

Lecture Two

Finding Meaning in the Natural World:

The Comparative Consensus

1. Norms and Nature

In the last lecture I argued that we are embodied conscious beings engaged in high stakes *psycho-poetic performances*. The quality of our lives, indeed whether our life is meaningful or not, depends in significant measure on how we “participate,” to speak platonically, in the spaces of *art, science, technology, ethics, politics, and spirituality*. These six spaces are members of the *Goodman Set* I call the *Space of Meaning*^{21st century}. We cannot, I think, opt out of *the Space of Meaning* if we want to live meaningfully. The reason is that both our culture(s) and our natures require us to find meaning in a culturally available *Space of Meaning* or not at all. Tonight I’ll do two things (1) explain what this means, why I think it true, and what psycho-social conditions are required to live in a manner that is subjectively satisfying and objectively meaningful; (2) I’ll sketch a philosophical psychology that I promised at the end of the last lecture that respects the neo-Darwinian consensus on human nature, as well as the *neurophilosophy* I offered, and that, in addition, conforms to and utilizes insights gleaned from 2500 years of observation on human flourishing across cultures.

Most sets are still-life, *Space of Meaning* is not. Each member space is layered, nested, contains multiple members itself and is ever-evolving, and thus so too is the whole set. Each member space differentially accumulates its own past, sheds parts of its past, possibly to re-

appropriate them later. And each space interacts with itself and the other spaces in multifarious ways.

The modes of interaction and intersection within each member space and across *Space of Meaning* as a whole range at any given time from harmonious to non-harmonious. At the social level there are reasons of communal stability to want the relations among the spaces to be towards the harmonious side. At the individual level harmony is favored for reasons well-explained by the theory of cognitive dissonance. At both levels the spaces do constitutive work. Intersection with these spaces, participation in them, makes, in some measure, the community and its members who and what they are.

How do or might the components of our individual cognitive-conative-affective schemes, whereby we participate in *Space of Meaning* as individuals, “hang together” so that in our search for meaning we carry out the *psycho-poetic performance* that is our life in a manner that is truthful, honest, worthy, fulfilling, productive of meaning and at the same time maximally harmonious or, at least, minimally discordant? If it is possible, it would be good to know how we should work-out and organize our *cognitive-affective-conative schemes*, so that we can best make sense of things and live meaningfully. My standard for living meaningfully has two components. First-personally one judges one’s life to have been well lived and it is so judged by third-parties in a position to evaluate legitimately the quality of the life lived.¹

Is there anything substantive that can be said about how best to find meaning and to live purposefully given that our nature and our situation is as I have described it in the first lecture? This is a straightforwardly normative question. And it is the subject of this evening’s lecture.

¹ Legitimate evaluation requires, at a minimum, adequate observation of the other’s life, adept mind-reading skills so as to reliably surmise motivation, and a defensible ethical set of standards.

My answer to the question is ‘yes.’ Furthermore, I claim that the answer provided is empirical, although it is not scientific in one familiar sense. The positive answer comes from philosophical reflection on our human nature. Insofar as we wonder about how to live meaningfully we are locating ourselves in the wider ecology of what I’ll call platonic space with a small ‘p’, since Plato was the first to try to get a grip on the orientation about which I aim to speak.

2. Platonic Space

Read Plato’s theory of forms in this naturalized way: the good, the true, and the beautiful are a way of gesturing at, or describing, the three fundamental and universal ways humans orient themselves in and towards the world in order to live well and meaningfully. Picture these forms initially, in Darwinian terms. Mother Nature has selected for parents who care about their young, who reliably detect where food and water sources are, who choose partners with symmetrical faces, and appreciate sunrises (work can continue) and sunsets (rest-is-in-store). Eventually expansive containers of the multifarious things that are ‘thought to be’ good, true, and beautiful come to exist in the social world. They are not invented by or held fully in the minds of individuals. Culture expands and articulates the forms, and each person finds her way to negotiate within parts of the space they provide. It probably matters that in order to flourish each person interpenetrates the space of the good, the true, and the beautiful to some degree, but again how she does so is variable. There is a vast array of ways of being and living well available within *Space of Meaning*. There are multiple ways of making sense and meaning by way of participation in *Space of Meaning*. Not all ways of participation, not all paths, lead to

flourishing.² But many do. The general route -- *dharma, dao* – can be made visible. It sensibly constrains the path of anyone who wishes to achieve *eudaimonia*.

Plato assumes that wisdom will reveal what these concepts – ‘the Good, the True, and the Beautiful’ – gesture at and aim to locate. And in addition that wisdom will enable us to see how to (1) embody all three in a consistent, unified, interpenetrating and uplifting way, that (b) will constitute thinking, feeling, being, and living well – *eudaimonia*. She who sees what is good, true, and beautiful and who understands how they interpenetrate is positioned to flourish, to achieve *eudaimonia*; otherwise not.

One way – but certainly not the only way -- to be a philosopher is to articulate at a synthetic and reflective level what it is that ordinary people who achieve *eudaimonia*, who flourish, embody and/or attain. Both the person who achieves *eudaimonia* and the philosopher who provides a picture of how goodness, truth, and beauty harmonize do something creative and artful.

Harry Frankfurt suggests the useful idea that what drives human meaning-making depends on the importance we assign to what we care about. Accepting my interpretation of Plato implies that there are three things people are naturally oriented to deem important and worth caring about: what is good, what is true, and what is beautiful.

