

**PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology  
Truth and Reality**

**Handout (24)**

**David Wiggins: Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life**

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\* Class exercise:

\_\_\_ What would you wish to have accomplished for you to feel that your life is not wasted, that you will have on regret if you have to die the next day?

**§ Meaning of Life and Moral Philosophy**

1. The question of truth and the question of life's meaning are among the most fundamental questions of moral philosophy.
2. My finding will be that the question of life's meaning does, as the untheoretical suppose, lead into the question of truth – and conversely.

**§ What is the meaning of life?**

\_\_\_ We have more or less abandoned the idea that the importance of emancipation or progress is that these are marks by which our minute speck in the universe can distinguish itself as the spiritual focus of the cosmos. Perhaps that is what makes the question of the meaning we can find in life so difficult and so desolate for us.

\* **the myth of Sisyphus [see extra handouts]**

**[1] Richard Taylor's View: Non-cognitivism**

\_\_\_ Meaninglessness is essentially *endless pointlessness*, and meaningfulness is therefore the opposite.

\_\_\_ Suppose the gods have implanting in him some substance that has this effect on his character and drives... Sisyphus has been reconciled to his existence.... He has been led to embrace it.

\_\_\_ ... how an existence that is objectively meaningless, in this sense, can nonetheless acquire a meaning for him whose existence it is.

\_\_\_ Our achievements..., those that do last, like the sand-swept pyramids, soon become mere curiosities, while around them the rest of mankind continues its perpetual toting of rocks, only to see them roll down.

\_\_\_ What picture now presents itself to our minds? It is precisely the picture of infinite boredom! Of Sisyphus doing nothing ever again, but contemplating what he has already wrought and can no longer add anything to, and contemplating it for eternity! Now in this picture we have a meaning for Sisyphus' existence, a point for his prodigious labor, because we have put it there; yet, at the same time, that which is really worthwhile seems to have slipped away entirely.

\_\_\_ The meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in its beauty and permanence any heaven of which men have ever dreamed or yearned for.

**[2] Wiggins' Critique of Non-cognitivism: the outside/inside; the subjective/objective distinction is incoherent**

\_\_\_ On the non-cognitive account, life is *objectively* meaningless. But the will itself, taking the inner view, picks and chooses, deliberates, weighs. And tests its own concerns. The extension of the concept *objective* is quite different on the inner view from the extension assigned to it by the outer view.

\_\_\_ The non-cognitive account depends for its whole plausibility upon abandoning at the level of theory the inner perspective that it commends as the only possible perspective upon life's meaning. This is a kind of incoherence, and one that casts some doubt upon the distinction of the inside and the outside viewpoints.

\_\_\_ I also believe that, once we break down the supposed distinction between the inner or particular and the outer, supposedly objective viewpoints, there will be a route by which we can advance.

**\* Valuational Judgments vs. Deliberative (Practical) Judgments**

I propose that we distinguish between *valuations* (typically recorded by such forms as 'x is good', 'bad', 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'ignoble', 'brave', 'just', 'mischievous', 'malicious', 'worthy', 'honest', 'corrupt', 'disgusting', 'amusing', 'diverting', 'boring', etc. – no restrictions at all on the category of x) and *directive* or *deliberative* (or practical) judgment (e.g., 'I must  $\psi$ ', 'I ought to  $\psi$ ', 'it would be best, all things considered, for me to  $\psi$ ', etc.).

**\* Differences in meaningful life from an *objective* point of view**

e.g. the life of the cannibalistic blindworms  $\neq$  the life of creatures that are conscious, can rest without sleeping, can adjust the end to the means as well as the means to the end, and can take in far more about the world than they have the immediate or instrumental need to take in.

e.g. the life of someone who contributes something to a society with a continuing history  $\neq$  life lived on the plan of a southern pig-breeder (circular reasons: hog  $\rightarrow$  land  $\rightarrow$  hog...)

\_\_\_ But on the non-cognitive view of the inner view there is no way to make these differences stick.

**§ Anthropocentric/Non- Anthropocentric and Subjective/Objective**

Let me point out immediately the *prima facie* implausibility of the idea that the distinction between objectivity and non-objectivity (which appears to have to do with the existence of publicly accepted and rationally criticizable standards of argument, or of ratiocination towards truth) should coincide with the distinction between the anthropocentric and the non-anthropocentric (which concerns orientation towards human interests or a human point of view).

**\* the conclusive critique of non-cognitivism:**

No attempt to make sense of the human condition can make sense of it if it treats the objects of psychological states as unequal partners or derivative elements in the conceptual structure of values and states and their objects. This is worse than Aristotle's opposite error:

We desire the object because it seems good to us, rather than the object's seeming good to us because we desire it.

Surely an adequate account of these matters will have to treat psychological states and their objects as equal and reciprocal partners, and is likely to need to see the identifications of the states and of the properties under which the states subsume their objects as interdependent.

\_\_\_ Surely it can be true both that we desire  $x$  because we think  $x$  good, and that  $x$  is good because (it is such that) we desire  $x$ .

e.g., 'red', 'funny', ...

