

Darwin and the Meaning in Life*¹

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ABSTRACT

It has often been thought, and has recently been argued, that one of the most profound impacts of Darwin's theory of evolution is the threat that it poses to the very possibility of living a meaningful, and therefore worthwhile, life. Three attempts to ground the possibility of a meaningful life are considered. The first two are compatible with an exclusively Darwinian worldview. One is based on the belief that Darwinian evolution is, in some sense, progressive; the other is based on the belief that the natural world is a thing of value and hence, that our lives are lived in the presence of value. The third is based on a belief in providence, and holds that we must transcend the exclusively Darwinian worldview if we are to find meaning. All three are, for different reasons, rejected. The conclusion reached is that, contrary to what has often been thought and recently argued, the impact of Darwin's theory is precisely to liberate us to lead the most meaningful of lives.

KEYWORDS

Darwin, natural selection, higgledy-pigglety, meaningful life, worthwhile life, quiet courage

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this discussion, it will be assumed, without arguing the point here, that in order to be judged worthwhile, our lives must be experienced as meaningful, or must at least contain a sufficiency of meaningful experiences.² It might indeed be further argued that in order to be worthwhile, our lives must not simply be *experienced as* meaningful, but must actually *be* meaningful.³ If, therefore, we are interested in the question of what makes life worth living, we must also be interested in the question of what makes for a meaningful life.

It will further be assumed that we are creatures gifted (or fated) with a dual capacity: the capacity to focus on and be absorbed by our everyday preoccupations, coupled with the capacity simultaneously to take a long view – to consider, if you will, our place in the scheme of things. The question of ‘man’s place in nature’ is a key question of environmental philosophy and, interestingly, was judged by T.H. Huxley to be ‘the question of questions’ (1906, p. 52). Rightly so. For the view that we have of our place in the scheme of things will have a profound impact on the view that we (feel able to) take on the question of whether our lives are meaningful and worthwhile.

Given these assumptions, then, we must surely be more than a little interested in the suggestion coming recently from several quarters that the view of our place in nature that is based squarely on a belief in Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection militates against our ability to lead meaningful lives and therefore, in consequence, against our ability to lead worthwhile lives. And ‘more than a little’ is of course understatement, for, to echo what Plato says at *Republic* 344e: ‘our discussion is about no chance matter, but about how we should live our lives’.

The objective of this paper is to offer a robust rebuttal of the suggestion. Contrary to the suggestion, it will be argued, if we accept that our place in nature is much as Darwin describes it to be, we are liberated to lead the most fully meaningful of lives. The argument will be based on:

- (i) an analysis of exactly what a belief in Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection commits us to, and
- (ii) an analysis of roughly what might be involved in the living of a meaningful life.

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1.

Perhaps the most uncompromising expression of the suggestion is to be found in Herman Daly's article 'Policy, Possibility and Purpose' (Daly, 2002). According to Daly, the philosophy of neo-Darwinism leaves no room for the existence of the self-determining organisms that we take ourselves to be, since neo-Darwinism both embraces philosophical determinism and abandons the belief in an objective criterion of value. The implication of this claim is that committed neo-Darwinians cannot even begin to live meaningful lives. However, Daly's critique is vitiated by the fact that he arrives at this conclusion on the grounds that 'the underlying philosophy of neo-Darwinism is reductionistic materialism'. For Daly, neo-Darwinism entails that 'choice is an illusion and even if we had real options we have no criterion for choosing among them. Natural selection does it for us' (p. 188).

But Daly's view cannot possibly be sustained either from Darwin's writings or from those of leading neo-Darwinists. Natural selection itself, far from being a determined process is replete with choice. From examples too numerous to mention, consider the case of sexual selection about which Darwin writes that throughout the animal kingdom 'the females have the opportunity of selecting one out of several males, on the supposition that their mental capacity suffices for the exertion of choice' (*Descent of Man*, Ch. 8). Consider, even, Darwin's study of earthworms (Darwin, 1904), to a discussion of whose intelligence he devotes a considerable section of chapter 2 of that work (pp. 61–93), referring with no obvious unease to the 'choice' and 'judgement' that they exercise (p. 92) in 'their manner of plugging up their burrows' (p. 61).

