# William James on the Meaningful Life

IDDO LANDAU

Web: http://philo.haifa.ac.il/index.php/en/departmentoffice-2/faculty-staff-reception-hours/senior-academic-staff/70-il

Following Susan Haack's philosophical work through the years has taught me much about feminist theory, epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, and pragmatism. Haack's pragmatism seems to be mostly influenced by that of Charles Sanders Peirce. In this article I focus on another pragmatist, William James, and his views on meaning in life as they appear in his short paper "What Makes a Life Significant" (1983 [1899]).[1] My discussion touches on points discussed by Haack in "Worthwhile Lives" (2008) and "The Differences that Make a Difference: William James on the Importance of Individuals" (2010).

## 1.

In his discussion of William James's "What Makes a Life Significant," Todd Lekan (2016) argues that James holds in this essay that meaningful lives must combine, on the one hand, ideals that are sensed as novel with, on the other hand, strenuous activity. I should like to add to Lekan's account that James also seems to relate meaningfulness to non-alienation.

James approvingly cites Phillips Brooks, who claims that "No life like poverty could so get one to the heart of things and make men know their meaning, could so let us feel life and the world with all the soft cushions stripped off and thrown away" (WML 162). According to this claim, one of the advantages of poverty is that it forces people to experience reality directly, without the "soft cushions" that, in more affluent and convenient lifestyles, separate people from the world. Anticipating Camus (1991 [1942]: 12–13, 14–15, 17–21) many years later, James takes alienation to militate against meaningfulness.[2] The notion "alienation" is not easy to explain. It is not loneliness, since one can be alienated even in the close company of friends or family, and one can be alienated from oneself and from objects in the world although one is of course not lonely for oneself nor for objects in the world. One way of describing the feeling metaphorically talks about experiencing the world, other people, or even ourselves as through a transparent film that partly separates us from what we want to "touch." When alienated, we are not quite connecting with or "getting" what is around us and we are not completely present. James also seems to be alluding to this feeling when he says, again citing Brooks, that for the poor, "poverty is a *true* region" (WML 162; emphasis added). Likewise, towards the end of his essay, James approvingly quotes the jurist Fitzjames Stephen, who compares modern life to the huge modern ships that allow passengers to cross the sea so safely and conveniently that they

do not even feel "that they have left the firm land" (WML 166). This is a metaphor for the voyage of life from cradle to grave, in which "progress and science may, perhaps, enable untold millions to live and die without a care, without a pang, without an anxiety. They will have a pleasant passage, and plenty of brilliant conversation" (WML 166–167). However, passengers traveling so safely and comfortably may thereby lose something very important:

> It seems unlikely that they will have such a *knowledge* of the great ocean on which they sail, with its storms and wrecks, its currents and icebergs, its huge waves and mighty winds, as those who battled with it for years together in the little craft, which, if they had few other merits, brought those who navigated them *full into the presence* of time and eternity, their Maker and themselves, and forced them to have some definite views of their relations to them and to each other. (WML 167; emphasis added)

Although James's discussion of alienation is condensed and lacks the detailed elaborations of some later discussions of the meaning (or meaninglessness) of life, he can be seen as an important anticipator of these discussions.

Another interesting feature of James's account is that he seems to believe that meaningfulness must have to do with endurance, coping with difficulties, or effort. He writes, for example, that "the solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing, the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains" (WML 166).[3] This is in keeping with Stephen's sea-voyage metaphor cited above, in which he explains how progress and science may enable millions "to live and die without a care, without a pang, without an anxiety. They will have a pleasant passage…" (WML 166–167). The mention of pangs and anxiety, which are presented as opposed to pleasantness, also suggests that a meaningful life, for James, must involve effort and coping with difficulties.[4] In his discussion of the stale life in the Chautauqua community, James also emphasizes the pleasantness of the place and describes it as one in which there is "no suffering and no dark corners" (WML 152), stating his preference, instead, for "wilderness with all its sins and sufferings" (WML 153). Thus, for James, effort or coping with difficulties are necessary ingredients of the meaningful life.[5]

