Philosophical Profiles

Susan Wolf

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IN BRIEF

Susan Wolf is Edna J. Koury Distinguished Professor of Philosophy of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She first burst on the scene in the early eighties with a trio of truly seminal papers: "Asymmetrical Freedom," "The Importance of Free Will" and "Moral Saints." Since then she has published prolifically primarily in two areas: free will and responsibility, and moral and non-moral values, her papers on the latter of which have just been collected in The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning & Love (Oxford, 2015). A second volume of her papers on responsibility will follow soon, or her long-suffering editor will want to know why not. Professor Wolf is a big fan of crusty British Philosophers Peter Strawson and Bernard Williams and, what's worse, actually reads Henry James novels for pleasure. But she will allow that it may be possible to have a meaningful life even if you don't.

DETAILS

Simon Cushing conducted the following interview with Susan Wolf on 29 July 2016.

Susan Wolf

a philosophical profile

SC: My first question: I see that you've got you're BA in math and philosophy. How did you end up with that as your dual focus, and what happened to math?

SW: Well, I actually started out just in math, and that came from a summer-school course I took in high school. I was kind of a nerdy kid and liked academic stuff, so I took—there was a summer program at a boarding school, where I took a course in a mathematical logic, and it was extremely intense, and very challenging, and I just loved it. It was the best, and—so, I went to college as a math major with a special interest in logic. And then the other set of courses that I loved were English courses, literature, basically. And I had what turned out to be the good fortune of an advisor who was the logician at Yale, a very distinguished man, named Abraham Robinson, who was a philosophical logician. He was a student of Hilbert, who was also a major philosopher of mathematics and logic, and he had created this combined major of math and philosophy. And, I think, knowing my other interests, and that logic was really where I wanted to concentrate in math, he urged me to go into that major. And, it was perfect, because, on the one hand, I could both do math, and do literature under a kind of aegis of it being philosophy, and on the other, I could take what I really loved about logic and math, which was the kind of purity and ambition and clarity of big structures and use that to talk about the human condition, which is what philosophy—or the kind of philosophy I've been drawn to, lets me do.

I think it's really unfortunate that there's this myth that you can't be interested in English and math at the same time. I remember encountering that at an early age, and I loved them both. I think it's terrible that these things get quarantined from each other, when, clearly, there's so much that each can give to the other.

Absolutely. And, even though there's this huge movement towards interdisciplinary work that's been going on for decades, 'interdisciplinary' rarely means the humanities and the maths and sciences. It means, 'within the humanities,' or, 'within the sciences,' and the idea of being a literary scientist, or a philosophical mathematician is still very unpopular, or unknown.

So, when you took philosophy classes, what was it that grabbed you? What was the moment when you thought, "This is it, this is what I want"? Can you remember?

There were probably several moments along the way. I loved logic, and then, you know, you could do these other kinds of logic, modal logic, tense logic—it was all just fun. My first, regular, non-logic, kind of philosophy course, was a huge lecture course—it was a great books course— by a brilliant philosopher and lecturer, Robert Fogelin, and the first—maybe the second—book we read was Spinoza's Ethics.

I can see why that would appeal because it's so beautifully structured, and it starts from first principles and derives all of these amazing conclusions about everything.

Right, so it was this grand ambition—just, amazingly, mind-blowing ideas. So, that was probably the second notch in the "Philosophy's the way to go." Then later, I had a lot of amazing attention from my professors, and Wittgenstein was very beloved at that time by, at least, my professors, and I thought Wittgenstein was great. And then I had a tutorial—kind of English-style tutorial—one-on-one, weekly meetings with professor Fogelin, when we read Strawson's *Individuals*. Strawson is a beautiful writer, who also thinks very big, and yet very carefully. And I just thought, "Oh, if I could ever do anything like that, you know—it's worth a try."

Well, you're anthologized a lot with "Freedom and Resentment," that's for sure.

Yes, well, that later became probably one of the main guiding lights of my work, and I still return to that essay more than any other single essay. But, at the time, I didn't know anything about ethics, or that part of Strawson. It was much more coming from math into philosophical logic, and stuff like that.

One of your earliest papers was "Asymmetrical Freedom." Could you elaborate a bit on what you argued in there, and perhaps put it in the context of what debates were raging at the time, because that was a fecund time for that debate.

Okay, let's see if I can remember. Well, there was the free-will debate that's been going on for hundreds of years, the question being how can we be morally responsible, how can we have whatever kind of freedom that is necessary for moral responsibility, given that our acts are a function of our character and the environment, which are in turn a function of something beyond our control. So, the suggestion is if our acts are determined so that it was inevitable that we would make the choices we do then it would seem we can't be praised or blamed for them because it wasn't up to us to do what we do, because we didn't have the ability to do otherwise. On the other hand, what I pointed out is that if are acts are totally free, so free as to not be determined by anything, even the good reasons we have to do the right thing rather than wrong thing, then it would seem that the kind of freedom we have isn't a freedom that would give us responsibility but a freedom that would be the equivalent of insanity, really. You know, being not responsive to the reasons that are out there. So the suggestion was that there's a kind of puzzle about what freedom could be, such that we're free enough to bear the brunt of responsibility but also capable of being moved by external things that give us reasons to go one way rather than another. That's the basic idea. Then I appeal to intuitions in the philosophical literature: one tends to think, well if you don't have the ability to do otherwise, you're not responsible. You don't deserve blame if it's a bad thing, and you don't deserve credit if it's a good thing. But, I pointed out that though that sounds like an accurate report of our first-order judgments on these things, when it comes to a negative, when a person does something bad, and then it turns out he couldn't help it, he was hypnotized or he was coerced or he was, you know, under some kind of influence, then, we don't hold him responsible for the bad things. But when we look at good things people do, the pressure to say "Well, they could have done otherwise" seems to disappear, and in fact we use such expressions as, "He couldn't hurt a fly," or, "I couldn't resist when I saw this gift to give you." We don't take that as a sign that, you know, "Don't give me any credit." It's rather an expression of how good the person is and how much credit they deserve.

I don't know if it's thanks to Daniel Dennett, or if he was just one in a line of people, but he cited Martin Luther saying "Here I stand; I can do no other." Nobody says, "Well, in that case, why are we talking so much about Luther?"

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Right.

This was a time when the debate about metaphysical freedom had sort of reached a stalemate and then along came people like Strawson in "Freedom and Resentment," and Harry Frankfurt, and then your view. How would you differentiate yourself, say, from Frankfurt and Strawson?

Well, let me differentiate myself from Frankfurt, because I'm not actually sure in the end Strawson and I disagree, we're just emphasizing different things. There are two aspects to Frankfurt's philosophy that affect different parts of the free-will debate—

The alternative possibilities ["Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"] and the second-order desires ["Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person"].

Right, now in fact, though what I have to say may have something to do with the alternative possibilities, that's actually not something that influenced me or that I was directed by at all. So—but then there's the other side of Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," being the seminal article, in which he suggests that the way to understand freedom of the will is in terms of a person not only being able to do what he wills to do, but his being able to have the will he wants to have. He has this concept of first-order and second-order desires: a first-order desire is a desire usually to do something; a second-order desire is a desire either to have a first-order desire or, more importantly—the notion is literally second-order volition—a desire that one desire rather than another move one to action. So the best example to illustrate that is the example of an addict, someone who's addicted to a drug. And let's take the case of the unwilling addict, someone who's addicted to the drug, doesn't want to be addicted to the drug, doesn't want to take the drug, but being an addict, of course, he also does want to take the drug. That is, he's got a desire, an appetite, a drive to take the drug, but he also has a desire not to take the drug. He can supply pretty obvious reasons for why he might have that. So there's a conflict of first-order desires: a desire to take the drug; a desire not to take the drug. So now we move to the second level: Which does he want to be the one that's effected? Which does he want to win out? Which is the one that he identifies with, that he values, that he cares about? If he's an unwilling addict, then what he wants more, and, if you like, what he really wants, is to not take the drug. So according to Frankfurt, insofar as he is able to govern his actions by his second-order volitions, he's acting freely and is responsible for the action. If, nonetheless, the desire for the drug overtakes him, or overpowers him, then he doesn't have the will he wants, he's not acting freely, perhaps he's not responsible for taking the drug. That's his idea. A way to think about that that moves away from his vocabulary is to suggest that we can talk about all the desires a person has as being his desires in some obvious, literal sense, but then we can say the desires that he wants to have, the desires he identifies with, the desire that he has higher-order volitions about, constitute his real self, or are part of his real self. So Frankfurt's conception of freedom and responsibility is: you are free and responsible for those actions that are not only governed by your first-order desires, but by the desires you want to have effected in action. You're responsible therefore not necessarily for all the actions committed by your whole self, but by the actions committed by your real self. So that's Frankfurt's view. Now, my own view—I'm not sure if I'm getting this, actually, in a way that will make it obvious how this connects to what I've described as the point of Asymmetrical Freedom. My own view is that that