And as for the neo-Darwinists, Stephen Jay Gould, for one, is quite clear on the point that biological factors clearly constrain, but do not determine human action: 'the statement that humans are animals does not imply that our specific patterns of behaviour and social arrangements are in any way directly determined by our genes. *Potentiality* and *determination* are different concepts' (Gould 1980, p. 251). Even Richard Dawkins, whose views might appear to fit the stereotype most closely, proves difficult to type-cast. It is true that he subscribes to what he calls the 'gene's eye view' of natural selection, but this does not make his position reductionist. Organisms are not merely 'vehicles for genes'; when it comes to natural selection, the organism is described as 'on its own' (Dawkins 1989, p. 52). Thus, genes provide neither an exclusive nor a comprehensive account of natural selection, as they would do if his position were reductionist. Rather, gene and

organism are ‘candidates for different, and complementary roles in the story’ (Dawkins 1989, p. 254).

By contrast, in the hands of Robin Attfield (2006) and John Cottingham (2003), the suggestion takes a decidedly more circumspect form. For Attfield, ‘there is no ultimate incompatibility between Darwinism and any of the various shared visions widely recognised as making life meaningful, religious and humanistic ones included’ (p. 190). But he appears less sanguine about the ‘Gene-Machine’ approach associated with Richard Dawkins, allowing only the *possibility* of construing this approach ‘in such a way that prospects remain for the lives of its adherents to be meaningful’. And his grudging conclusion is that ‘Darwinism *need* not undermine such meaningfulness in any of its versions, although Gene-Machine Darwinism can appear to put it at risk’ (p. 195, italics added). Mary Midgley’s concerns,⁴ by comparison, appear more far-reaching, since they focus on the role of natural selection itself. For Midgley, the neo-Darwinist orthodoxy which maintains that natural selection is the sole and exclusive cause of evolution makes ‘the world ... in some important sense, entirely random’.

Perhaps the most sustained development of the suggestion is to be found in John Cottingham’s *On the Meaning of Life*, the central chapter of which is devoted to discussing the ‘barrier to meaning’ posed by current scientific orthodoxy of which Darwinism is held to form a major part. Hence, a section of that central chapter is ominously entitled ‘The Shadow of Darwin’. Cottingham, like Midgley, worries about the randomness implicit in the Darwinist world view: ‘if current scientific orthodoxy is correct, our entire human existence is not much more than a random blip on the face of the cosmos’ (p. 31). He worries too about the ‘competitive viciousness’ and ‘seeming wastefulness’ of the evolutionary process (p. 62). To allay these worries, indeed, he thinks we need to look beyond Darwinism: ‘If there is at least the possibility of a religious interpretation of reality, this would open the way for our lives to have meaning in a strong sense ... So far from being a cosmic accident or by-product of blind forces, our lives would be seen as having a purpose – that of attuning ourselves to a creative order that is inherently good’ (p. 62). In response, let us first examine how far these concerns can be addressed from within the Darwinian world view.

2.

Within the Darwinian paradigm, a natural place to look for meaning might be in the sense that we are travelling some onward and upward evolution-

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ary path. As is well known, Darwin himself in the penultimate paragraph of *The Origin* – although he is more cautious elsewhere – looks to a future in which ‘all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection’. But as is also well enough known, neo-Darwinism refers to a version of Darwin’s theory that differs from it in significant ways. It is shorn of the Lamarckism of the original, but includes the addition of the Mendelian theory of inheritance. Darwin’s own theory, on the other hand, besides including a role for the inheritance of acquired characteristics e.g. through use and disuse, also contains the belief that the environment e.g. climate, could induce hereditary adaptations through ‘pangeneses’ i.e. the ability of somatic cells to influence sex cells (*Variation* ch. 27).