James also holds that there is some kind of eternal meaning of life that is then manifested or expressed to some degree in various people's finite lives, perhaps somewhat similarly to the way Spinoza's modes are specific modifications of God or Nature (Spinoza 1985 [1677]: 424-425; 430-431; 450-453). He writes:

> *there are compensations*; and no outward changes of condition in life can keep the nightingale of its eternal meaning from singing in all sorts of different men's hearts. . . . If the poor and the rich could look at each other in this way, *sub specie æternitatis*, how gentle would grow their disputes! (WML 167)

Unfortunately, James mentions eternal meaning rather cursorily, and does not elaborate his view on it.

The citation above suggests also that, like Viktor Frankl (1985: 86, 154; 1988: 16) many years later, James holds that all people's lives are in fact meaningful. James seems to be saying that if certain factors detract meaningfulness from some people's lives, other factors compensate for these detractions, so that the metaphorical "nightingale" of eternal meaning cannot be kept from singing in the hearts of "all sorts." But since earlier in the essay James does explicitly suggest that the people in the Chautauqua community, and some poor people he observed, did not have meaningful lives, it is probably correct to read him here as saying not that all people have meaningful lives, but only that the option of having a meaningful life is never closed, so that there is always a chance to make life meaningful. This reading of James is corroborated by his claim, after discussing the "marriage" of the factors that make life meaningful (namely, having an ideal and trying to realize it with effort and pain) that "whatever or wherever life may be, there will *always* be the chance for that marriage to take place" (WML 166; emphasis added). James is suggesting here, then, that

there are no circumstances in which the option of having a meaningful life is closed. This, of course, is a very radical and optimistic claim.

James claims that the "comparatively deepest significance in life does seem to be its character of progress" (WML 164). But it is not completely clear what he means by the term. "Progress" is often understood as a process of change towards a positive goal. But James does not specify whether he is using the term in this regular sense. He explains progress as "that strange union of reality with ideal novelty which it continues from one moment to another to present" (WML 164). This is consistent with the common understanding of "progress": in progress we have, thanks to the constant change towards a positive goal, something new and dissimilar to what we had earlier (since if we had no novelty, and the situation were similar to what we had earlier, there would be no progress). Thus, we have here continuous novelty. However, as Lekan (2016: 582) helpfully explains, "novelty" in this essay need not be understood as change, but rather as the opposite of "sodden routine" (WML 163), that is, freshness in attitude, which could be maintained even if one did not present new content. I think that we have to accept that James is not sufficiently clear on this point, and that he may or may not be claiming that meaningfulness is deepest when there is progress (in the regular sense of the term). It is probable, however, that he meant by this term what we usually mean by it. Otherwise, it is unclear why he would present the term at all and what function it would fulfill; he could simply have employed "novelty," "continuous novelty," "newness," "freshness," or the like, instead.

James may appear at first to hold that modernity decreases meaning. His description of the life in the Chautauqua community, typified by technological comfort and safety, as stale and meaningless seems to suggest that he takes modernized technology to diminish meaningfulness (WML 152). This is also suggested by his approval of Stephen's sea-voyage metaphor: as cited above, the metaphor criticizes the modern, technological, and convenient way to sail (WML 166–167). In another place in the essay, on the other hand, he suggests that, at least as far as the *number* of ideals is concerned, all eras are similar:

> The changing conditions of history touch only the surface of the show. The altered equilibriums and redistributions only diversify our opportunities and open chances to us for new ideals. But with each new ideal that comes into life, the chance for a life based on some old ideal will vanish. (WML 167)

According to this claim, although historical changes open opportunities for new ideals, these new ideals come at the expense of old ideals. Hence, the modern age is not typified by more ideals than earlier ages, and in this respect, modern life does not increase meaningfulness. The argument seems problematic, since new ideals may be added to old ideals rather than replace them; the number of ideals may change from era to era.

But James's expressed view on the topic is not that life is less meaningful in the modern era, nor that all eras are alike; it is, rather, that we should adopt an agnostic stance on this issue: "he would needs be a presumptuous calculator who should with confidence say that the total sum of significances is positively and absolutely greater at any one epoch than at any other of the world" (WML 167).

