that this is apt to be

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<sup>12</sup> Part III, chapter 4.

costly. Second, my argument is very much in keeping with Nozick's view that all human beings are bearers of value. The human animal is unique among other animals in that whereas many animals can express their like or dislike of this or that state of affairs, only human beings can indicate that they find a state of affairs to be *worthy* of affirmation. Only human beings are capable of being judges of behavior; and sincere renderings of such judgments constitute the bestowal of an indisputable good upon another. This capacity ranges across all groups of human beings. Evil is the denial of this reality, which may explain its violence. For violence visited upon a people has a way of making the appearances of such individuals fit the wrongful image that one has of them as beings who are bearers of very little value or none at all.

Now, Nozick's felicitous expression gives us a way of putting things both succinctly and positively. The difference between the moral and the immoral person is that the former is receptive to bearers of value regardless of their human form. This is a way of being in the world. The moral person possess a positive dispositional constitution, in that that there are no untoward sentiments that need to be overcome in order to be properly responsive to genuine affirmation from others. When put this way,

the idea that the moral person is favored over the immoral person to be affirmed by others does not at all seem like a clever argument requiring one to accept the conclusion all the while leaving one unconvinced. Given any two equally talented and equally successful people, surely the one who is favored to enjoy more affirmation from others is the one who, from the outset, has no untoward sentiments to overcome in order to be properly responsive to affirmation from others; for if nothing else, this is the individual who is less likely to be dismissive of others who are attempting to be affirming.

To complete our argument, we need only bring out the point made in the preceding section that it is via the affirmation of others that we come to see our lives as having meaning.

What I have tried to show is something akin to the basketball story mentioned in the discussion of favoring (section I). Given that other things are equal, then my argument is that for any two people, X and Y, where X is a moral person and Y is an immoral person, then in virtue of being a moral person X is favored over Y to lead a meaningful life. Now if the *ceteris paribus* clause in the context of horse racing or basketball does not render things

trivial, then there is no reason why it should do so in the context of morality. The argument that I have given is that there is something about the nature of the moral life that accords one a non-trivial advantage when it comes to leading a meaningful life. And a given advantage does not cease to exist as such merely because there are other things, such as enormous intellectual ability, that also accord an advantage. We can distinguish between advantages that are contingent upon our abilities and station in life and advantages that are inherent to having a moral character. The latter is precisely the sort of advantage that I have identified in this essay with regard to the connection between morality and leading a meaningful life.

The account provides us with a way of explaining how it is that so often in life people find so much meaning in the so-called small things, like being the coach of a little league football in the case of David Schmitz. One imagines that there is no end to the joy and delight that he experienced in coaching because the players majestically affirmed him with gratitude and admiration for the role he played in helping them to play to the sport to their fullest potential because he held their self-development in the sport as end in itself rather than merely a means to his own ends. Alas, we can easily

imagine a very different coach (no less talented) who cared about the success of the players only insofar as their performances furthered his own ends and made him look good in the eyes of others. In all likelihood, the boys would pick up on this; accordingly, there would be less gratitude and admiration on their part towards this new coach. Even if the players did not, a most poignant truth is that their gratitude and admiration would mean much less to this other coach. Thus, owing to his objectionable moral character, the “small” things that could have been so meaningful in their own right turn out not to be so for this second coach. And the life of Hitler stands as an ever-present reminder that power alone is no substitute for the marvelous affirmation and, therefore, meaning to which small things can give rise.

In this essay, I have tried to show that the moral person is favored with respect to being affirmed, and so with respect to leading a meaningful life and that the sentiments characteristic of being moral are a deep aspect of being psychologically healthy. If the arguments of this essay are sound, then a strong case has been made for the cherished intuition that leading a meaningful life is primarily about the kind of person an individual is, as opposed to the grandeur of her or

his accomplishments.

In the spirit of Plato’s *Republic*, the strong claim would be as follows. Given the nature of morality, any moral person would, in virtue of being such, lead a more meaningful life than any immoral person. Thrasymachus (the antagonist) would have dismissed this view, claiming that morality is utterly irrelevant to leading a meaningful life. I doubt if the strong claim is even remotely plausible. However, if the argument of this essay is sound, then we have seen that Thrasymachus is mistaken. For we have indeed seen that there is something about the nature of morality that gives the moral person a non-trivial advantage when it comes to leading a meaningful life. This conclusion, though not where Plato would have us be, is nonetheless a very long ways from where Thrasymachus thought we were.