It is no surprise, then, that neo-Darwinists are more muted in their views; but the belief in progress of a kind persists. Indeed it would seem at first to be a natural corollary of the view that fitness is an explanatory notion – a view on which most neo-Darwinists seem to be agreed. In Stephen Jay Gould’s words, certain traits ‘confer fitness by an engineer’s criterion of good design, not by the empirical fact of their survival and spread’ (1980, p. 42). Mark Ridley (1985, p. 30) concurs: ‘That argument alone [sc. ‘the argument of design’] provides the criterion, independent of survival, of the “fittest”’. But Gould is quite clear that no inference can be drawn to progress, or even direction, for ‘To Darwin, improved meant only “better designed for an immediate, local environment”’. And this seems correct. For a contextualised *de facto* trend is contingent upon the continuance of the localised factors responsible which can, and do, readily change. Dawkins, however, gives a more exuberant reading, affirming that ‘Progressive “improvement” of the kind suggested by the arms-race image does go on, even if it goes on spasmodically and interruptedly’ (1988, p. 181). Hence, ‘later, more “modern” animals, whether predators or prey, would run rings round the earlier ones’ (p. 183).

Fortunately, we do not have to adjudicate these neo-Darwinist debates, since there is reason to think that even Gould’s modest account of how ‘fitness’ explains can be called into question. The reason was adumbrated by Anthony Manser in a paper published in 1965 and entitled, simply, ‘The Concept of Evolution’. The paper is notable for the way in which it problematises the concept of ‘environment’ as it is used to describe how natural selection works to make organisms better adapted to (more fit for) their environments. As Manser astutely observes: ‘In the melanism example, if it had not been for the change from light-coloured to dark-coloured forms, no one would have noticed that the blackening of the trees in some areas constituted a change in environment for the species’ (p. 26).⁵ The essential

point is that the term ‘environment’ cannot function in a de-contextualised way. It is not simply that it presupposes a focal point – a surrounding must surround something – but more crucially that it presupposes the potential for causal interaction between the surrounding and what it surrounds. Our environments are, precisely, those elements of our surroundings with which we potentially stand in a causal relationship (they are what David Cooper terms ‘fields of significance’ [1992]). It would follow from this reading that we cannot know what constitutes a creature’s environment in advance of knowing what does and does not impinge on its life. Thus, to speak of an organism’s adapting to its environment creates a somewhat misleading picture. It is rather that an organism creates its environment in a process of mutual adjustment. Hence the explanatory relation between survival and fitness is the opposite of the one that neo-Darwinists attempt to defend: it is not that an organism survives because it is fit (enough); rather, it is (proved to be) fit (enough) because it survives.

But what this most definitely does not entail is that Darwin’s ‘theory’ of natural selection lacks explanatory value. Explanations abound, but they are the everyday, mundane explanations of why any given organism survives long enough to reproduce.⁶ Hence it is the least theoretical, most ‘humdrum’, of theories. Indeed, one might venture to say that the ‘theory’ is, precisely, that no ‘theory’ is needed. True, one might attempt *de facto* generalisations of the kinds of everyday explanations that are found to obtain. But these will always present at best a partial view. Survival leading to reproduction will as often be secured, for example, through the avoidance of competition as through the possession of some property that secures a ‘competitive advantage’. At other times it will be secured through the capacity to remain inconspicuous and, in one or two cases where sexual selection plays its part, through the possession of a bluer backside than the next guy. Recall that Darwin’s aim was the limited one of explaining how the hereditary traits of a given population might change over time. For this aim to be achieved, the sole requirement is that the accumulation of everyday events affecting the survival and reproduction of a given population over a given period should result in differential selection – that is, selection producing some change in the pattern of distribution of the hereditary traits.