is unsatisfactory, because what values you want to have or what values count as your real self could, for all that Frankfurt has said or for all that the view includes, itself be things that you've been hypnotized to have, brainwashed to have or that are a helpless product of your heredity and environment. Take the example of someone who grows up in a racist society, so, given that all they've ever heard, all they've ever learned, all their role models have been racists, they become racists. And they're happy being racists because, I mean, why not? That's all that they've been encouraged to be. Being a racist they discriminate in making decisions about who to hire, or who to rent one's apartment to, or whatever. So, they're performing acts that are based on their first-order desires, and those are desires that they have second-order desires about; they have no problems being a racist. It seems to me that when you think about the background and really take seriously the possibility that, given the community that they've been exposed to, given their background they couldn't help but be racist, then there is a puzzle as to why the person would be responsible and presumably blameworthy for their racist activities, given that they're acting in ways that they couldn't help but act. What's the answer to that puzzle? I think the answer to that puzzle is that they're blameworthy if and only if it's reasonable to think that they could have seen why they shouldn't be racist. If, in other words, both their internal faculties—faculties of intelligence, perception, reason, generally, properly construed—and their environment, that is, the kinds of things they were exposed to, thoughts, arguments, people, were sufficient to allow them to kind of break through the pattern that maybe their community was encouraging them to have, to be able to step back and say, "Wait a second, this is wrong! It's not true what everybody's been saying about black people. It's not true that some people are better than others." It's not really about whether they have second-order desires, it's not so much about their own attitudes towards their values, "do they like them": it's about their ability to recognize whether those values are good values or not. It's about, in other words, their ability to reason, and through reasoning, get to the true and the good, as I put it in those early days. What we're really looking for is the ability to access the true and the good, through reason, perception, you know, all of the faculties we use in order to recognize the difference between true beliefs and false ones, good values and bad ones, and so on. So, in the case of the racist that I thought could fit all of Frankfurt's conditions, the real-self conditions, the, "I'm happy being a racist and so when I'm a racist I'm responsible," I said, "Actually, not necessarily responsible. If you couldn't possibly have seen what's wrong with racism, you don't deserve blame." On the other hand, when we say, "Oh he couldn't hurt a fly," meaning that as a form of praise, the assumption, as I put it in the article is, "Look, we wouldn't say that about somebody who's in an iron-lung." I mean, of course he can't hurt a fly either, because he can't move. But that doesn't constitute a form of praise. When we say, "He couldn't hurt a fly," as a form of praise, it's because he's so gentle, where the idea is that he understands the virtue of being gentle. He understands the value of kindness, of wanting not to cause pain to people. That's a case in which we're assuming that the person not only has, but has exercised the ability to reason, to see what's true and what's good. We talk about his exercising ability, but in a way, he couldn't not exercise that ability. If he's intelligent and perceptive and exposed to the right things, he will inevitably see, "Oh, hurting people gratuitously is wrong," and so he won't be able not to be that way. On the other hand, the reason he is that way is because he sees why he should be that way, and that's all one can ask for in wanting to be praiseworthy.

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Doesn't it seem that we're focusing on different things for praise and blame on that view? So, for example, it certainly seems that what we're praising when we're saying "he couldn't hurt a fly" is his character, his virtues. Whereas, when we're blaming, we're blaming on the basis of his choosing capabilities, of his deliberative mechanisms.

Well, that's absolutely right about the examples I've been talking about. But, maybe to avoid that, at least for the short-term, instead of talking about "he couldn't hurt a fly," talking about someone who sees someone on the side of the road in trouble and he—

Helps them, because "that's what you do."

Right, but I mean here too, he's choosing, "I won't make it to my appointment on time," or, "I won't get to the movie. I'll stop and help this person." It is a choice, just as it'd be a choice to drive past. So, either choice is an expression of the person's values; in the one case they're bad values, in the other case they're good values. In the one case, to say, "Can I blame him if he walked by because he was callous?" I would say it depends on whether one could have reasonably expected him to know better than to be callous, to see why he shouldn't be callous. So there the ability to do otherwise is important. When the person stops in order to help, I want to say in the end it's really the same thing that we care about. If the person stops in order to help because, in a kind of bizarre variation of the Manchurian candidate, he's been brainwashed to say, "Whenever there's someone on the side of the road," you know, robot-like, "I must stop and help," that doesn't deserve praise either. The reason it deserves praise is because we're projecting that the person is stopping because he says, "Ah, a fellow human being in trouble, I should help him," and thinks that for good reason. So, it's the ability to see the true and the good, and seeing it, to *act* on it that matters in both, whether it's the negative or the positive. It's just that in the case of the positive he necessarily has that ability, whereas in the case of the negative it's an open question until you pursue the background.

You've heard of "affluenza"?

Actually I don't know the phrase. It's a good term.

There's a famous case, a recent one, where a kid—I say kid you know, an eighteen-year-old or something—drove a car into a crowd of people, I think, and then just fled the scene. And he got a lower sentence because he was so wealthy he had been protected from having to see the concerns of ordinary people—I can't remember the exact circumstances, but it caused an outrage because of the judge's reasoning. The reasoning actually may have had more to do with, "Prison wouldn't suit this person, because of the way they'd been raised." Suppose that someone said that, "Well, you know, I read this article by Susan Wolf and it seems to support my being less harsh to people like this, because it's not their fault," like JoJo in your case ["Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility"]?

Right. Yes, that would be a very upsetting use or abuse of my view. My first reaction to that particular case is that the moral that I would like to take from the view I have is that the ability to reason and to, in other words, to think and reflect on one's experience, to hear arguments, to be open-minded, that that should be getting much more attention and emphasis in child-rearing, in education, than it does, because that is the key to being a free and responsible being, to being—I mean it's a key to being a free and responsible being, to be able to reflect on your values

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and question them and see through them. And usually, as a matter of fact I should think, being affluent, being privileged, being at least not horribly impaired or impoverished, should make it *more* likely that you have those abilities rather than less. Presumably you have education, you have parents talking to you…

I'm not going to raise current candidates for president in this context.

Yes, let's just stay out of that. I do not want to defend my country's evident political craziness right now, but in any case, right. It's not a guarantee, nothing is a guarantee—but, other things equal the fact that a person is a spoiled, middle-class or wealthy brat, doesn't seem to me sufficient to say, "He couldn't help it. He couldn't think for himself; he couldn't see reasons to stand up and stay at the face of a crime." I mean, almost everyone knows that.

It would require a very extreme sort of isolation. I mean, it reminds me a little bit of the story of the Buddha's upbringing, where he was kept away from viewing poverty and death, because otherwise the worry was that he would go and do what he ended up doing, which is go out into the world and become a learned man, instead of staying at home and being a ruler as he should have.

Right. And, in fact, the same thing—I mean, the example I gave earlier about the racist, I think, many people would, perhaps reasonably, say you can say the same thing about that case. I mean, I had set it up for philosophical purposes with the idea that perhaps if you're raised in a sufficiently insular community, you couldn't help but be a racist if that's all you saw in front of you. In the real contemporary world, one might argue that's just like affluenza, that everyone of normal intelligence has within their access the evidence, the arguments, the basis for reaching conclusions to reject one's racism. But, it's an empirical question to some extent how much we can figure out on our own when important members of our community and our role models are telling us otherwise. But, affluenza is another case like that, I think.

This would be obviously a science-fiction-y case, you can't imagine this really happening, but, suppose I were to think to myself, "I don't want my child ever to be blameworthy. What's the simplest way that I can achieve this? Oh, if I isolate them in this extreme manner, then they will be praiseworthy, but they'll never be blameworthy, so in some sense that's what I should do." Suppose they were to say to you, "Why isn't this a good thing?" You would have to say blameworthiness is valuable in its own sense in a way—and how would you say that? That you shouldn't prevent your child from being blameworthy, because actually blameworthiness is important?