## 2.

Lekan (2016: 589; 592n.5) claims that James's view of meaningfulness in "What Makes a Life Significant" is best understood as contextualist rather than as subjectivist relativist. I suggest that what James says in this essay is consistent with seeing him both as a contextualist relativist and as a subjectivist relativist as regards the meaning of life. James writes, for example, that "there is nothing absolutely ideal: ideals are relative to the lives that entertain them" (WML 163). Likewise, he talks approvingly about the "simple faithfulness to *his* light or darkness which any common unintellectual man can show" (WML 164; emphasis added). But this suggests that individual unintellectual people, who may be more or less in the same circumstances and contexts, can have different types of light and of darkness. Further, when discussing ideals, James does

not at all allude to any contexts. The ideals necessary for a meaningful life should fulfill only the following three conditions: (a) they should be conscious, that is, should not be followed unawares; (b) they should be carried out with "uplift" or "brightness," that is, should be understood positively by their bearers; (c) they should not be carried out as a habitual "sodden routine" but be experienced as a novelty or in their "freshness" (WML 163). None of these three conditions refers to context; it seems that ideals, for James, can be contextual (e.g., related to social, economic, religious, etc. conditions or groups) but can also be subjective (e.g., related to specific individual emotional makeup).

James's contextualist and subjectivist relativism may seem to be in tension with his view, mentioned above, that there is also an eternal, and probably objective, general meaningfulness that can be manifested differently in different people's lives. Perhaps, then, it would be more correct to typify him as an objectivist about the general, eternal meaning, and a relativist as regards its many possible manifestations.

## 3.

I have so far described some features of James's view of the meaning of life in his essay "What Makes a Life Significant." In the way of evaluation, I should also note some difficulties I find in his views.

I doubt that effort or coping with difficulties are indeed necessary conditions for meaningfulness. Suppose we were to find out that Shakespeare and Mozart did not, as a matter of fact, invest efforts or cope with difficulties when writing and composing. Their work was not at all demanding for them. It required no endurance, and did not involve coping with any difficulties. It was effortless, intuitive and fun for them to just let the plays and symphonies "flow" from their minds to the paper. Perhaps the true effort, for them, would have been in trying *not* to create, since their creativity just wanted to burst out of them. (Such people are sometimes referred to as "naturals" in their field.) Even if all this turned out to be the case, I suggest, we would (and should) still take Mozart, Shakespeare and Picasso to have had meaningful lives thanks to their valuable creations. Perhaps such "naturals" could even be taken to have lives that are more meaningful than the lives of those who have to make an effort and cope with difficulties in order to produce what they do.[6]

What has been said here about effort seems true also of courage and endurance that James mentions (WML 166). The examples above suggest that courage and endurance, too, may be helpful in some circumstances, but unnecessary in others (and perhaps even in some cases distract from or otherwise impede the creative process). I am not certain what precisely James meant by "fidelity," but if it refers to something close to endurance or effort, then again I do not think that it is a necessary condition for meaningfulness.

James, as already noted, has some very negative things to say about the safe, convenient life in the Chautauqua community, taking it to represent safe, convenient ways of life in general. He may or may not be correctly describing the degree of meaningfulness in that community; I have no basis for an opinion about that. However, because of the difficulties I have with James's views on the necessity of effort, endurance, etc. for meaningfulness, I also disagree that, in principle, inhabitants of communities in which life is safe and convenient need have nonmeaningful lives. Experience seems to show that one can lead a meaningless life in a comfortable community, but one can also lead a meaningful life in such a place.

I will not argue here against James's Spinozistic notion of an eternal meaning that seems to be at least partly independent of the meaningfulness in specific lives. I am a nominalist about meaningfulness: I see it as always being a quality of lives, deeds, events, artworks, etc., and never existing independently of them. I am also uncertain that there is anything that is eternal. But James does not argue for his claim, and entering into the metaphysical pros and cons of his view is beyond the scope of this paper. I will only point out that I do not think that the pragmatist considerations for believing in God, which James presents in *The Will to Believe* (1979), also apply to believing in an independent, eternal meaning.