In light of the above we can say, on the one hand, that the so-called ‘tautology objection’ to Darwin’s principle of natural selection⁷ is in some sense vindicated. On the other hand we can say that it has none of the devastating consequences that Darwin’s creationist critics imagine. We need to see Darwin’s ‘theory’ as at least as indebted to the thought of Sir Charles Lyell as to that of Malthus. For the focus on Malthus and on the alleged effect of

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increasing numbers on the availability of food – ‘alleged’, given that many organisms are indeed food for other organisms so that their increase actually increases the availability of food – produces a very one-sided picture of the range of everyday events that are capable of bringing about differential selection. At least as significant, I would argue, is the major lesson that Darwin took from Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*⁸ – the power of small-scale incremental changes to bring about large-scale results. Nor does this ‘humdrum’ interpretation of Darwin’s theory in any way lessen our sense of his achievement. For what he grasped was the truly amazing possibility that the biosphere as we now know it came about largely as a result of the accumulated effect of innumerable small-scale everyday events. And if we now believe that several catastrophic events also played their part, and also reject the inheritance of acquired characteristics and the theory of pangenesis as contributory factors, this still marks no major departure from the spirit of Darwin’s theory.

According to this ‘humdrum’ version of neo-Darwinism, then, where we are now – the current state of the biosphere – is simply the result of an historical process and, like most historical processes therefore, a product of pure happenstance. Darwin was dismayed when he heard that John Herschel was referring to his book (*The Origin*) as ‘the law of higgledy-pigglety’ (letter to Lyell, 10 December 1859, Burkhardt 1996, p. 208). But he did not need to be. For we have found reason to think that Herschel got it about right. An additional virtue of this phrase is that it undercuts misleading references to natural selection as a ‘mechanistic process’ or to ‘the evolutionary mechanism’ (Kirkman 2009, p. 232; Cottingham 2003, p. 49). In any substantive sense of the term, there is nothing remotely ‘mechanical’ about the ‘higgledy-pigglety’. In a Darwinian world, then, there is no respite from the random, and no guiding star to which we can hitch our hopes for a meaningful life. Moreover, and for good measure, we should also take on board John Stuart Mill’s sobering account of the ‘protracted tortures’ and ‘hideous deaths’ that, with much else, are ‘nature’s everyday performances’ (1874, pp. 28–9). So far, therefore, we can in truth agree that the Darwinian world is every bit as random, contingent, remorseless and bleak as Cottingham, Midgley and others describe it to be.

3.

A second response to the suggestion under examination might be built upon a view favoured by many environmental philosophers – the view that the

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natural world is (on balance) imbued with value. For it might reasonably be inferred from this view that we must be glad to live our lives in the presence of such value, since it reassures us that we live in a world where there is something to live for. Paradoxically though, some of these same philosophers (for example, Eric Katz [1997] and Robert Elliot [1997]) also appear to think that if we engage with the natural world in any way, which one might think an obvious source of such gladness, we actually destroy the value – and must therefore presumably be made less glad.⁹

But in truth, it must be questioned whether the concept of value has any work to do in a Darwinian world, except as an empty place-holder. For if we consider any substantive account of value and attempt to apply the concept to items in the natural world, it quickly becomes apparent that incomparable and incommensurable values are the rule rather than the exception. The point is graphically illustrated by Robin Attfield's discussion of the implications of the existence of predation and parasitism for the value of the biosphere (Attfield 2006, pp. 129–30). He expresses dissatisfaction with Holmes Rolston's view that although parasitism is a disvalue, 'the segments of nature involving parasitism are of positive value overall', remarking that the real question is 'whether nature might have had more value ... in the complete absence of parasitism'. His conclusion is that 'In terms of what we value, systems involving predation and parasitism are better than the possible alternatives'. But one is bound to say that the steps along the way to this conclusion are so speculative as to remove all credibility from the conclusion itself. On first being invited to agree that 'parasitism can and often does involve gains to the system of nature' we are already struggling to understand how 'gains to the system of nature' are reckoned up. Undeterred, Attfield continues as follows:

... once the intrinsic value of the lives of the parasites themselves (such as, say, cuckoos or mistletoe) is included in the reckoning, alongside their various impacts, good and bad, then, even if there are instances which have apparently more disvalue than value, a serious basis still turns out to exist for claiming that parasitism introduces more value than would exist in its absence. This is because the value of the life of parasitic creatures themselves could well exceed the cost to the creatures who are their victims. (p. 130)

The note of caution introduced in the final sentence ('could well') is tantamount to an admission of the weakness of the approach. For 'could well' allows for 'might well not'; and then where are we with our 'reckoning'? A reckoning of the relative value of the life of a cuckoo and an outgrowth of mistletoe would be a start, but is unlikely to be forthcoming. And the impacts

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of even these two species, good and bad, which we are invited to ‘include in the reckoning’, could well be non-denumerable or at any rate indeterminate, and therefore beyond reckoning. Such an approach is not even suitable for the annual valuation of all UK assets¹⁰ because it neglects to consider the intangibles and invisibles that make such things assets in the first place – for example the supporting network of people’s habits, loyalties, virtues and commitments. It is wholly inappropriate for application to natural systems which embody such a network of relationships that it is folly to attempt to pick out, itemise and reckon the value of individual components.

But besides the host of doubts one might have about the basis for these ‘reckonings’, there is in any case surely something amiss in the idea that an event such as the influx of ladybirds to the North Norfolk coast in the summer of 2009, just to take an example at random, might actually tip the balance as to whether there is sufficient value in the natural world to make life worth living. That at any rate appears to be a logical implication of the attempt to take seriously the question whether the balance of value in the world is ‘in the black’ as a premise for the further question whether the world in which we live is such as to permit the living of worthwhile lives.

Of course there is value a-plenty in the natural world if we are speaking of relative value – the value of moisture to a plant, the value of camouflage to prey, or of visibility to predator and so forth. But it is well understood that no overall valuation of relative valuings of this sort should or even could be attempted.

4.

Bernard Williams has claimed that ‘there is a “problem of evil” only for those who think that the world is good’ (1993, p. 68). The presence of suffering and evil, however, surely poses a problem for any attempt to live a meaningful, and therefore worthwhile, life, regardless of whether or not one thinks the world is good. For, given our capacity for ‘the long view’, such a life will continue to be haunted by the thought that the cost is too high. But note already how, in this context, it seems wholly inappropriate to treat suffering as a ‘disvalue’, merely. The issue raised by suffering is not whether it is of such a degree and kind as to threaten the overall balance of value in the world. Rather, the issue raised by suffering – both our own and that of countless other creatures – is how much we can bear and how we can bear it.

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It is not surprising then that many respond, like Cottingham, by taking refuge in the notion of a cosmos that is, even in the most vestigial sense, providentially ordered. For this affords the assurance that, whatever the cost in pain, suffering and evil, somewhere, somehow, these costs are redeemed. In Cottingham's words, such a view 'would locate our human destiny within an enduring moral framework' (2003, p. 62). Or again: 'because of the fragility of our human condition ... we need to be sustained by a faith in the ultimate resilience of the good; we need to live in the light of hope' (p. 104).

However, and despite Cottingham's vigorous defence, this response, in turn, appears too hasty. For on the one hand, the difficulty of living a meaningful and worthwhile life under the Darwinian world view is less severe than it appears at first sight. And on the other hand, it can be argued that the belief in providence actually detracts from, rather than enhances, the prospects for such a life. The argument turns on what we think brings meaning to our lives.

Cottingham is surely right to observe that talk of 'meaning' in life 'is inescapably evaluative talk' (p. 20). Nor can it be doubted that meaningful lives might be attainable under all sorts of conditions and in all sorts of ways, so that it would be absurdly presumptuous to offer a 'prescription' for such a life. Nevertheless, some markers of the meaningful life can be helpful – open, of course, to critical examination – as can the identification of factors (extreme triviality, or extreme viciousness perhaps) that arguably render the ascription untenable.