Well, I think what I regard as desirable—what I would think most people regard as desirable—is to have the status of being a responsible agent, a responsible individual. And to be a responsible individual is to be someone who is liable to either blame or praise, to credit or discredit. Not that anyone has an option of whether one is raising one's child to be responsible or a non-responsible individual at all—but what we're choosing between is, you know, which would be better? To be a non-responsible agent who therefore will be neither open to blame or to praise, but will be secure in blamelessness, but by being, as it were, a lesser being, a non-responsible being, like a lower-animal perhaps. Would you prefer that, or would you prefer to be a responsible individual, where you're necessarily risking blame if you don't use your abilities properly, but also you have the opportunity of being praiseworthy, of being something interesting and wonderful and

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admirable? Of course, inevitably—I don't mean *literally* inevitably—anybody who's responsible is going to be blameworthy sometime, because there is no realistic scenario in which anyone but a divine being could have the ability to do right or wrong and never do wrong. That said, it seems to me so easy a choice: "Would you rather be a responsible individual with all the risks of blameworthiness that involves, or a non-responsible individual with the safety of blamelessness?" It seems obvious that the first is so much more valuable than the second, which, by the way, does get us a little to Strawson's view, I think.

Right, the different points of view that you would be regarded by. Yeah, well it's also interesting that you're sounding a little bit like free-will theodicy, that the reason why free will is such a great gift despite the evil that came along with it, is that without it we are lesser beings.

You know, I never thought that was such a bad argument. That was also a part of my early training.

You're actually on the side of compatibilists, and that's not the freedom that the free-will theodicists like, because compatibilists' freedom puts god on the hook, because if he created them, he could manipulate the laws of nature in such a way as to make us always choose right.

Yeah, all right.

If you read philosophy of religion a bit, it does tend to have a much more libertarian bent. The assumption is that libertarianism is obviously right, for reasons that seem to ignore a lot of the debate that you've been engaged in, this idea that you can be blameworthy irrespective of whether or not determinism is true. Whereas, the free-will theodicy has to commit itself to a radically indeterminist libertarianism. So, it is funny that you get little camps in philosophy where they're really talking about the same thing, but they don't talk to each other, because, over here the main concern is the nature of God, then over here, the main concern is more earthly matters.

Well, you're right about that, there is relatively little exchange between the people who are engaging in free-will issues coming out of philosophy of religion, and the more secular philosophers who are engaged in this. That said, it doesn't seem to me that there's anything that conceptually would rule out being a theistic-compatibilist, who takes free will to be compatible with determinism, and even with divine determination of a kind. In fact, early in my graduate career, I studied a lot of Leibnitz, and it seems to me that there's a very attractive interpretation of Leibnitz as a compatibilist who takes the free-will theodicy pretty seriously.

Okay, another early hit of yours was "Moral Saints," which is the first essay collected in your 2015 book [The Variety of Values (Oxford)]. The cover is, as you said, by a Dutch Master, so they tend to be dark. Now, in the introduction to this, you say that "Moral Saints" contains the seeds of the ideas that you would develop over the next few decades, and, I like what you say, that, looking back, you feel, "Geez, maybe I haven't had a new idea in thirty-five years!" It reminds me a little bit of that remark by David Lewis, where he said, "I wanted to be someone who sort of flitted about, and said something over here, and said something novel over here, when it emerges that actually I'm a systematic philosopher, and I'm just applying my theory in all

these places." Well, could you say a little bit about "Moral Saints," and maybe the "seeds" that were in it?

Sure, the point of the article, "Moral Saints," is to suggest that when we think of what it would be to be a morally perfect individual, a person as morally good as possible, thinking first of using one's common-sense idea of what morality tells us to do, and what moral values are, and then later on looking at some philosophical moral theories, the most standard moral theories and the most standard conceptions, I think, of common-sense moral values, are such that a person who is as morally good as possible, when I think about what that kind of person is, I find myself thinking—well, I'm going to qualify this in a minute—my first thought is, "Yuck, that might be somebody who is very admirable, but not somebody who I would really enjoy, not somebody I'd want to marry, not somebody I'd want my kids to marry…"

The 'having-a-beer-with' test.

Yes, well, there we go. It might not be the right way to choose who you want to be president, but who you'd want to be. I want to be someone people would want to have a beer with. So there's this puzzle. In philosophy at least, people talk as if morality is the supreme value, and that it's always and unequivocally better to be *morally* better. But if that were true, then when you think about what's the morally best way you could possibly be, that would have to be the best. But, you think of what that would be, and it seems to me there are lots of things that the morally best person might lack that mean a lot to me. A certain kind of sense of humor, is one kind of example. Any number of passions for the arts, for sports—there's a tension between caring too much about something that is not necessarily aimed at maximizing happiness or minimizing pain, that's not necessarily concerned with being as respectful and kind as possible.

Like, as Dorothy Parker said, "If you don't have anything nice to say, come sit next to me."

Exactly, so Dorothy Parker is the perfect example of someone who would have written this article better than I would have. I think Groucho Marx is an example, maybe even more extreme than that—but if you like those people, and you think, "Look, there's something great about them," you can't fit that into a view that has a conventional view about what morality consists in, and also thinks one should always aim to be as moral as possible.

So, actually, this is also relevant to philosophy of religion, because you're suggesting that heaven would be hellish.

Well, if heaven consists of moral saints— the conventional and most philosophical theories would suggest that is what I'm suggesting. And I'm not the first person to suggest that, you know, I think Julian Barnes has a great chapter at the end of one of his books about an image of heaven that might be—and George Bernard Shaw has a famous example of that. So, it's—yeah, it's a common view though, just not so common in philosophy.

Now, it seems like one thing you could say about that is, "I agree. What seems most compelling about what you're saying is maybe we need lots of different kinds of people. Maybe, if you look at society as a whole, you've got to have a diversity of people. But, that doesn't alter the fact that, you know, everybody should try to be moral. It may be the case that from a social point of view, maybe Plato's right to

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a certain extent. You've got your different classes of people, and you need your different classes of people to make it work. But that doesn't mean that from a personal standpoint everybody shouldn't aspire to be as moral as possible." What would you say in response to that?

First of all, I want to just correct you. At one point, you said, "That doesn't mean that from a personal point of view, it's not true that you should be moral," and then later, you said, "As moral as possible." I don't want to deny the first at all. Yes, you should be moral, we should all be moral. In fact, one of the conclusions I want to reach is that we shouldn't think that the 'ought' that we should each from a personal point of view aspire to, is to be *as moral as possible*. It's to be at least moral enough to be good, decent, to do the right thing. That's what we should aspire to, but to be as moral as possible is something beyond that, and so one of the more academic points of thinking about moral saints is to say we should leave room in our moral thinking, our moral theorizing, our moral vocabulary, for there to be a distinction between being moral, meaning morally decent, acceptable, not blameworthy, and being morally as good as possible, which is, to use a technical term, supererogatory, it's beyond what anyone should feel they have to do. Let's just leave it at that. So, I want to make that distinction. Now, the suggestion you were maybe making was, "Well, it's probably a good thing that we have a diversity of people, that not everyone is as morally good as possible. But shouldn't each of us try to be as morally good as possible, and those who aren't—I mean, even while we might be grateful that there are some who don't achieve it". Is that your idea?

I don't know what my idea is really, but it might be the case that from the point of view of society a certain mixture works. But, from the point of view of each individual, maybe it's just a case that many of us will fail, and this happens to work for society's purposes but you could still say, "Well, you should still try to be the best person possible." You should try to be the person like this policeman in the news who saw a suicide bomber on the way to a crowd and just hugged them, and was killed instantly, of course, but thereby saved people.