I also doubt the claim that the option of having a meaningful life is never closed, so that there is always a chance to make life meaningful. Those who have cared for severely depressed people know that, unfortunately, they often simply *cannot* form ideals such as those James talks about, much less strive and suffer for them. Severely depressed people frequently do not have the mental or emotional power needed for what

James envisages. They often find it hard or even impossible just to gather the strength needed to get out of bed. Many others who are not severely depressed are still so emotionally broken, despairing, or disappointed by various events in life that they cannot form or hold to ideals or, at least, cannot do so without professional help, which unfortunately is unavailable for many. There are also many people who, in some or many circumstances in life, cannot fight, focus, or suffer—James's other conditions for meaningfulness—because they lack the determination or emotional, mental, and sometimes the intellectual powers necessary for that. James's trusting view about the ability of all people to make their lives meaningful is heartwarming, and we would of course very much like it to be the case. But it seems overly optimistic.[7]

As pointed out above, James connects meaning to progress. I have to differ here too. I suggest that the intensity of the feeling of meaningfulness, and the objective value of what one relates to, each affects the depth or degree of meaningfulness no less than progress does. Meaningfulness can be very high, or deep, when these two other factors are present even if there is no progress; that is, even if one is stable in one's meaningful activity or in one's relation to what is meaningful. Even a state of affairs in which, notwithstanding work or effort, one slowly, and perhaps heroically, regresses may well be highly or deeply meaningful. On the other hand, progress without one or both of the two other factors (intensity and objective value) seems empty. Progress, then, may well be one of the factors of the depth of meaningfulness, but it is probably not the most important or main factor.

I suggested above that James is not completely clear on what he means by "progress": he may be referring not to a development towards a positive end but to a state in which one continues to relate to one's ideals in a fresh, non-habituated way rather than mechanically and routinely. But in this second sense of the term, too, progress does not seem to be more critical to the depth or degree of meaningfulness than are the intensity of the feeling or the objective value of what one relates to. Intensity is distinct from "freshness": a feeling of meaningfulness that is "fresh" but weak or non-intense, does not seem very deep or of very high quality. Likewise, a "fresh" feeling of meaningfulness that relates to an objectively unimportant or worthless issue seems empty and shallow, while a non-fresh, routine commitment to a valuable issue (e.g., continuing one's volunteer work as a medical assistant among the poor in a third world country) seems to be deeper and of a higher quality. Thus, when progress is taken to mean "freshness," again, progress does not seem to be the factor that most importantly affects the depth or degree of meaningfulness.

I have suggested above that James is not only a contextualist but also a subjectivist relativist as regards the meaning of life. If that is indeed the case, then, following many others who have written on the topic, I too find this position difficult to uphold. Various writers on the meaning of life have argued that subjectivism regarding the meaning of life leads to conclusions that are too implausible to accept. Irving Singer (1996, 113), for example, points out that if this subjectivism is upheld, we have to accept that collecting bottle caps can make life meaningful. Susan Wolf (1997, 218) presents the example of counting tiles on a bathroom floor, Charles Taylor (1992, 36) the example of maintaining precisely 3,732 hairs on one's head, and Eric Wielenberg (2005, 18–23) that of eating one's own excrement. These authors present such cases as counterexamples to the view that relativist or subjectivist conditions are sufficient for taking someone to have a meaningful life. But according to James's criteria for ideals, if Singer's eccentric bottle cap collector does hold that collecting many, many bottle caps is very important and treats it as an ideal, it can make his life meaningful. Of course, following James's criteria, the bottle cap collector would also have to be conscious of his or her ideal, to carry out this ideal with "uplift" and "brightness," and to experience the ideal in its novelty rather than as a "sodden routine." But if all these formal criteria are fulfilled, the bottle cap collector's life would be meaningful. James also holds that the ideals should be followed with determination, courage, etc. But this condition, too, does not exclude the examples above. The bottle cap collector may follow that ideal through great discomfort and suffering, be quite determined, and add more bottle caps to the collection under dangerous conditions, thus also showing courage.