One might expect these two challenges: (1) Plato didn’t see that commitment to the ‘True’ would yield modern science and technology. Science and technology sometimes compete with the ‘Good’ and the ‘Beautiful’. Sometimes, they undermine both. The Copernican and the Darwinian revolution undermined perfectly satisfying, indeed uplifting stories about humankind

² My own intuition is that it is somewhat easier to state which ways won’t work than which ones will work. This might be because we are sometimes thinking about possibilities that haven’t been tested in the latter cases.

and our home. Plato's own story of the creation of the cosmos in the *Timaeus* is revealed as poetic bunk, and the "divine quest" to live ethically and meaningfully, in a way that approximates the way that is "worthy of the gods" is revealed to be a fatuous wish. We are just smart (too smart for our own good) animals. And when we die we are just dead. A really smart animal would simply go for all the gusto he can get. End of story. Since this issue of science and disenchantment is the general issue of all six lectures I'll keep coming back to it and thus put it aside temporarily.

(2) The second objection is that the claim that we have a platonic orientation is descriptively false. Many of Plato's own dialogues give voice to the still familiar picture of persons as psychological egoists. In the famous Myth of the Lydian shepherd Plato's brother Glaucon anticipates a psychological portrait that gains rich texture with Freud. Given our druthers every human wants sex, power, and whatever maximizes his or her material wealth. The sweet shepherd who discovers a ring that makes him invisible 'immediately' kills the king and takes the queen and the kingdom for his own. After re-telling the myth, Glaucon says this: "and any man be he 'just' or 'unjust' would do the same, if he could do so with impunity."

Prudence, and prudence alone, causes us to reign in this side of ourselves. Plato and his student Aristotle have a reply: even if we humans have motivations of this sort and even if we were able to maximize what we see as personally profitable with impunity we will not flourish, achieve *eudaimonia*, be happy. This fact, assuming it is one, is culled from observation of what works and doesn't work to produce *eudaimonia*. I call this style of tracking what leads to flourishing and what doesn't "*ethics as human ecology*."

Still one might worry that the Platonic picture is simply too sweet and wishful. Surely, Thrasymachus, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault were onto something. All honest

civilized souls will admit to naughty desires and urges. And we feel the force of the Myth of the Lydian shepherd. The latter great minds agree that normative consensus is to be expected, but only for purely prudential reasons. We want to satisfy our libidinal urges, period. End of story. Unfortunately, a world in which each individual tries to maximize his or her own pleasure defeats itself. And thus *Eros* yields to *Logos*. Only if we are well-behaved are conditions in place such that a modicum of socially acceptable pleasure satisfaction is possible. There is civilization and we are its discontents. This was Freud's last word on our situation.

There will, of course, be elaborate myth-making such as the platonic story, designed to brainwash us into thinking that we *really* are naturally oriented towards what is good, true, and beautiful and, in addition, to make normative conformity *seem* as if it provides true meaning. There will need to be, and thus there are, elaborate schemes promising amazing rewards in the hereafter, and art, music, and sports, and wars every so often (very often) that function to provide some subliminal satisfaction for what we'd really rather be doing. But this will be just that: myths designed to assuage our misery. When Thoreau worries about all his compatriots living "lives of quiet desperation," he is simply detecting what is, indeed, what must be our predicament. Thoreau's hopefulness that flourishing could become widespread was, once again, a sweet, dear, and idle hope.

Although I have perhaps overstated the depressing, disenchanting, 'quietly desperate' picture of the human predicament, I want to grant parts of the underlying psychological picture some credence. We humans do naturally care a lot about personal satisfaction. Hedonic well-being is firmly on our radar, and selfish, communally disruptive motives are abundant. It would make sense to be completely selfish – with self-serving strategic exceptions -- if we were designed solely to achieve individual "fitness." But we were not designed that way. We were designed to

be fit as social animals. Thrasymachus, Hobbes, et al. dramatically underestimate the degree to which social mammals such as *Homo sapiens sapiens* display what Hume called fellow-feeling, the root of benevolence, as well as selfishness.³ And for all the talk about Darwin's theory being one of 'red tooth and claw,' it simply isn't. Humans are designed to care about more than individual fitness.

3. Darwin and the Compromise Picture

Darwin's picture of human nature and the dawn of genuine sociality and eventually morality differs from Thrasymachus's and Hobbes's in two important respects. First, Darwin is a Humean not a Hobbesian.⁴ To the extent that we are egoists, we are egoists with fellow feeling. We care about the weal and woe of, at least, some others. Second, and this follows from the first point, morality is not "something altogether new on the face of the earth." It is not an invention *de novo*. *Homo sapiens*, presumably like their extinct social ancestors, as well as certain closely related species, such as chimps and bonobos, possess instincts and emotions that are 'proto-moral,' by which I simply mean that we possess the germs, at least, of the virtues of sympathy, compassion, fidelity, and courage. There is no "skyhook" being imputed here. We didn't create the relevant instincts and emotions. Natural selection did. We are endowed with these instincts and feelings thanks to a craning operation that began with unicellular organisms. As Dennett rightly insists, if you really accept the Darwinian picture, there are no skyhooks, only cranes -- cranes all the way down. A crane, which is itself already grounded (and not itself all that complex) lifts what is already there upward and onward, sometimes making something stable and new. Skyhooks, if there were any, hang up there, on their own as it were, drawing into being

³ Hume rightly saw that which side of ourselves we reveal or is developed depends on the relative scarcity of resources. Quote from ECPM.

⁴ Interestingly, we know that Darwin read Hume's ECHU, but there is no evidence that he read the *Treatise* or ECPM.

that which did not exist before the skyhook drew whatever-it-is into being. God is a skyhook, natural selection is a crane.