Right. Well, individual acts of heroism, which are wonderfully admirable and do lead me to think, "Oh, I wish I could be that way. I wish I could do that," or, you know, "I hope I had the strength, the courage, the integrity to do that." But an individual act of heroism is different from having, as a personal ideal, to be as good as possible all the time in all contexts. So, it's the second that I'm mostly talking about. But it's a good question, how do we put these together, and I'm not sure I can answer it. But anyway, going back to your suggestion was, "Look, maybe most of us will fail, and maybe that's a happy result. But, shouldn't each of us try to be as good as possible?" I want to actually say no, we shouldn't. On the one hand, I want to also add that the diversity of people, that is an important point, and important in part in saying, "Look, it's not that I actually think that no one should be a moral saint. It's part of the wonderful diversity of life that there are people who aspire to be moral saints, and maybe there are people who achieve it." I'm not really against there being people who do have that aspiration…

You might say, "I don't want to sit next to them at dinner, but I'm sure glad they exist, because I would like them in my government or, you know, as my judge if I ever come before them."

Well, I just want someone who's *just* when I come to court. But there's a recent book by Larissa MacFarquhar called, *Strangers Drowning*. She's a journalist, a very philosophically acute

> 66 We shouldn't think that the 'ought' that we should each from a personal point of view aspire to, is to be as moral as possible. It's to be at least moral enough to be good, decent, to do the right thing. That's what we should aspire to, but to be as moral as possible is something beyond that… it's beyond what anyone should feel they have to do. 99

journalist, and the book consists mainly of interviews of people who really are living lives aspiring to something like my model of moral sainthood, and so there are real people out there and everyone has to read that book for themselves to decide what they think of them. But I didn't mean to say no one should be that way, but what I do mean to say—which is directly what you were challenging me about—is, shouldn't we all at least try to be that way? And I just think, no, why should we try to be that way? To say that we should all aim to be as morally good as possible, I think, assumes something that I think, at the very least, needs an argument to support it, and that personally I don't find likely to be there.

Let me give you an example perhaps to support your case. I have a relative by marriage and his mother and father ran an orphanage, and raised their child, him, as if he was on a par with all of the orphans raised. Didn't want to show him any favoritism at all, thought that that would be unfair. And you might say that's a case where they were being perhaps more moral than they should have been, because what—and I think that your case is most clearly plausible when the morality is in competition with, as you say, love, because we do think that love should trump morality in a lot of cases—although not when we see nepotism working against us.

Right, right. Well, again, there are two different points one can make here, two different aspects to the issue. One is, you're taking a case where morality, or at least a certain conception of morality, is at odds with personal love. I guess where I would want to start the question, "Shouldn't we each of us try to be as morally good as possible," would actually be in a different place, which is to talk about other forms of being absolutely wonderful as a human being, totally admirable, so—you know, maybe there's an author or an artist or a scientist, like, you think— or even an Olympic-quality athlete where you just think, "Look!" Well, let me just pick some appropriate author. Let it be, Dickens, or—leaving aside what we know about Dickens's life.

Yes, we probably better.

Yes, that's another story which we might get to later. Use Kant instead, it really doesn't matter. How about living a life of someone who devotes himself or herself to the pursuit of knowledge, or to advancing philosophy, or to writing great literature. Isn't that an admirable way to live? Well, yes. The short answer is, yes. And, yet, if you're devoting yourself to writing great literature, or to science for the sake of science, not a medical cure for cancer, but understanding the history of the universe or something, you know. You're not as morally good as possible, you're not devoting yourself to justice and alleviating poverty and, you know, helping strangers around the street. You're in your lab doing something, or you're at your computer writing something. I think there's just all kinds of achievements that we respect and admire and are totally legitimate things for people to do in their lives, without having to justify it by saying, "In the end this is the best way I can help humanity." There are just more values out there. This is why I think of moral saints and a lot of things that have been connected to that in my work as under the topic *moral and non-moral values*, because the idea that we should be as morally good as possible is the idea that moral values are either the only values or they trump all other values in any way, to any degree. It's not so much, "Oh, we're lucky that there are people that fail, because they turn out to be great artists or great scientists." It's *not* a failure to be a great scientist; it's another legitimate choice, an admirable choice even.

I think one of the points you also make in that article is that people obviously feel the pull of familial bonds trumping moral claims, and what they tend to do is to say,

> **"**If you're devoting yourself to writing great literature, or to science for the sake of science, not a medical cure for cancer, but understanding the history of the universe or something…You're not as morally good as possible, you're not devoting yourself to justice and alleviating poverty … You're in your lab doing something, or you're at your computer writing something. I think there's just all kinds of achievements that we respect and admire and are totally legitimate things for people to do in their lives, without having to justify it by saying, "In the end this is the best way I can help humanity."**"**

"Well, that's a part of morality too," and the trend is therefore to make everything part of morality, when it isn't. And, you want us to say, "Let's keep morality fairly simple and clear, and confined to these things," and say that it has to compete with other things like love and meaning.

Right, exactly.

Okay, but of course one of the problems with diversity of values is how do we choose amongst them? Because, when you say, "this is what you should do in your life," what's the force behind the "should"?

Yeah, that's a good question. I like to limit my use of "should." I guess the way I want to think about morality, though there are a limited number of demands I think morality properly makes of people, one of the things that's special about morality and about moral values as contrasted with all these other values, is that they have the force of a "should." So, the force of the "should," when applied to, "You should treat people as equals," "You should give people what they deserve," "You should be kind and notice the disparity of your privilege against other people's relative poverty," and so on, there is a force of a "should" which I tend to think of in external terms, that is, to be a good person, these things will come into your life and affect the way you run your life, and affect what you do. And, if you don't behave according to those principles and values, then you are liable to censure, you are liable to certain kinds of pressure from others. I mean, it seems to me moral values, values about how to treat other sentient beings, are ones where there is some appropriateness of pressuring people to behave well, rather than badly. All these other values, values of self-realization, values of appreciation, of beauty, of science, of nature—I think we don't have the authority—unless maybe we are raising young children or something—it's not really our place to say, "You should do this rather than that," "You should be a philosopher rather than a musician, or rather than a couch potato." I mean I think it would be better for you to make something of yourself, than to not make something of yourself, and that you would be happier. But, the "should,"' I think, is a more questionable attitude to take towards everything but the moral values.

I was raised by an English teacher, and I have distinctly old-fashioned views about grammar, and there's a person [University of Michigan English Professor Anne Curzan] who comes on the radio every week on Michigan Radio, who is of the view that the way that a word should be used is the way that people use it. So, she's perfectly willing to concede on "hopefully," now it's not just an adverb, and my response is, "No! No! I can't take that." But that makes sense though, for example, imagine that I'm a classical music-nut, and my kid wants to get into something much more atonal, or, you know, pop music or something, and I say, "Well, that person can't sing in tune, so it's not music. You shouldn't emulate that." You're saying that I should say "Well, that's not my place," whereas concerning, "You should be kind to your fellow sentient beings," that is.

That is my official view and philosophically that's the view that I stand by. I mean, I have many sympathies with those who want to use "hopefully" to refer to "full of hope" rather than "I hope that," and I still have trouble using "their" as a singular pronoun, but I want to distinguish what I think of as a matter of taste or temperament from a matter of actual, justifiable criticism.

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Yes, and actually, your example of "their," I'm with you on that one. But now I feel pressure to give in, for moral reasons, because it's now a transgender issue, whereas before it was just a grammar issue, and I'm not going to give ground on that. But if you make it a moral issue of respect to persons, okay, I guess I've got to.

Right, then you have to give in not only in saying "you should," but in actually doing it yourself, I suppose.

Right, yes, yes, unfortunately. Well, does that make us moral saints?

No. One pronoun does not a moral saint make.

One of the things that I found interesting in Moral Saints, was your disagreement with Bernard Williams. It's funny, Bernard Williams—there seem to be these figures throughout history of philosophy—I think of Thomas Reid as another one—as sort of the curmudgeons, the people who stand up and say, "Well, I'm not gonna. I don't like the way this is going, I'm going to be a contrarian about it." Bernard Williams seems to have been a really good one of those, both in philosophy of personal identity, and moral philosophy. Now, you have certain alignments with him, but then you part ways with him. How would you draw the line?

I would say I almost never part ways with him.

On the value of morality you certainly do.