James's account is also problematic if he is understood not as a subjectivist relativist but only as a contextualist relativist. In some economic, social, religious, and cultural contexts, people adopt and try to realize ideals that are very implausible to most of the rest of us, and accepting that their lives are meaningful

thanks to their investment in these ideals would be very counterintuitive. As Lekan points out (2016, 578, 581–82), the ideals people adopt can even be highly immoral. Some people embrace racist ideals. In some religious groups, persecuting, subjugating, or killing people of other faiths has been considered an ideal. Even if James's account of meaningfulness were only a contextualist relativist account, it would be problematic.

It might be objected at this point that this criticism is unfair, since James is discussing in this essay not the meaning of life itself, but only the *sensation* of the meaning of life. According to this objection, James is focusing in this essay only on the psychological phenomenon of sensing life as meaningful, not on meaningfulness itself. And insofar as James presents merely psychological claims, it might be argued, he is right: the bottle cap collector, the devout Nazi, etc. do, as a matter of fact, have the sensation that their lives are meaningful, even if their lives are not objectively meaningful.

But James seems to be discussing in this essay meaningfulness as well, not only the sensation of meaningfulness. We can see this when James points out that he is also dealing with "a life objectively and thoroughly significant" (WML 165). Likewise, following and quoting Fitzjames Stephen, he recommends not just the feeling of meaningfulness but, rather, that which would bring people "full into the presence of time and eternity, their Maker and themselves, and [force] them to have some definite views of their relations to them and to each other" (WML 167). Since James is not presenting a merely psychological discussion, then, the relativist aspects in his account remain problematic.

I have focused in this last section on what I take to be some weaknesses in James's account of meaningfulness in his "What Makes a Life Significant." But these critical remarks should not overshadow the importance and the many interesting aspects of this essay. We have here, sometimes in embryonic form (which also has to do with the essay's intended audience, namely, students), an example of an early nonreligious discussion of some of the main issues that were to come up later, in more modern research on the meaning of life. Like many of the philosophical discussions of the meaning of life that have developed only decades later, including the two pieces by Haack cited above, James's discussion notes examples in the real world, relies on common intuitions, presents the pros and cons of various positions, and—notwithstanding his vagueness on some issues—aims at clarity. His discussion anticipates work on topics that have been treated in more detail and precision in recent and contemporary analytic research on the meaning of life.[8]

## NOTES

1. From now on this text will be cited as WML followed by page numbers in the Burkhardt and Skrupskelis edition.
2. For a sharp literary portrayal of the experience see also Camus (1988 [1942]).
3. By "pains" James probably does not mean "suffering" but, rather the effort needed to cope with a difficulty.
4. James also mentions *care* here, but the term as he uses it here likely means *worry* rather than *good-willed attention*.
5. Interestingly, a central theme in Jack London's highly successful *The Call of the Wild* (1990 [1903]) and *The Sea-Wolf* (2011 [1904]), which were originally published 4 and 5 years, respectively, after this essay of James's, is the one discussed here. In *The Call of the Wild*, Buck, a dog who lives comfortably as the pet of a middle-class judge in Santa Clara Valley, is stolen and eventually finds himself as a sled dog, suffering many hardships in the process, learning the "law of the club," and having to fight the lead dog to death. Eventually he escapes to the wilderness, joins a pack of wolves, and thus answers "the call of the wild." But his new life of hardship, pain, and danger is represented as better for Buck than his previous comfortable life. The same theme is central to *The Sea-Wolf*, in which the domesticated intellectual Humphrey van Weyden, whose ferry has sunk, is rescued by a seal-hunting schooner where he is forced to work hard, cope with pain and brutality, toughen up, and become self-reliant. But that, too, in the end, is described as all the better for van Weyden. His life, like Buck's, is represented as having become more significant and authentic.
6. For a similar claim from another angle see Landau (2017, 43–48).
7. For a similar criticism of Viktor Frankl's view on this issue see Landau (2019).
8. I am grateful to Mark Migotti and Saul Smilansky for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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