What sort of cranes did nature equip us with such that morality could be hoisted? Here is Darwin's answer:

In order that primeval men, or the ape-like progenitors of man, should become social...they must have acquired the same instinctive feelings...They would have felt uneasy when separated from their comrades, for whom they would have felt some degree of love, they would have warned each other of danger, and have given mutual aid in attack or defence. All this implies some degree of sympathy, fidelity, and courage....[T]o the instinct of sympathy...it is primarily due that we habitually bestow both praises and blame on others, whilst we love the former and dread the latter when applied to ourselves; and this instinct no doubt was originally acquired, like all the other social instincts, through natural selection.... [W]ith increased experience and reason, man perceives the more remote consequences of his actions, and the self-regarding virtues, such as temperance, chastity, &c., which during earlier times are...utterly disregarded come to be highly esteemed or even held sacred...Ultimately our moral sense or conscience becomes a highly complex sentiment --- originating in the social instincts, largely guided by the approbation of our fellow-men, ruled by reason, self- interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings, and confirmed by instruction and habit.⁵

⁵ Charles Darwin, Descent, 1871 pp. 498-500.

Darwin's story, as one might expect, is gradualist—gradualist in two respects. Humans, thanks largely to the possession of a cognitive-affective-conative economy that was passed on from ancestors have moral or, at least 'proto-moral' dispositions from the start. Furthermore, these dispositions are adjustable during one's lifetime. Social insects, not being conscious, organize social life without feeling or thought. Most mammals seem as if, and certainly all primates do, organize their social lives with and through feelings: selfish-feelings and fellow-feelings. But if this is right, then the Humean-Darwinian story has, what might be perceived as, a serious downside, namely it ties morality too closely to the emotions. Many of the same philosophers who prefer the prettier Humean-Darwinian picture of human nature to the Hobbesian picture, will say that even if Hobbes was wrong about what we are like deep-down-inside, at least he saw that morality has to do with reason. Darwin, in the quote above appears to agree: sympathy, experience, reason, instruction, and habit are all involved in the development of our moral sense. Hume, of course, thought the same. But what both share in addition to a similar take on human nature is the view that the emotions are essential to morality even when experience, habit, and reason enter the picture. For Hume, and possibly for Darwin as well, moral reason works with and through the emotions. The emphasis of the importance of the interaction of reason and emotions is therefore not a disadvantage of the Humean-Darwinian picture. First, it has truth on its side. Second, the research consensus in contemporary psychology and neuroscience is that individuals – psychopaths and persons with Phineas Gage-like damage to medial cortical regions-- who lack emotions interacting with reason are deficient at moral feeling, thinking, and action (see A. & H. Damasio, A. Bechara, J. Blair, & Flanagan, Guzeldere and Tankersley).

So there is a compromise picture between the Thrasymachean-Hobbesian one and a Pollyannaish picture. The compromise picture is this: deep-down-inside-beneath-the-clothes-of-culture, as it were, our *cognitive-affective-conative constitution* is a mixed bag. We have egoistic traits and we have traits that subserve social virtues of sympathy, benevolence, compassion, and so on. One can imagine this objection: We have a choice between the not so attractive view of Thrasymachus et al. and the prettier one of Hume and Darwin. Those who favor the latter do so because it is more flattering. It is that. But that's not the reason to accept it. The reason to accept it is that the Humean-Darwinian picture has science on its side, namely, neo-Darwinian theory. The former lacks this support.

One might imagine a second objection: Ok, but thus far all explanations of social virtue since Darwin's hopeful opening gambit have been instrumental or prudential. Consider the hard problem of explaining altruism. One hundred years after Darwin, with the rejection of group selectionism, everyone realized that there appeared to be no good Darwinian reasons for incurring any real costs (to fitness) to benefit any other. But such actions *seem* to occur. Two explanations came forward and have the imprimatur of the neo-Darwinian synthesis. Altruism is either (1) person-based reciprocal altruism or (2) gene based kin altruism. The objection continues: Everyone agrees that these are the only two neo-Darwinian accounts of altruism available, and both imply *the non-existence of genuine psychological altruism*. Genuine psychological altruism, if there were such a thing (which there isn't), would involve incurring fitness costs for the good of the other for her own sake, without any possibility of later reciprocation or help for one's genes. Trivers (19xx) account of "you-scratch-my-back, I'll scratch yours" reciprocal altruism explains instrumental altruism, not any altruism genuinely motivated by the good of the other. Nor does gene-eyed altruism where I incur costs for kin

because doing so might favor our shared genes. Genuine psychological altruism might occur, the critic could concede. But such cases are simply mistakes, quirky over-extensions of the imperfectly designed mechanisms that subserve the two instrumental kinds of altruism.