Well, perhaps so, I have to say Bernard Williams is one of my superheroes in philosophy, so I think in most of the ways in which the philosophical world at large finds him controversial, I'm on his side. So, what you're referring to, I guess, is that I like morality, I like the idea that morality has a place in our lives, that it should continue to have, and Williams makes some rather inflammatory remarks, saying maybe morality's time has passed and it's time to move on beyond it, a much more Nietzschean view. So, it's true, we part company here, but, on the other hand, my views about morality, namely, that it has a place, not that it takes over all of our evaluative thinking, is to a large extent I think due to his influence on me. I mean, I see the message of a lot of his work to be, "Morality is not all there is to life; morality is not the be-all and the end-all." And that what he was mostly criticizing was the idea of holding fixed the content of morality and its supreme and over-arching value in the evaluative world. And, I'm trying to get rid of the second, while holding onto the first. And I don't really think that's as far from his views as—

You think he was just being inflammatory for the sake of it?

No, I don't think that. I mean, it's a long and complicated story, what exactly is his target and what exactly does he want to move towards. But, for example, if you take some of the more specific, concrete values and virtues that we identify as paradigmatically moral—for example, the virtue and content of justice—I don't think there's anything in Williams's writing that suggests that he doesn't care about justice, or that he doesn't think justice is extremely important and that we should insist on people behaving justly. So, it's one thing to say, "Get rid of morality," it's another thing to understand that in a way that's compatible with saying, "Well, that doesn't mean people should start going around lying, cheating, and stealing, much less killing each other." Many of the values that are the concrete moral values that we think of as the center of morality are values very much part of Williams's own set of values and concerns, I think.

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That reminds me of the debate in political philosophy about political obligation. You have people like A. John Simmons who've made a career out of arguing that there's no such thing, but he also has to say, "That doesn't mean I think we should be rioting in the streets."

Right, right

Now, this book is the first of two volumes, and you collect in this one essays on morality, meaning and love, and I want to talk a little more about meaning, certainly, and maybe love too in a little bit. But, in the second volume, presumably, are going to be collected things like your stuff on the real self and stuff on moral responsibility. Why did you separate them out, and do you see them as two distinct spheres in your thinking or do you think that they're all part of one big web?

Well, the first and very unphilosophically interesting answer to why did I separate them out, was that I had too many. And actually, anecdotally, I had signed a contract many, many years ago to do a volume collecting my essays. And it already said which essays would be in it, and all it needed was an introduction and some proofreading. But, there's lots going on in life, and for some reason it was never at the top of my to-do list, and so years went by and I kept writing these other essays that I had committed to doing, and never getting around to actually getting the volume out. And in fact, at one point, already now five years ago I would say, I was writing an essay on blame in which I used as an example of the distinction between the judgment that someone is blameworthy and the actual act or attitude of blaming someone—I used as an example my editor at Oxford University Press who I thought was certainly in a position to judge me blameworthy for failing to come through on my contract to get him a collection of essays, but so far as I could tell he wasn't actually blaming me. He's a very nice person and he could've blamed me, I was liable to blame, but—so I was blameworthy but not actually blamed by him. So anyway, eventually, I thought, "All right, let's just get this over with, let's get this volume done." So I wrote to him and said, "You know, I have some other essays," and he said, "You know, this is enough we better do it in two volumes." So that essay self-referentially referring to the contract will be in the second volume, the essay about blame. Anyway, it was just a question of trying to find good ways of dividing this. So, better to divide the responsibility stuff from the moral and non-moral stuff than any other way I could think of. So, that's the short answer to why I separated them. To the question, "Are these two totally different sets of interests, or are they all related to each other, are they part of a big view?" I think, autobiographically, I didn't think of them as especially connected as I was working on them at least in the early days. From more or less the beginning of my career and even before my career, from graduate school on, I've had these two major subjects that I come back to again and again, one having to do with responsibility and the other having to do with moral and non-moral values. But, I never saw them as related, but I also never saw them as in tension. In fact, I suspect in some ways my views on one thing were informing my views on the other, but all very much unconsciously. As it happens, the work I'm doing now, which, I guess one way to put it is, it's on non-moral responsibility. The work I'm doing now really is taking a lot from both aspects of my philosophical interests, I mean I'm not on purpose synthesizing, it's just happening this way, which is to say—when you do philosophy, or at least when you do a certain kind of philosophy, you have a view of the world and different parts of that view come out and get expressed as you concentrate on one or another issue, and if you're lucky and your view of the world is more or less self-consistent, the relationship between these different things will just emerge somewhere.

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Yeah, it would terrible to discover at the end, "Oh my god, they're totally incompatible!" You want it to be like a good Seinfeld episode, where all the storylines get meshed together at the end.

Yes, right.

Talking about the moral responsibility, you said a little bit about the real-self view. It seems to me that the issues in moral responsibility and personal identity often can be talked about separately and sometimes are talked about separately, but more and more now people are connecting them. And, just by using the very term, "real self," in your view on moral responsibility that, poses the question of, "Well, what is the real self, and is it something like the "me" that is supposed to persist through time in my theory of personal identity?" "What makes it real?" perhaps should be my next question.

Well, by introducing that in the context of the philosophical literature on personal identity, you're suggesting an interpretation of "real" that's metaphysical. I mean, that may be what's behind your—

Well, I'm thinking that you mean, what's really me. I mean, for example, I'm responsible for the stuff that's really me, not stuff that's a product of manipulation, or hypnosis, or whatever. This is really me, so I should be held accountable for it. Well, why is it really me?

Right. So, in the stuff that I've published where I use the term, real self, I'm using it to refer to a view that I don't agree with, and that I associate with the works of Harry Frankfurt, Gary Watson, some others who've gone on, and who interpret the "real self" as the self that the individual embraces for herself, the self that the individual identifies with.

That's the second-order desires, for example.

Second-order desires, to go back to our earlier conversation. That's the way that Harry Frankfurt talks about it. Gary Watson in a very interesting kind of commentary or variation on Frankfurt's view, says that the distinction that Frankfurt at least initially talked about between first-order and second-order desires would be better talked about as a distinction between those things that are as it were mere desires, and those things that are *values*. I actually kind of prefer that distinction to the first-order and second-order desire one, but either way, the real self is the valuing self, is the self that consists of those things that the individual values, embraces, endorses. So, that's what the "real self" refers to in those other writings that have referred to it as the real-self view. However—and this is sort of getting into the stuff that I'm working on right now—I actually think that, though there is something plausible, something I think useful about thinking about a person as having a real self, it's wrong to identify the real self with the self that is endorsed by herself, or self that is approved of by herself, or the self that she wants to be.

So you could really be an asshole despite your best intentions.

Well yes, your real self could be an asshole. Part of this has to do with the fact that we're not great with respect to self-knowledge, you know, that the things that I endorse aren't necessarily the things that I really care most about. But also, the things that I really don't endorse might still be really part of me, as opposed to superficially part of me. So, I would like to distinguish what

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I've identified in the past as the "real self" in connection with this other literature, from a different distinction that I think might be as important or more important in a lot of philosophical and personal contexts.

Maybe "ideal self" is a better term.

For what was called the 'real self'? Yeah, that's a good idea.

But you still want to say though, don't you, that I shouldn't be responsible for things that aren't my ideal self? I mean, even if they're really part of me, if I'm unaware of them, and if I would reject them if I could, doesn't that affect my responsibility?

Well, so this is all connected to things I'm working on right now. I've been working on for the last couple years, but it's an ongoing project, and, I have somewhat complicated views about this, I don't know how much you want to go into it. I'm inclined right now to think there are two senses of responsibility, one of which is connected with accountability, what things you can blame someone for, what things you can punish them for, what things you can expect them to be answerable to—and it's not totally simple to say, "Well, if you are unconscious of it, you can't be blamed for it," because it might be that you're culpable for being unconscious of it. Just like the victim of affluenza: you can say, "Look, the fact that you didn't know that you should stay at the scene of the crime, or that you shouldn't have driven while drunk, or whatever, is not an excuse—doesn't get you off the hook for not doing anything, because you were in a position to know." So, it's complicated over there. But then there's another whole range of things that are a kind of responsibility that isn't accountability, that is, attitudes one can have towards someone for being an asshole, even though it's not that they value being an asshole, or that they don't—it might not be part of their ideal self—you can still have negative attitudes towards them which have relevant implications, not punishment certainly, I mean, you don't punish people for being assholes anyway. But, I think there's a way in which, subject to certain kinds of conditions or clarifications, you do hold someone responsible for being an asshole, or for being pretentious. And on the flip-side of that, you hold someone responsible, you give them credit for all kinds of things that again might be unconscious, might not be particularly intended or aimed or aspired to, that are just part of the person that makes them wonderful. One of the things I've been thinking about recently is something I'm calling *aesthetic responsibility*, so thinking about the accomplishments of artists, novelists, art broadly construed, where I think there's a way in which I very definitely hold Henry James responsible for his novels, I have strong attitudes—I mean, I'm a fan, so not everyone is, but I love his novels—but the point is, it's not a question of holding him accountable, it's a question of seeing his novels as an expression of a self, of a real self, I would say. It doesn't matter whether he could have written different novels, whether he could've not written any novels at all. In a way, the idea, given who Henry James was, he couldn't have done anything but write those novels—that's a totally plausible thought to me. And I don't think it takes anything away from either my view of James, which is to think he is wonderful, or from Mark Twain's view [who said of an empty library that it was still a good library because it had no Henry James in it]. The stipulation that he couldn't have done anything else takes nothing away from the appropriateness of having attitudes towards him on the basis of his work. So, I wouldn't call it blame, accountability, it's not that, but it's an expression of a real self. It has nothing to do with control, or consciousness, or self-endorsement. James himself might not know all of what he put into his novels, but that doesn't seem to matter to me so much.