**§ Wiggins' Moderate Cognitivism**

1. Perspective is not a form of illusion, distortion, or delusion. All the different perspectives of a single array of objects are perfectly consistent with one another.
2. Moral judgments can have truth value, which lies in their "assertibility."
3. Given any  $L$ -sentence  $s$ , the axioms can be deployed to derive a pairing of  $s$  with an assertion condition  $p$ , the pairing being stated in the metalanguage by a theorem in the form:
 

$s$  is assertible if and only if  $p$ .
4. The assertion conditions give the meanings of the judgments he wants to comment upon.
5. What is *interpretation* or *translation* in this context is to come up with a set  $\Sigma$  of equivalences ' $s$  is assertible just in case  $p$ ' (one equivalence for each sentence of  $L$ ) with the following overall property: a theorist who employs the condition  $p$  with which each sentence  $s$  is mated in a  $\Sigma$ -equivalence, and who employs the equivalence to interpret utterances of  $s$ , is in the best position he can be to make the *best possible overall sense* there is to be made of  $L$ -speakers.
6. The theorist need not have exactly the same beliefs as his subjects. But the descriptions of the world that are available to him are essentially the same sorts of description as those available to his subjects.

7. It follows that the possibility simply does not exist for the theorist to stand off entirely from the language of his subjects or from the viewpoint that gives this its sense. He has to begin at least by embracing – or by making as if to embrace – the very same commitments and world-view as the ordinary speakers of the object language.
8. We do not need to pretend to be outside our own conceptual scheme, or at a point that ought to have been both inaccessible and unthinkable. The question is one we can pursue by working with informal elucidations of truth and assertibility that can be fruitfully constrained by the project of radical interpretation.

## § Wiggins's Refutation of Relativism

### \* The Futile Search for "Cosmic" Rationality

After all there is no such thing as a rational creature of no particular neuro-physiological formation or a rational man of no particular historical formation. And even if, inconceivably, there were such, why should we care about what this creature would find compelling?

Suppose we take a Peircean view of Science as discovering that which is destined, the world being what it is, to be ultimately agreed by all who investigate. Let 'all' mean 'all actual or possible intelligent beings competent, whatever their conceptual scheme, to look for the fundamental explanatory principles of the world'. Then think of all these theories gradually converging through isomorphism towards identity. Cosmic rationality in belief will then consist in conforming one's beliefs so far as possible to the truths that are destined to survive in this process of convergence.

This Peircean conceptual scheme *articulates* nothing that is humanly possible to care about.

This is a very stark view. It expresses what was an important element of truth in the 'external' perspective. Seeing the world in this way, one sees no meaning in anything.

I conclude that there is no such thing as a pure *a priori* theory of rationality conceived in isolation from what it is for us as we are to have a reason: and that even if there were such a thing, it would always have been irrelevant to the problem of finding a meaning in life, or seeing anything as worthwhile. What we need is to define non-cognitivist relativism in a way that is innocent of all dependence on a contrast between our rationality and some purer rationality

## § Wiggins' Final Attack on Non-cognitivism

\* **The doctrine of cognitive underdetermination** – the distinctive nucleus of non-cognitivism

\_\_\_ In so far as human life has the meaning we think it has, that possibility is rooted in something that is arbitrary, contingent, unreasoned, objectively non-defensible.

\_\_\_ Our form of life is not something that we as a species has ever found or discovered. It is not something that we can criticize or regulate or adjust with an eye to what is true or correct or reasonable. Even within the going enterprise of existing concerns and deliberations, it would be a sad illusion to suppose that the judgment that this or that is worthwhile, or that life is worth living, would be simply and plainly true.

\* **Its implications:**

1. In living a life there is no truth, and there is nothing very like plain truth, for us to aim at.
2. Anybody who supposes that the assertibility of ‘I must do this’ or the assertibility of ‘This is the way for me to live, not that’ consists in their plain truth is simply deluded.
3. In reality there is no such thing as *The Good*, no such thing as knowledge of it, and nothing fixed independently of ourselves to aim at.

\* **Wiggins’ suggestion:**

(1) ***Take out the demand on “uniqueness”:***

\_\_\_ What philosophers, even philosophers of objectivist formation, have constantly stressed is the absence of the unique solutions and unique determinations of the practical that naïve cognitivism would have predicated. [But this view is wrong.]

(2) ***Accept the value of “invention”:***

\_\_\_ The familiar idea [of the non-cognitivist] is that we do not discover a meaning for life or strictly find one: we have to make do with an artifact or construct or projection – something as it were invented. And, whereas discovery is answerable to truth, invention and construction are not. [But this view is false.]

§ **Summary of Wiggins’ Critique:**

1. **However rarely or frequently practical judgments can attain to truth or not, and whatever is the extent and importance of cognitive underdetermination, we have found no overwhelming reason to deny all objectivity even to practical judgments.**
2. **That practical questions sometimes have more than one answer, and that there is not always an ordering of better or worse answers, is no reason to conclude that good and bad answers cannot be argumentatively distinguished.**

3. **It is either false or senseless to deny that what valuational predicates stand for are properties in a world.**
4. **Individual human lives can have more or less point in a manner partially dependent upon the disposition in the world of these value properties.**
5. **In as much as invention and discovery are distinguishable, and in so far as either of these ideas properly belongs here, life's having a point may depend as much upon something contributed by the person whose life it is as it depends upon something discovered. Or it may depend upon what the owner of the life brings to the world in order to see the world in such a way as to discover meaning. This cannot happen unless world and person are to some great extent reciprocally suited.**

**§ Conclusion: What is *the* meaning of life?**

It would be better to go back to the 'the' in the original question; and to interest ourselves afresh in what everyone knows about – the set of concerns he actually has, their objects, and the focus he has formed or seeks to bring to bear upon these: also the prospects of purifying, redeploying or extending this set.