This view is common. But it is false. Anyone paying attention knows that there are now credible accounts of how biological evolution could allow genuine psychological altruism. Sober and Wilson (200x) is the locus classicus. The fact is that even if there emerge weaknesses in group selectionism as a realistic account for genuine psychological altruism, there is no problem so long as the relevant dispositions can be acquired. The mind/brain is plastic. And there exist great ethical traditions that teach that flourishing proceeds from altruism of wide-scope. The Bodhisattva's vows in Buddhism assume that expansive true altruism is possible, indeed, that it is actualized by many enlightened being. And Jesus was not recommending anything he conceived as psychologically unrealistic when he recommended a Golden Rule of widest scope.⁶

The point is that there are those who seek explanations of the evolution of true psychological altruism in evolutionary biology. It may be that evolutionary biology will be best at explaining kin-altruism and reciprocal altruism, with plausibility proofs for how altruistic groups could also evolve such as proposed by Sober and Wilson offer. Suppose all, or most evolutionary accounts, explain why altruism stays in the neighborhood, is in-group, then they have explained why a familiar fact obtains (see Sherif 19xx; Powell 2005). But our explanatory resources do not end with evolutionary biology. Given mind/brain plasticity and the transformative work that culture

⁶ The Golden Rule, sometimes formulated as “the Silver Rule” Do not... “ is quite common across great world ethical traditions. See, J. Wattles (1996) a comprehensive guide to the history of the golden rule. Wattles is very careful on the meaning of the rule across different traditions. Of special importance is the question of *scope*, i.e., whether the rule apply to all persons or only to all persons one interacts with.

can do, we can explain that wide compassion, deep altruism sometimes occur, and furthermore why getting them up and running and keeping them actualized is not simple.

4. Psychological Wisdom, East and West

The core idea behind the “mixed bag” view is familiar not only in classic Western texts such as those of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and so on, but in other ancient wisdom traditions as well—in Chinese and Indian philosophy for example.

Mencius, the great Confucian, provides a philosophical psychology according to which humans contain four sprouts, which if properly cultivated, lead to flourishing. The sprouts of compassion, disdain and shame, deference, and approval and disapproval, if nurtured, bear the fruits of benevolence, right action, propriety, and wisdom. If these seeds are not nurtured, we humans can turn out to be selfish creeps who do not live well or meaningfully. Mencius likens this to suffocating the sprouts of goodness. Although Mencius doesn’t do so himself, one could paint a picture in which there are sprouts for *all* the traits that humans in fact reveal, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Nurturing the four good sprouts requires weeding out the sprouts that can bear the fruits of egoism and disregard for what is true.⁷

⁷ There are very interesting interpretive issues here about what across various traditions is considered ‘natural.’ Regarding classical Chinese philosophy: Mencius did in fact grant that human beings can follow the path of gratifying their senses, rather than their moral sprouts. But nowhere does he suggest that this involves nurturing a (not-so-good) sprout. Xunzi, a critic of Mencius, does not use the sprout metaphor but argues that desires for profit and gain, and envy and hate of others are natural. David Wong (personal communication) writes: “it is probably a distortion of his (Xunzi’s) view to call them sprouts, however, as he seems to have regarded only what is fully present and not latent tendencies or dispositions as part of our nature.” And Hagop Sarkissian (personal communication) writes: it is only Mencius who clearly employs the sprout analogy, but there is no salient notion of ‘weeding out’ in the Mencius text, only of growing / developing / nurturing the *good* sprouts. This is all very interesting and suggests two interpretive possibilities to me: Mencius thinks there are some not-so-good sprouts in our nature and just fails to make this clear. Or, he thinks, that bad seeds can blow in from the outside and take root in us. This would require an explanation for how, say, a corrupt culture could germinate seeds that are not in the natures of the individuals comprising it. In classical and contemporary Indic philosophy, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain, there is a visible strand of thinking that says that “humans are innately good.” I asked His Holiness, the Dalai Lama,

Similarly, classical Indian philosophy sets out the four aims of virtue, success, pleasure, and liberation from suffering as necessary conditions or constituents of the good life. These aims are clearly stated as such by contemporary Hindus. At the same time Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism all agree that our natures contain hindrances, weeds, or poisons that are natural and that threaten to undermine our quest to live well, such things, as egoism, greed, hatred, and delusion. Despite this all these traditions agree that true flourishing comes from abiding conventional morality, as contained, for example, in the norms embodied in the “noble eightfold path.” Maximal flourishing comes from embodying the virtues of the bodhisattva: compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The virtues of the Buddha and Ghandi, for example.

5. Positive Psychology and Well-Being

I have been doing work in comparative philosophy for some time now, specializing mostly in Chinese and Indian philosophy, and recently turning my eye to Islamic and African philosophy. My convictions about the importance of making empirical assessments about how various ways of living contribute (or not) to well-being and thus to normative ethics and social and political philosophy, has led me to be on the watch for what norms, if any, are universal. From the ecological perspective I endorse, if there are norms that (a) are universal as a matter of fact, and (b) these norms yield practices that are productive of human ‘good,’ then the best explanation (or at least a plausible hypothesis) is this: there are universal features of human nature as well as

about this since he says this sort of thing repeatedly in his writings. His reply was this: The claim that we *are* innately good (which we would think looks like a normative rather than a descriptive claim) is (from the point of view of a tradition that is less fussy about the distinction) a claim that describes the potential in us to achieve what is good, what is wholesome, worthy and productive of *eudaimonia*. Although we have seeds that support egoism (that, after all, is what the four noble truths are on about) we are not innately egotistical since that, according to the theory, would be tantamount to saying that by growing egoism we could attain what is good, wholesome, etc. And that would be false.

universal features of the natural and social environments in which we live that lead to the discovery and utilization of these norms.

There are research programs outside of comparative psychology that ask these sorts of questions. The new field of positive psychology is one such research area, and it pleases me that recent work in the field claims a comparative consensus on the virtues that are mandatory for *eudaimonia*. The methodology is as follows: review the wisdom literature across the world's most important wisdom traditions from, say, 1000 B.C.E and seek, what, if any, normative consensus emerges. Here is the list of what Peterson, Seligman, et al. (2004) call the "High Six." I list them in order of alleged ubiquity.