Yeah, although—I was just thinking, do you like Wes Anderson's movies?

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I'm not a huge fan. I like Moonrise Kingdom a lot.

Everyone knows the criticisms of him, but one of the things that people say about him is, "Oh, all your movies are so Wes Anderson!" And it's almost like they're blaming him for it. So you have these sort of competing forces. It's like when people make a new album, and, "Oh, it's another Smiths album, it just sounds like the others" whereas if they don't, of course, they're going to piss off another group of people.

Right.

I mean, suppose someone said to Henry James, "Okay, now write a hardboiled private-eye novel..."

Yeah, well, actually that goes back to—was it David Lewis?—these different aspirations about how to do philosophy, right? I mean, there are novelists who say, "Look I'm going to try to write a novel of this kind, this genre, this persona, and then write another novel of another kind," and there are philosophers who also just sort of, try their skills at different things, not necessarily expressing a single vision. And then there are other philosophers who do express a single vision, and other artists, painters, novelists, musicians, where in some way, it's more of the same. I don't know if—it's interesting, you know, is one better than the other? I guess I'm a pluralist about this sort of thing.

Yeah, actually, I notice something about the writers, both philosophical and novelistic, that appealed to you, it's that their writing is dense and chewy, like Bernard Williams and "Freedom and Resentment." Sometimes I think the way to be remembered is to write in a way that is open to multiple interpretations. Don't necessarily clarify yourself too much. Wittgenstein is the apotheosis of this because it's like, little koans almost, and he can be, and is, interpreted totally crazily, and in various different ways. And, I do find myself—I want Mark Twain writing; I don't want Henry James, in my philosophy, you know; I want it to be pure and straightforward. Do you think that you have the suspicion that if it can be put that plainly, it can't be deep? Or, do you think that's not true?

Well, I don't want to say anything quite that strong. In response to your suggestion that, well, the way to really make your mark is to be obscure, or dense—I mean, you're right about my tastes—there is something that Bernard Williams and Henry James have in common for sure, and Wittgenstein—but, what I wanted to say right away was, there's a real distinction between being *dense* and being *obscure*. What I think I love is subtlety, is having the kind of sensitivity and precision and just sort of sharp vision to be able to distinguish very subtle points, or very subtle differences that others don't seem to notice, or think are trivial. One of the things that people often say about Henry James and also, I think, about some of the other things that I really like, that might be suspected of being trivial, is "Isn't this splitting hairs; isn't this a fine difference?" Maybe it's just a matter of temperament, but I love having a difference pointed out to me between two things that until it was pointed out I thought were equivalent. That's just something, it kind of thrills me, like, "Oh, I see the world better."

Right. And, I think, although I'm torn about Freedom and Resentment, I think the reason why, if anything, it's much more popular than ever, although I think some of the parts of it do seem a little bit dated—like the debate about determinism seems

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a little of its time—but I think the reactive attitude stuff—I think that's why people go back to it. The whole discussion about reactive attitudes can be traced to that. And, I think that's another one of these distinctions, that—"Hey, here's something that you didn't notice, was a thing, and we'll call it this." And, that's great philosophy that does that.

Yeah.

Meaning; yes, I don't want to let you get away without talking about that, because you've written a recent book about meaning [Meaning in Life and Why it Matters (Princeton, 2012)]. Now, Meaning in Life, not meaning of life. Perhaps you could start by explaining the difference, because of course philosophers are supposed to talk about the meaning of life.

Well, it depends on what kind of philosopher you are: either you're supposed to, or that would be the worst possible thing to talk about, because it's nonsense. Nonetheless, I'm not talking about it. So, the question of the "meaning *of* life" as I understand it is the question "does life have a meaning?" It's a question that seems most naturally interpreted as closely connected to, "Does life have a purpose?" It's a question about life, or human life as such. Many people think there is no meaning to life, but that means to *anyone's* life. Many people think there is a meaning to life, and that would be again to anyone's life. So there are these big questions, like "Is there some reason we're here?" or, "What can it tell us about the universe?" Different from that, and maybe only very loosely related, there's a whole area of talk where people say, "*My* life isn't meaningful *enough*," or, "So and so is doing something really meaningful," where we're not talking about life as such, we're talking about one life as opposed to another, one way to live a life. You can live a life such that it is more meaningful or such that it is less meaningful. So "meaning in life" I identify as the subject that's addressing, "What is it that makes a life meaningful," where, against the background of the idea that a life can be more or less meaningful, and some lives are more meaningful than others, or some ways to live one's life would give it more meaning than others. So, it's not really about life as such, or life relative to the universe, it's about how to live a good life, where one aspect of living well or living a good life is that it be a meaningful life.

You have a specific theory.

My view is that life has meaning insofar as one is engaged by and with activities that one loves, and that are worthy of love. Or, as I put it in a slogan-like way, meaning arises when subject of attraction meets object of attractiveness. So, the idea is that to live a meaningful life, one has to be engaged in things that one loves, that one cares about, that one is gripped by and attached by, but it also has to be the case that things that are the objects of that kind of love and excitement and grip are objectively valuable, valuable not just from one's own subjective point of view, but from another point of view.

Right. Now, of course, the objection that you get in this book, is you're bundled together with various responses. Which one gave you most pause, if you can remember. There's John Koethe, Robert Adams, Nomy Arpaly and Jonathan Haidt, who is a psychologist. You certainly got the "elitism!" response: whenever you say "objectively valuable," the question is "Well, by whose standard?"

Well there's not a "who," by the truth, right? I mean, the short answer to the, "By whose standard?" or the "Who are you to say?" or, "Who's to say what's objectively valuable?" The short

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answer is, "No one in particular." There is no elite, there is no authoritative body or individual. Philosophers are certainly in no privileged position. I certainly am in no privileged position. But the theoretical idea that meaning has some reference to objective value, is meant to say, "Look, what we want when we want a meaningful life, and what I think is the only intelligible way of understanding how this could be something worth wanting, is that the things we're engaged with, that we devote ourselves to, that we care about, are worth caring about, that we're not deluded, that we're not engaged in something that we're taking seriously thinking is worthwhile but it's just a mistake, that it would turn out that we've wasted our lives, you know, going after a false value, or a false idol, or something." But, there isn't a person or a group that's got any special authority to say what's true and what's false. It's an ongoing philosophical question that we all should engage in, and ideally that we all should engage in collectively. So, theoretically, there is no "who" who's at the bottom or the back or the foundation of what are good values, or true values, and what are false values. But, I think, in practical terms, when someone raises the question of elitism, to "Oh, you're using values that are just from your community, your privileged community, your overeducated community, your Western and imperialist community," is to come back and say, "Well, show me some other values, show me some other point of view, and then think it through." I mean, another thing that David Lewis—I only know this from secondhand, but I guess David Lewis at one point talked about a "wait-and-see" way of doing philosophy, where the idea is, you start out making a claim that you're offering as universally true, like "We all know," but of course all you have is yourself and your small community, and then you find out once you've offered this to a public audience, whether it's universal or not. And, when they say, "Oh no, I don't see it that way," then you have a choice of saying, "All right, this is only true relative to, or in a certain context," or you change your views about what's true. You sort of wait and see how universal your values are.