That said, the specific markers offered by Cottingham, and used by him to draw negative conclusions regarding the prospects for a meaningful life under Darwinism, are readily open to challenge. Firstly, his attempt to set up a contrast between the 'mere local satisfaction of contingent wants' that a secular Darwinist must allegedly settle for, and the 'enduring moral framework' made possible by a 'religious interpretation of reality' (p. 62) really won't do. For if it is impossible to base a meaningful life on the local satisfaction of wants, this is because it is impossible to build meaning from the satisfaction of wants, not because there is anything amiss with local contingency. And one might rather think that there better had be contingency in the moral framework. For if, say, environmental stewardship is currently at a premium in our moral framework, there would appear to be an element of contingency about this fact. For there was almost certainly a time earlier in human development when tribal loyalty was at a premium, and environmental stewardship, perhaps, wholly irrelevant and inappropriate.

Secondly, although he characterises the Darwinian stance as involving 'our feeling thrown into an arbitrary alien world where nothing ultimately

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matters' (p. 9), he offers no defence at all of the assumption that 'mattering' must be 'ultimate' and cannot be quotidian. Nor is use of the epithet 'alien' justified or even appropriate, given that every single organism alive on the planet today can trace their ancestry back for at least three billion years, and given that the 'ties that bind' each generation to the next are of such significance.

Thirdly, he argues that hope, which he rightly identifies as a potentially crucial ingredient of the meaningful life – for despair (the absence of hope) is a powerful corrosive – must be supported by faith in 'the ultimate resilience of the good'. His argument is that the very idea of a meaningful life can begin to seem a fantasy 'if the ultimate nature of reality contains no bias towards the good ..., if there is nothing to support the hope that the good will ultimately triumph, if essentially we are on our own, with no particular reason to think that our pursuit of the good is any more than a temporary fragile disposition ...' (p. 72). Now a Darwinian will likely sign up to all of these conditionals and in consequence, by Cottingham's reasoning, be deprived of any grounds for hope. But a Darwinian will also make no sense of the notion of 'the ultimate triumph of the good' and hence will likely think this a delusional hope to begin with. And it is far from obvious that the only alternative to despair is a hope that the good will ultimately triumph. For there are many forms of despair and correspondingly many forms of hope. Many of these forms are still and small and quiet, and have little to do with grandiloquent ideas about the ultimate triumph of the good. Hence a Darwinian will prefer to trust the wisdom of the ancient Greek myth which places hope, alone, inside Pandora's box alongside all the ills which beset the world.

Fourthly, in company with many others, Cottingham lays considerable store by the importance of a goal or purpose to the living of a meaningful life: 'to be meaningful, an activity must be *achievement-oriented*, that is, directed towards some goal' (p. 21). And this has ramifications since it leads him to suggest that since the Darwinist has no faith in the 'buoyancy of the good', she must continually face the prospect of short-term failure and long-term futility. This in turn means little prospect of success and therefore little prospect of meaningful activity (pp. 67–70). However, it may be replied that the emphasis on goals, achievement and success is misguided. For provided that a life is no more than normally sinful, then I would urge that no more is required for that life to be meaningful than, for example, the presence of some creature to love, human or non-human. A further issue arises if we stipulate that the life in question is afflicted by – say – Downs syndrome. For Cottingham also includes self-awareness in his list of re-

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quirements, and this too can be challenged. At the very least, the relevant concept of self-awareness needs to be carefully articulated, since there are certain forms of self-awareness that a person with Downs may not possess. However, the question of the ascription of meaningful lives to those who are in some sense innocent of the ways of the world, though fascinating, cannot be pursued further here.