- Justice
- Humaneness
- Temperance
- Wisdom
- Transcendence
- Courage

I'll be talking about positive psychology and associated research programs in the next lecture. Here I simply make two comments. First, the list conforms pretty well to my own list of universal virtues. Second, there is one notable exception: "transcendence." Peterson et al. remark that "transcendence" is "the most 'implicit' of the core six; Transcendence is rarely nominated explicitly, but the notion that there is a higher meaning or purpose to life,

be it religiously underpinned or not, infuses each tradition.” (2004, p.50). And when ‘transcendence’ is first introduced, they write: The transcendent according to Kant is that which is beyond human knowledge. We define it here in the broad sense as the connection to something higher – the belief that there is meaning or purpose larger than ourselves.” (2004, p. 38).

Neither comment introducing the virtue of ‘transcendence,’ nor any of the evidence adduced give me the slightest confidence that ‘transcendence’ so understood is a virtue. Why not? The consensus is that a virtue is a disposition to perceive, feel, think, judge, and act in a characteristic way appropriate to the virtue, i.e., as called for by a situation that makes display of that virtue, $v_1, v_2 \dots v_n$, apt. The first five alleged virtues fit the definition, but ‘transcendence’ does not. The problem is that ‘transcendence,’ as described, is a general-*cognitive-affective-conative* orientation that may well be seen the world over and thus provide insight into a feature of human psychology. Furthermore, it may be normatively endorsed across cultures because being so oriented is productive of good. It is not a virtue, at least not clearly so, because it is not tied to particular types of situations that call upon particular virtues. Virtues such as justice, courage, and temperance are called upon by situations that require fairness, integrity, and self-control, respectively. And they are action-guiding. A courageous person stands up for what is hers (her convictions, her body, her country). ‘Transcendence’ describes a more global orientation to experience than virtues do. Furthermore, it is hard to see what, if any, type of action it calls forth. This point is important for several reasons. One is this: there are those who behave as if religious beliefs are immune from criticism because of its status as the primary mode of meaning-making the world over. ‘Transcendence’ (together with impulses to make sense of things causally) is

almost certainly at the root of the religious impulse to posit divine-being(s). But it is also at the root of certain expansive ways of feeling and thinking that deflate the self by inflating that with which the self partakes. Conceived this way it has no necessary link to positing supernatural beings. So I think the positive psychologists are onto something. But in this case, they are not onto a virtue that is judged as mandatory for *eudaimonia* across cultures. The transcendent impulse is, it seems to me, very, very common. Spiritual, but irreligious people, display the impulse. Is it good for you? I think so. But it is not, as described by the positive psychologists, a virtue.

6. The Upshot and Why It Matters

The general picture, what I think looks something like a comparative consensus, is this: We are thrust or oriented to achieve or maximize a set of needs, impulses, or instincts only some of which will in fact bring *eudaimonia*.⁸ The thirsts for things that won't, if consumed, bring *eudaimonia* don't necessarily require elimination or complete repression. Minimally, we need to work to moderate and modify aims that are unproductive or destructive to our goal of flourishing as social animals. The platonic picture that sees us as oriented to locate and embody what is good, true, and beautiful must now be read as normative, specifically as a hypothetical imperative: If you want, as is wise, to achieve *eudaimonia* then set your sights on what's good, what's true, and what's beautiful. Why is it wise to set our sights on these things? Aristotle's answer is this: everyone, including the hedonist, the egoist, will admit that at day's end they want nothing more than to find true happiness. It is possible that once the hedonist or egoist is convinced that hers is a legitimate way to live, such that she might at life's end express

⁸ FN: References from African philosophy, Islam, Jewish, and Christian texts.

satisfaction at the way she has lived. But if she has misgivings it will be because her platonic orientation still exerts a tug. The person who is *eudaimon* will not engage in second-guessing on her deathbed. If the egoist, hedonist, amoralist, or immoralist does second-guess herself, it scores points for the view I am advocating.

If this much is true, then psychology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive and affective neuroscience, and social neuroscience need to start by accepting that we are animals possessed of the relevant *cognitive-affective-conative* orientation, and then explain how and why we are constituted this way (this is not all that hard: clue, it involves the evolution of certain capacities that make us fit as social animals and that are also suited, but not designed, to satisfy urges for meaning that comes with the equipment). By starting with this view of human nature we are positioned to describe and explain how humans as meaning-makers with certain natural orientations (towards the good, the true, and the beautiful) will predictably find themselves, individually and collectively, in situations where smooth relations among our moral, spiritual, scientific, and aesthetic orientations seem difficult to reconcile.⁹ We live in such a time. But by situating the *eudaimonistic aim* as the fundamentally important one we can better see both reasons for and paths back towards harmonious reconciliation among the three broad Platonic ends that taken-together allow for the *eudaimonistic aim* to be realized. Although I haven't laid out the argument I assume that the reader can see how the extrapolation works for the three platonic ends to the *Goodman Set* with six members that I claim constitutes *the Space of Meaning*^{21st century}.

Taking the *eudaimonistic aim* as basic, as part of our *conative constitution* is perhaps something initially seen by the Greeks in the West. It is an underestimated strain in Plato. Many

⁹ Kierkegaard, Either/Or.

classicists falsely think that Plato doesn't have much to say about *eudaimonia* (contrary to popular belief among many experts the word appears numerous times), and that he all on about *Pure Rationality*. For reasons that are, in fact, available in his own and in Aristotle's corpus, the descriptive and normative picture of humans as potentially fully *rational animals* has been ascendant in the history of Western thought. But the richer more complex *eudaimonistic* strand in Platonic and Aristotelean thought has aged well even if it has not been held so well in view. Many neuroscientists and philosophers, Antonio Damasio and Martha Nussbaum most prominently, have argued forcefully that a proper picture of the nature of persons requires renewed emphasis on the emotional, affective, conative, *eudaimonistic* thrust of our kind of animal.