Or you set about trying to convince everyone, so that they do think that.

Well, good point. I mean, well, right, you have to go—I mean, you have to be open-minded and flexible. You make the best case you can for what you think is true, but you listen to the best case you can that the rest of the conversants can give for what they think is true, and you don't know where it's going to end up. And, really, I at least don't think I have anything at stake, that the values that I start out with as thinking are objective ones are right. I could find out tomorrow that engaging in moral philosophy is a waste of time. I wouldn't find it out, I'd have to come to see it that way, and if so, then I've got to change.

You've got more time for reading Henry James novels.

Which is more likely, moral philosophy or Henry James being a waste of time?

So, of course, when you take that view, the result is we can't really know if our lives are meaningful, whereas if you take a purely subjectivists view you can make your life meaningful, just by caring a lot or something like that; whereas what you're saying is, "Well, we can have a fairly strong suspicion that the person building a model of the Eiffel Tower out of toothpicks doesn't have a fully meaningful life, but we can't know. Maybe it will turn out that they're inventing outsider art of a particular variety, and later generations will say, "Thank god for toothpick–Eiffel Tower–person, because without that person, we wouldn't have discovered this new form of outsider art,"" so their life is more meaningful than they knew.

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So, you start out with the point, it follows from my view that we can't be absolutely certain that our lives are meaningful, no matter what we're doing. And that's true. So I want to go in two different directions from that comment: one is, unlike the direction you took it, which is, "Well, we can be pretty certain that this person's life is meaningless, but not absolutely certain," I would rather say, "Well, we can be pretty certain that the person who is developing a cure for cancer or is fighting injustice or is alleviating misery here or there, *is* living a meaningful life, if it's true that according to my views, nothing's guaranteed—I'm kind of an anti-foundationalist—we can be pretty sure of that. There are very few people that would contest that. And, so, I would take it in the more optimistic direction, rather than in the less optimistic. In fact, I'm a rather expansive pluralist about what is meaningful, and I think almost always, if you yourself are looking and reflecting on whether what you're doing is meaningful, you're even asking the question, "What's the point of this? Can I articulate and see whether what I'm doing has any value outside of my own eccentric appetites?" chances are good that what you'll end up with is something meaningful. I think the very asking of that question is a kind of prod to go in the direction of something valuable. If, for example, people ask that about the philosophy they're writing, "Am I wasting my time writing about this topic?" or something, I think that's a healthy thing to do and is more likely to get them to do something meaningful. So, I want to take it in the more optimistic direction. That's number one. Number two, you can't be certain about anything in life. It would be great to have certainty, but just get over it. We can't have it about almost anything, and you just have to live on as best you can, you know, trying to reflect and be reasonable. You don't give up on making progress towards the truth, even realizing that there's a tiny chance that you're actually going to get it and *know* that you've got it.

Yeah, but it certainly seems to me that a lot of the artists that we end up admiring are very pigheaded, and do not get discouraged by people who say, "Don't do that, you're wrong about that, nobody likes that, stop doing that."

Right—I guess I think that's a good thing, right, because—especially in the arts, though not just in the arts—creativity often requires believing in one's own vision, and not taking very seriously or being willing to just step back from the opinions of other contemporaries. That's true. But there again, I don't take that as in tension with my view that, "Look, no one is an authority on what's good and what's true." No one is an authority, which is to say the majority isn't an authority any more than any individual or elite group is an authority. So, the fact that ninety percent of the people like *The Da Vinci Code* doesn't guarantee that *The Da Vinci Code* is a good book. The fact that ninety percent or ninety-nine percent of the people didn't think Cezanne was doing anything good, or Van Gogh wasn't doing anything good, doesn't guarantee that he wasn't doing anything good. So, that's true, and one has to admire the people who have the confidence in themselves to ignore the crowds.

Maybe I can make a suggestion, because one of your examples is a person sitting on the sofa, you know, eating Cheetos, watching sitcoms.

Drinking beer in my example.

Okay, well, you need something to wash the Cheetos down, and get that orange stuff off your fingers. But, that was your example of someone who, you know, it seems fairly likely that there's not a lot of meaning there. Couldn't we say that the true difference between someone like that and someone like Van Gogh, is that Van Gogh has a vision, has an idea, and, sure, they're rejected in their time, people don't

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see it as valuable, but, it's not that his—offering a challenge to your conception—it's not the fact that later on people found it valuable—so, let's say you downplay the objective element, but what's important is that he had a vision and he had a conception and he was working to have it. So it's really, let's say, a subjectivist view, that we can take away the objective element and that's not what differentiates the beer-drinker and the Van Gogh, it's that the beer drinker has no conception of what they're doing, has no vision, whereas Van Gogh has a vision and it doesn't matter if it's not appreciated later. What matters is the vision and that he's trying to do something. What would you say in response to that?

Well, the first thing I would say is I never meant to suggest that it had much to do at least with whether he's appreciated. So, he paints these paintings. They're great paintings. They're not great because someone notices that they're great, they're great because of what they look like, and what they look like is such that fully enlightened people would appreciate it, but, of course, whether they got appreciated or not is another question. So, I need to distinguish 'objective' from 'inter-subjectively approved by,' or something. So, that's number one. Now, your suggestion was, isn't the difference between Van Gogh and the couch potato that Van Gogh had a vision, didn't matter what the vision was, it was just a vision, and that's what made his life meaningful, something like that, is that right?

Yes, that's right, that he had a plan, that he had a vision, a picture of what he wanted, and that you don't need the objective element.

Right. I don't see that as actually as antithetical to what I'm trying to say as you might expect. So, first of all, one big difference that doesn't come out there between the couch-potato and Van Gogh, is that the couch-potato isn't doing anything. He's passive, well, he's eating Cheetos, that's true, and watching low-level sitcoms—that's sort of the idea. It's a life in which he's not engaged in any activity—it's kind of low-level contentment. Whereas, Van Gogh is doing something with his life, he's creating very original paintings, for example. Now, we could compare Van Gogh with an Olympic track-star, or with a mother and housewife who is taking care of a family and raising her children and engaging in civic community things—it doesn't have to be a vision. These are all examples of people who, on my relatively expansive, tentative vision of what are valuable ways to spend one's life—these are all valuable ways to spend one's life. And, so the question is, "What makes them all valuable ways; is there really anything objective that's backing all of these up, or not?" And, so the reason I was thinking that your suggestion wasn't as antithetical as you might expect is that, I'm very pluralistic about the things that are valuable, and a lot of what's valuable has to do with what is the character of the person's relationship to whatever it is that they're doing. I mean, there are good artists and bad artists, and you might think, "Well, according to your view, Van Gogh's life is meaningful because he did create masterpieces, but the artist next door was creating stuff that objectively—it's not really a question of whether it was appreciated—but is objectively just not really very interesting or very beautiful, then it's not meaningful." About that, I am inclined to say, "Well, it's more meaningful to create masterpieces, but devoting oneself to art, even the aspiration, if the aspiration isn't insane or ridiculous or nonsensical, like the aspiration to collect the biggest ball of string would be, that already puts you in the direction of some kind of meaning, in part also because I think one of the things that's valuable is to develop virtues in oneself, and virtues aren't all moral virtues; they're virtues of self-discipline, and determination, and carefulness, and integrity. All of those things I think are aspects of living a life in a way in which one's putting energy into things that are objectively valuable. That's a very broad way of understanding objective value, but that is at least compatible with the

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view that I've put out there, and it's actually the way I meant to understand it. So, athletes who devote themselves for a phase of their lives to just being as good as they possibly can be, ideally better than anybody in the world has yet been at running a marathon, or whatever, that seems to me to be a valid thing to do and something one can be proud of, and something that has a certain kind of objective value to it as compared to the couch-potato. But, of course, it's not because running a fast race has value beyond it being an occasion to exercise all these skills and virtues, I think. So, that's just to say, part of what's great about Van Gogh is the work that he's left us with. But, part of what makes it a meaningful life, is not just that it yielded these objectively valuable objects, but also that it yielded them in a way that involved a kind of self-realization, a pursuit of a vision, and there isn't a single great vision, there are lots of visions, and maybe any vision that's really careful and complex and original is objectively a good one.