Fifthly, although I have no quarrel whatever with the contention that moral values form an inescapable touchstone of the meaningful life (p. 31), Cottingham himself seems to think this view difficult to sustain if, as Darwinists hold, human existence is no more than 'a random blip on the face of the cosmos'. But how so? As David Schmidtz persuasively argues (2008, ch. 4 – 'Reasons for Altruism'), we humans have good reason to build morality into a life well lived – a meaningful life. Basically this is because it gives us both more to live for and more that is worth living for. Being moral, we come to have 'a self worth caring about' and become and remain 'a self worth living for' (p. 71, sqq.). But to this fact, whether we are random blip or no seems supremely irrelevant. Furthermore, it is arguable that the temporary fragility of that life is what makes it all the more precious, and its self-affirmation, in consequence, all the more meaningful.

So far, in this section, we have attempted to resist the claim put forward by Cottingham and others that some special difficulty besets the committed Darwinist who aspires to live a meaningful and worthwhile life. The second part of the argument is an attempt to 'turn the tables', suggesting that if there is a difficulty, it besets more the providentialist than the Darwinist.

The argument takes its starting point from Paul Tillich's reflections on the three sources of anxiety that he regards as part and parcel of the human condition – namely fate and death, guilt and condemnation, and, above all, emptiness and meaninglessness. The last of these is central: 'For the anxiety of meaninglessness undermines what is still unshaken in the anxiety of fate and death and of guilt and condemnation' (1962, p. 169). Together, these anxieties conspire to create the conditions for despair. At this point he advances what seems to me a most telling insight. His contention is that life at its best – the most meaningful and worthwhile of lives – involves self-affirmation in the face of these anxieties. Equally important is his next observation: that this requires above all the virtue of courage. It is for this reason that he so admires the Stoics whom he regards as having 'a social and personal courage which is a real alternative to Christian courage' (p. 210).

Now Cottingham is no stranger to such reflections, but he is inclined to reject them because of their inegalitarian implications: 'to take the superhuman heroism of the defiant Sisyphus as our model is again the inegalitarian

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manoeuvre, presupposing the need for a courage so indomitable as to deny realistic prospects for happiness, let alone meaning to countless numbers of human beings' (p. 70). The flaw in this response is the restrictive understanding of courage that underlies it. For courage, like hope, takes many forms. And a quiet courage which takes the form of endurance, displayed not in the face of danger but in the face of suffering, death, guilt and emptiness, is not only in principle *open to* all but in practice is *required of* almost all of us, unless we happen to live unusually charmed lives.

The suggestion we can take forward, then, is that the most meaningful and worthwhile of lives is one that both calls forth and demands the exercise of certain sorts of courage. The final part of the argument is that the conditions calling forth and requiring the exercise of these sorts of courage are more likely to be encountered in a Darwinist than a providentialist world. For three reasons:

a) *The problem of the built-in purpose.*

From the Darwinist claim that (human) existence has no purpose one is sometimes invited to conclude that (individual) life has no point. But one might more plausibly argue to the contrary that individual life would have no point if there were already a purpose to human existence, and that Darwin's theory precisely liberates us to lead individually meaningful lives. For either the existence of a built-in purpose is entirely irrelevant to our worthwhile lives, or it is not. If it is, then it is hard to see how the providentialist perspective has any traction. If it is not, then there is the problem of living to another's purpose. This, I would argue, undermines self-affirmation and detracts from a meaningful life. Suppose that our friend invites us out for the day. We think he invites us out because he enjoys our company. In fact, he is feeling sorry for us and, for the best of intentions, thought it would do us good to get out. If we never find out, then from a purely subjective point of view we shall enjoy it the same either way. But from an impersonal point of view, there is a case for saying that this detracts from the worthwhileness of the experience.

b) *The solution as obstacle.*

Given a faith that the ultimate nature of reality contains a bias towards the good, we must in consequence believe that no matter what the degree and kind of suffering there is in the world, it will ultimately be redeemed. We must in other words believe that a solution to the problem of suffering is built into the fabric of the cosmos. While this still requires the courage to endure our personal sufferings, we are not in the same way called to take on the sufferings of the world. The Darwinist, on the other hand, if she is able,