6. Fitness then Flourishing

I'd like to think I've given an argument that makes plausible two things (1) that our natures are a mixed bag from a normative point of view; (2) *eudaimonia* comes, if it does, only if we grow the better seeds in our nature, and weed out or moderate the growth of the 'not-so-hot' stuff. The number of people who have -- often by necessity or inattention -- cultivated the bad seeds, or been given no resources to care for their own garden, are many. The facts are that their way of living does not achieve what they want, although it can from the point of view of a sufficiently screwed up psycho-social-aesthetic seem pretty or good. The other way does. The generalization is based on experience. It is based on complex psycho-social-historical observation.

One way to explain how people so frequently go down a path that won't bring *eudaimonia*, indeed can't achieve *eudaimonia*, involves attending to "First Things First Imperative." Interestingly this imperative is categorical. *Fitness First!*

Following John McDowell, we might distinguish between first and second human nature.¹⁰ First nature is strictly Darwinian and is comprised of the *conative constitution* to be fit. First nature involves the powerful impulse to survive, and it engages the world with the cognitive and affective tools designed to do that job. On the cognitive side, there are pattern recognition capacities and inductive reasoning skills. On the affective side, there are the basic emotions. The two dimensions, cognitive and affective, are inextricably bound together from the start.

Second nature kicks in once we achieve fitness or better, as we are on our way to doing so. Second nature involves something in the vicinity of the aspiration to live meaningfully, to flourish, to achieve *eudaimonia*.

First nature, we might say, concerns itself with satisfaction. Once we have food, water, shelter, and sex, we are impelled to seek more. What more? Happiness. The ways of making meaning and sense contained in the *Goodman Set* that constitute the *Space of Meaning*^{21st century} have the resources to assist us in going down the right path. But we will need to wend our way through these spaces as individuals or collectively with our *eudaimonia* detection equipment on. The spaces of meaning are cultural ‘objects’ or sites that are there, are as they are, for all sorts of quirky reasons. They may have evolved so that we can find the good within the spaces provided, but they were not intelligently designed for that purpose. So be choosy.

One quick answer as to why so many people don’t achieve *eudaimonia* has to do with the fitness imperative and the requirement that it be met first. Scarcity of resources keep a full 20% of humans at present from achieving fitness. Flourishing can’t be achieved unless fitness is.

The linear order is perhaps overstated. All great wisdom traditions, Confucian, Indic, Greek, African agree that certain basic needs must be met before a person has credible chances to aim

¹⁰ John McDowell on Aristotle

for living well. Call the basic set of needs, *alpha*. Even if one has *alpha*, bad luck can thwart meaning-making. Furthermore, being fit involves staying fit. Fitness is not something one achieves on a certain day at a certain time and is then done with. This means that while working to be and stay biological fit, one can begin the project of aiming to flourish. Indeed, most people do it this way.

One additional related point: some critics think this view is elitist, only the 80% of current citizens of the earth who are not living in conditions of absolute poverty have prospects for *eudaimonia*. Two points: (1) it may be true if, for example, one lives very poorly as defined by the World Bank in a society that provides minimal social support of basic necessities, even below *alpha*, that one **might** have a shot to be *eudaimon*. It is worth noting, however, that all examples of hermit monks involve having lived lives before going off to the Himalayan cave that equipped the hermit, sage, or bodhisattva with a way of living and being that allows continuation of the quest to live well and meaningfully. It required something like education. (2) It is not the view that is elitist. If there is elitism, it is in social practices that support doing nothing, or not enough, for those who live below the eudaimonistic threshold.

The overall picture in summary is this: Our core *conative constitution* orients us categorically to seek fitness. This core *conative constitution* is not best described as comprised of a set of beliefs – it is not epistemically driven. Nor is it, as a given in the first instance, either rational or irrational. Like induction it is arational. We do not rationally adopt the aim to be fit or to use induction. But we know how to use the equipment we are endowed with to achieve fitness (using induction plays a big role). To use an existentialist turn of phrase, gaining fitness is the orientation we are *thrust* into the world to achieve. Next comes the magic trick, so watch me carefully, at every place across the earth once fitness is achieved, often as it is being achieved,

humans begin to strive for meaning and happiness. The quest to flourish invariably reveals that we are possessed of (in virtue of the kind of social animals we evolved to be) a platonic orientation for what is good, true, and beautiful. Because our natures are mixed bags, this part of our nature doesn't always win out. But the inference to the best explanation for how to flourish involves growing that side of ourselves. The only possibly controversial assumption I need is not really magical at all. I start with this perfectly fair and sensible question: what, if any, aspirations are quintessentially, possibly universally, human? I do so for this reason: I assume that all ways of making meaning and sense, especially if they are very old and, what is different, universal, reveal something about human nature. What's that? They reveal something about our basic *conative constitution*. If we have a basic *conative constitution*, and I think we do, it constitutes the core motivations for what we humans are inclined to do, to be, to make, and so on. We do things we are motivated to do before we have much sense of why we are doing them. But not much, I think, turns on this last point.