Now, you want to separate meaning as a value: this is part of your project of plurality of values, and morality is just one set of values. So, if we're taking morality out of meaning, could you have a meaningful life that is truly evil? So, for example, suppose what I threw myself into is becoming the best torturer ever; I can elicit the most exquisite agonies and I do with real flair and panache. Would the fact that I'm evil be a barrier to my life being meaningful, or do you not want to have morality intrude?

So, again, maybe this is a pedantic correction: it's not that I want to take morality out of meaning, so much as I want to regard them as distinct categories that overlap. I mean, many of the most meaningful things people do are meaningful because they're morally good.

But you also want to say that they can be meaningful where they're morally neutral. For example, I mean, a lot of people would say Olympic sports are kind of morally neutral.

Yes, exactly, so they're different questions. If you ask can a meaningful life also be an evil one, I think the answer is yes, it can. At least insofar as it can be meaningful and evil where the relationship between what makes it meaningful and what makes it evil is accidental. So, I mean, in fact, I think a lot of artists who are great artists and who did something—who were subjectively engaged with an objectively valuable project, producing this art, were nasty people, and did nasty things. I mean, Dickens was a very bad husband, I don't know about the rest of his life. Picasso, many, many artists… So of course you could be evil and you could live an evil and meaningful life in that way. A somewhat more complicated case would be Hitler. It seems to me very plausible to say that he lived a meaningful life. It seems very implausible to say his life was meaningless; that seems very bizarre. I'm inclined to think he lived a meaningful life in so far as he achieved some very impressive things not accidentally, and showed certain kinds of—maybe certain kinds of virtues, not accidentally. Simultaneously with that and not totally accidentally related to that, or not in the same way, he was an evil man, and the cause of horrible evils. So, I'm inclined there to say, I don't want to call his life meaningless, but on the other hand, when you're thinking about Hitler, to ask was his life meaningful or not, is a kind of peripheral question to what we mainly want to say about Hitler, which was that he was a monstrous human being, and left a monstrous legacy. So, I want to say, what's salient about Hitler was that he was evil, but it's not inconsistent with his living a meaningful life. I would want to contrast that with a certain kind of serial killer who—all the person does is kill a lot of people, and there is no value, no positive aspect that counts as the objectively valuable things that the serial killer is engaged in. That could be a meaningless life. Hitler's own life which was engaged in sort of big ideas and changing the world according to some values that presumably were positive ones, even though they were hopelessly

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intermixed with other values. It seems to me a conceivable way of imagining a Hitler, that there would be a mix of meaning and evil. That's my view about that. Now, your case of the torturer, I'm not sure what I want to say about it. I could be convinced either way. On the one hand, the suggestion is that the aim is very closely tied to something that is purely evil and has no positive value. So, by my theory, if you're subjectively engaged in something with no positive value, that doesn't give meaning to your life. But the adverbial aspect, the exquisite, artistic, creative aspect makes it sounds as if there is a positive value that is maybe contingent connected to it being used on torture. So, it makes the case a difficult one for me.

What about if I'm confronted with the knowledge that what I am most talented at is something not good? Wasn't it Einstein who said, "Had I known I would have become a locksmith." Now let's assume he would've made a really bad locksmith and he would've found it boring. But what he's saying is, "If I'd known that my work would turn into this," you know, the atomic bomb, "better that I lead a meaningless life."

Oh, well, that's possible.

So, what we're confronted with is: we still don't really know how to choose between meaning and morality, because it might be the case that we shouldn't make our lives as meaningful as they could be if the thing that you're best at and that you would have the most talent for is actually immoral.

I've never meant to suggest that we should live as meaningfully as possible any more than I believe that we should be as moral as possible. The aim is just to say, "Look, there are dimensions to the good life; there are dimensions to what's worth aspiring to and raising one's children, or encouraging one's society to aspire to, other than being as moral as possible or being moral and being happy." And, meaning is a sort of large category, in which a lot of other things fit. But the idea that one should maximize any one of these dimensions, especially insofar as they conflict with any of the others, is no part of my view. And, in fact, as the kind of example you're giving shows, it would be a bad thing to add to the view.

You're reminding me of an article I haven't read for years, but it was anthologized in various introductory ethics books, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn," isn't that Jonathan Bennett?

I love that article, yes, Bennett.

I remember it was my first semester of being a TA, this article enraged me, because you weren't in a position to judge—he says, "Well, obviously he was right not to follow the dictates of his conscience, but then—"And sometimes, Huck was right to do this, but so and so would've been wrong. And it was like, "What do we do?" And, that wasn't answered. And, you're perfectly okay with that?

Well, yes. I mean, by saying "okay," I don't mean happy about it, Look—there are no guarantees in life. One has to stay open-minded, and as soon as a philosopher or anyone else says, "This is self-evident, there's no going back," I think that's a very dangerous view to have, and, again, we can go back to our American politics right now. It's just very dangerous. You have to listen to the possible objections to something that seems self-evident to you now.

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But at the same time we think we can say fairly clearly that Huck was right.

With Jonathan Bennett—I teach this article a lot, because I think it's great, it's accessible. The way he opens, he says, "When I say something is right, all I mean by it is, I strongly believe in it, and expect my audience to as well." So, he is actually not an objectivist—I mean he doesn't have an objectivist view of values. So, again, it's wait-and-see. You start with, "Look, I'm talking to an audience, all of whom will agree with me, won't they, that Huck's decision not to turn in the runaway slave was the right decision?" And, the answer is yes, we all do agree with you. And, what's behind that and whether we're right to agree with you, that's a part of moral theory that he's not engaged in. But, we can start from there. We also all agree with him that Himmler made the wrong decision, by saying, "I'm not going to listen to the emotional reactions I have when I send people to the gas chambers. I'm going to act according to my ideology." I mean, he couldn't call it an ideology. Yeah, I mean, we all agree with that. But from the inside of course, in saying "I'm happy with it," as I said, no, you can't be happy about knowing for sure whether to listen to one's beliefs or one's heart, whether to believe one's role models or one's instincts—yeah, it'd be nice if those things conformed—but in some ways the theory, the method of reflective equilibrium is just a way of trying to go back and forth until you do get some kind of coherent view settling on you. But, what's the alternative? I mean, there is no alternative, so we just have to live in the messy, uncertain world we're stuck with.

Yeah, it's often the case that undergraduates taking a philosophy class, when this is their first philosophy class, get a little bit annoyed, and say, "Well, you keep telling me this, and then you tell me this. I just want the answers." So, my first undergraduate philosophy professor, Anthony Grayling, he used to say philosophy is not about answering questions, it's about questioning answers. That doesn't tend to satisfy them that much, but what do you say when people ask you, 'What's the point of philosophy?' or, do you think philosophy has a role in the public sphere? Why should it be taught in universities?

Well, I guess, asking that question encourages one to look for an answer in terms of how it makes us better citizens or better thinkers. And, I think there is a degree to which philosophy does make people better thinkers and better citizens. It makes them more tolerant of, more conversant in, more prone to thinking carefully and subtly, maybe recognizing distinctions and possibilities that they were not inclined to distinguish before. So, I think there is a lot of that. At the same time, when I ask myself, "Why am I doing philosophy?" well, there's another element, which is just—

It's what you're good at, and it's what you enjoy doing.

Well, it's not so much about what I'm good at. I think to live in a—well, it is that it's a tremendously satisfying thing. It's just satisfying to think hard, to correct oneself, to be challenged in these particular ways. I think it's satisfying for a lot of people, and it's potentially satisfying for a lot of people. In some ways, it's the same answer to why Shakespeare is taught in universities, because if you learn how to do it, and find yourself liking it, it can enrich your life in a tremendous way. I mean, it just makes you a fuller, richer person. So, that is an important aspect to me, of why I do philosophy, and one of the things that I want is to get my students to at least have the chance to see this way of thinking that can just be tremendously enriching. On the other hand, I confess, a lot of the courses I teach, when I choose what I want to teach, I want to teach courses that will connect to other parts of students' lives. I mean, I'm not just teaching to philosophy majors, much less to philosophy graduate students. So, I teach philosophy and gender in feminism, and

I teach aesthetics, in part to get them to experience better and think more carefully, and see in new ways things that they're necessarily going to be engaging with for the rest of their lives, to do it better and clearer and more fully. So, it's a mix of wanting to connect to other parts of their lives, and wanting them to just be able to love philosophy for its own sake.