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must endure both personal suffering and the sufferings that are ‘nature’s everyday performances’ and in doing so can, if Tillich is correct, aspire to the most meaningful of lives.

c) The necessity of an open question

For those who espouse the Darwinist vision, the very possibility of living a worthwhile life has to be an open question. Now one may happen to think that it is indeed an open question whether the conditions of life in general make it possible to live a worthwhile life; and most of us, even if only on occasion or in our darker moments, I suspect, may think it at least a close call. And if at those times we persevere, it may be out of bloody-mindedness rather than out of conviction. But the argument does not rest on supposing it to be a fact, only on supposing it to be an implication of the Darwinist vision. For if it is true, then it can be argued that the living of a life with no assurance that it will be worthwhile gives that life a zest and calls for the most meaningful form of self-affirmation. At the same time it can be argued that such an incentive and challenge is wholly absent under a providentialist vision in which the idea that worthwhile lives may not be possible cannot be entertained.

5.

My conclusion is that, in the pursuit of a worthwhile life, it is better by far to unleash and relish that rich range of responses awakened in us by a natural world that, from a Darwinian perspective, we can find in turn exhilarating, intriguing, fragile, bleak, fascinating, sombre, awe-inspiring, poignant, mysterious, threatening and – it may be – unutterably sad. If the ingredients of worthwhile lives cannot be found here then, I contend, they are not to be found anywhere. And, with apologies to Darwin (*Origin*, final paragraph), there is grandeur in this view of meaning that makes worthwhile lives open to all, rather than hostage to the Syren charms of progress, salvation or a sufficiency of value.

NOTES

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¹ The phrase ‘meaning in life’ is chosen to indicate that our topic is the individually meaningful life, rather than ‘The Meaning of Life’. For an intriguing discussion of this latter topic, see Cooper 2003, ch.7.

² For further discussion of the connection, see e.g. Firth 2008. In these broad brush reflections, many issues must remain unattended to. However, the issue of what counts as a sufficiency probably ought to remain unattended to.

³ On this point at least we are concurring with John Cottingham’s view that ‘the term “meaningful” carries with it a package of criteria for its appropriate use’ (2003, p. 24).

⁴ Expressed in a letter to the *Guardian*, 6 September 2005, p.23, and quoted by Attfield, 2006, p.190.

⁵ He is referring to the classic study by H.B.D. Kettlewell of industrial melanism in the peppered moth *Biston betularia*. For more detail see e.g. Ridley 1985, pp.27–28.

⁶ The continued use of the term ‘everyday’, as distinct from ‘naturalistic’ or – worse – ‘materialistic’, is deliberate and, I believe, closer to the spirit of Darwin, given his well-known aversion to metaphysical disputes.

⁷ First stated, according to Mark Ridley (1985, 29), by the Bishop of Carlisle in 1890. The objection goes that fitness can only ultimately be demonstrated through survival. Hence the survival of the fittest is simply the survival of those who survive – a tautology. A classic discussion of the objection can be found in Stephen Jay Gould’s essay ‘Darwin’s Untimely Burial’ (Gould, 1980, pp.39–45).

⁸ Which, according to the Autobiography, he ‘studied attentively’ during his voyage on the Beagle.

⁹ Thus, Katz writes that ‘When humans intervene in nature .. we destroy [its] natural autonomy by imposing a system of domination’ (op. cit., p.129 cf. ‘wherever the process of domination exists .. it attacks the pre-eminent value of self-realization’ p.130); and Elliot, in similar vein, that ‘There is .. a recognizable point to the claim that even the harmonious transformation of nature drains it of significant intrinsic value, contaminating it with human purposiveness’ (op. cit., pp.148–149).

¹⁰ Which, at the end of 2008, apparently stood at £6,954bn (*Daily Telegraph*, Business section B3, 4 August 2009).

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