Plato described the relevant orientation, which I am aiming to tame and naturalize in an enchanting language where the definite article precedes three holy nouns, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Experience has revealed that he was half right. We do have a constitution that aims us towards platonic space. But we now understand, post-platonically, that the good, the true, and the beautiful are not timeless external Forms, but works-in-progress, things we seek to make determinate within the constraints of natural orientations to do so. Furthermore, and as a consequence, the words, 'the good', 'the true', and 'the beautiful' gesture at what we know to be partly indeterminate, culturally variable, and, most importantly, multiply realizable.

But the evidence from history and philosophical anthropology leads to this picture of human nature. We are not born either fit or flourishing, but with thirsts for both. We don't experience or

see the second thirst until the first is quenched. But it is there. Our conscious and unconscious minds, deploying both cognitive and affective equipment, provide the tools for achieving the twin ends of fitness and flourishing. The ends themselves are given by our natures, as part of our *conative constitution*.

7. Expanding the Ecological Horizon: From Ethics to Politics

My proposal is that we think of persons as embodied beings situated in multifarious social ecologies who are driven affectively (as well as instrumentally) to do as Plato claims. Being creatures who aim by our natures to flourish as well as to be fit is perfectly consistent with a Darwinian view. Living in a world in which many people are prevented from actualizing their potential places powerful moral demands on those who have the resources to do so.

Does the ecological approach I've recommended have anything to say about this, about how our flourishing might be fruitfully conceived as tied to the flourishing of others?

I think it does. John Rawls invokes what he calls "*The Aristotelian Principle*" in his discussion of life plans and human flourishing. *The Aristotelian Principle* says:

Other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate and trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.¹¹

¹¹ Assent to the Aristotelean principle will depend on how the clause emphasizing "complexity" is interpreted. Many traditions emphasize "simplicity" as a sensible way to lead a good life. There is no automatic conflict, so long as the Aristotelean principle is read as principled and restrained about the quest for complexity. One might think of the spirit of the bow to complexity as akin to Aristotle's view on true friendship. One can have only a few true friendships, otherwise one is spread too thin. Likewise, only a few of one's talents can be developed complexly. If one dedicates oneself wholeheartedly to developing one's musical, artistic, or philosophical talents, there will not be time or energy to develop all of one's other potential talents to a similar degree. What the claim then comes to is that once one starts to develop a talent, one will have urges to improve it, to take it as far as one can. Furthermore, all advocates of simplicity -- Puritans and Quakers and Zen Buddhists -- write (truly) as if living the simple life is a

Rawls calls this “a basic principle of motivation” that “accounts for many of our major desires, and explains why we prefer to do some things and not others by constantly exerting an influence over the flow of our activity.” Now Rawls thinks that the *Aristotelian principle* is constrained by two principles of justice: (1) equal liberty for all (constrained by non-interference rules governing basic rights); (2) “the difference principle”: advantages in social and economic status are allowed only if they are to the advantage of the worst-off.

Rawls claims that these two principles will be chosen by rational beings from behind a veil of ignorance, i.e., behind which no one knows where he or she will end up in the lottery of life.

Rawls attempts to speak as a careful philosophical psychologist when he writes that humans desire certain things for their own sake—“personal affection and friendship, meaningful work and social cooperation, the pursuit of knowledge, and the fashioning and contemplation of beautiful objects. The desire to engage in complex activities rather than only simple ones comes from the fact that humans relish ingenuity, invention, novelty, and the expression of individuality.”

It seems to me that the *Aristotelian principle* and the psychology associated with it does express a fundamental fact about human psychology. It tells us something deep about the conditions for human flourishing. Meaningful human lives, we can now say, involve being moral, having true friends, and having opportunities to express our talents, to find meaningful work, to create and live among beautiful things, and to live cooperatively in social environments where we trust each other. If we have all these things, then we live meaningfully by any

reasonable standard. If we have only some of them, we live less meaningfully, and if we lack all these things, especially the first two, then our life is meaningless.

This general framework allows that there are many, many different ways to live a good life. There are many different social habitats that can, in principle, allow for human flourishing. Furthermore, different people have different talents and interests. Which ones we seek to develop are a complex outcome of nature and nurture, as well as what our social environment favors. For many persons, realizing their complex talents and interests is not in the cards. Some are prevented by their environment from even discovering what talents and interests they have. Others know what they would do, how they would live, if they had the chance, but they don't. What Marx called "alienation" is the widespread condition of not being able to discover what one wants or not being remotely positioned to achieve it. Alienation is self-estrangement. An alienated individual feels the tug to uncover her potential, whatever it is, but her social environment prevents her from gaining the education or material support that might lead her discover who she is and what she might be. Alternatively, she may have discovered her talents and interests, but there may be no social institutions in place to realize her talents or interests. Other times, the opportunities exist, but not for her because she must devote all her energies to surviving or caring for others, possibly in squalor.

Some human lives thus lack meaning. If we think that each human life has intrinsic worth and that each person deserves equal chances to live a good life, then it follows that we should work to make the conditions of living meaningfully universally available.

Aristotle saw this, at which point he turned his attention from ethics to politics.¹² From the perspective of ethics as human ecology, certain socioeconomic conditions need to obtain for humans to flourish. These requirements simply are not in place for all people. Education and meaningful work are not universally available. Beauty is hard to find amidst squalor. The lack of basic political freedoms, massively unequal distributions of wealth, and ethnic hatred provide dramatically sub-optimal environments even for basic decency and true friendship. These conditions require worldwide political reform.

What I have just said reveals that some sort of ethical and/or political principles are required if the *Aristotelian Principle* is to carry ethical and political weight. *AP* is, after all, a psycho-social-historical generalization. Nothing normative follows from it. That is, without linkage to action by some sort of norms, *AP* can just be taken to reveal a psychological feature of persons that will be pursued by each individual or, perhaps, within a small circle of friends. For the psychological insight to do any work, it needs first, to be linked to something like the recognition that all persons are equally worthy of respect, dignity, and worth; and second, recognition that this recognition provides me with reason to act in such a way that I work to make the social conditions for achieving *AP* widespread.

The idea of ethics as human ecology without such a recognition is perfectly compatible with norms that advantage only me and my people. Assume therefore that a meta-ecological norm to the effect that we are to seek human good in a way that does not privilege any group of persons can be justified (Kant, Marx, Rawls, Nussbaum, Sen, and P. Singer all have ways of doing this).

¹² Once more I want to caution the reader not to read too much into the linear sequence of the narrative here. Aristotle does turn from ethics to politics, as does Plato before him in the later Books of the *Republic*. But both think that their own portrait of a virtuous agent can only be realized in a virtuous polity. So in reality politics come first and creates the possibility conditions for good persons to evolve.

The project of human ecology then becomes seeking the world most beneficial to all human beings, including future ones.

8. The Capabilities Approach

Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen have done important work of this meta-ecological sort. They call their approach the “*capabilities approach*,” and it is designed specifically to make judgments about how well different cultures are providing the conditions necessary for human flourishing. According to the capabilities approach, we ask what an average human is capable of achieving if she was given the chance to develop. The key question is not whether she accepts or approves of her way of being and living, but whether she has chances to develop her human capacities.

Nussbaum (2000, 78-79) offers this list of “Central Human Functional Capacities” This is my paraphrase:

- A life of normal length
- Ability to have good health, adequate, nourishment and shelter
- Being able to move about freely and securely
- Being able to use sense, imagination, and thought in a “truly human way,” cultivated by a good education.
- Being able to develop one’s emotions in a normal way, to be able to love.
- Being capable of forming a conception of the good, critically evaluate it, and live and plan in accordance with it.
- Affiliation. Being able to live with and toward others in a compassionate and just manner.
- Being able to live harmoniously with nature.
- Being able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities.

- Political and Material Control over one's environment: free participation in political life, ability to own property and possession of *habeus corpus* rights.

The reason Nussbaum and Sen emphasize opportunity over acceptance, approval, or even subjective contentment derives from two observations.¹³ The first is that the *Aristotelian principle* of flourishing captures the set of aims or capacities that, if satisfied, would produce a good life in an objective manner. Second, it is a well-confirmed social psychological observation that people do not always see things clearly or truthfully. Certain social systems inculcate beliefs about the station, duties and worth of particular persons that lead them to accept that they are not due full access to the sort of development that the *Aristotelian principle* envisions. Such systems produce malformed persons, who, among other things, may fail to see what they legitimately want or need. It is worth emphasizing that everything said so far, is, I claim, based on empirical observation. The truths cited are truths of philosophical anthropology and psychology. They are truths of human ecology.

I want to call attention to the fact that across the traditions I have mentioned *eudaimonia* depends on ethical, aesthetic and epistemic goods. Living in the vicinity of the good and the beautiful either won't work to achieve *eudaimonia* if we believe what is false, or it will work, but deficiently so if it is supported by beliefs that can be known at the time (and are widely known by others with whom one is in relation) to be false, wishful, delusional. Similarly, for only living truthfully. This is so for a variety of reasons one of which has to do with the fact that on one conception of the true it pertains only to facts and says nothing about what is of value, norms, etc. If this is all we mean by the true, it will help not one iota in answering questions about how

¹³ Capacities are emphasized over "functioning" because an individual might legitimately opt out of a capacity, e.g., a religious person might wish to fast at some detriment to her health. Nussbaum thinks that the language of capacities has an advantage over the language of rights insofar as it is not contentiously 'Western.'

one ought to be or to live. I don't in fact think this is a good description of how the domain of the true was or is conceived by any great wisdom tradition, but by depicting it initially in this way, it can help move us a step closer to understanding our contemporary situation or predicament as regards conflict among the disciplines, what Aristotle called *scientia*, organized ways of trying to see things truthfully.

10. Conclusion

Tonight I've attempted to deploy an empirical ecological approach to provide an answer to the question I posed at the start: Is there anything substantive that can be said about how best to find meaning and to live purposefully, given that we are fully natural beings, members of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*?¹⁴ I have sketched an affirmative answer in the form of a philosophical psychology that has both descriptive and normative credibility. Everything I've said is compatible with the picture of persons that emerges from neo-Darwinian theory and our best contemporary mind science. According to that picture we are fully embodied thinking-feeling animals who live and achieve meaning -- if we do -- in a world that is fully natural. We are agents and we act freely. But we do not possess any faculty of free will that permits circumvention of natural law. When we die, our career as a conscious being is over. But we leave effects. Our karma good or bad carries on. This matters. So it is wise to live well, in a way that makes meaning and sense in a manner that alleviates suffering and equips others to pursue what our common humanity makes us seek. If you live with your eye on the prize, then when you die, although you won't go to heaven, you'll have lived in a worthy way and have something to be proud of.

¹⁴ Strict biological classification a la Linneus admit of a maximum of two Latin words. So we were dubbed *Homo sapiens*. Biological anthropologists and archeologists, not bound by Linneus's rules made discoveries which revealed for certain the temporal overlap of various *Homo*'s several of which were very smart, e.g., *Cro Magnum*. This resulted into several kinds being absorbed under the rubric *Homo sapiens* – *Homo sapiens sapiens* being one.