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went frequently an attack, covert or overt, on the elites which had made these forms their province.

I believe that this affirmation of ordinary life, although not uncontested and frequently appearing in secularized form, has become one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization. It underlies our contemporary "bour­ geois" politics, so much concerned with issues of welfare, and at the same time powers the most influential revolutionary ideology of our century, Marxism, with its apotheosis of man the producer. This sense of the importance of the everyday in human life, along with its corollary about the importance of suffering, colours our whole understanding of what it is truly to respect human life and integrity. Along with the central place given to autonomy, it defines a version of this demand which is peculiar to our civilization, the modern West.

1 .4

Thus far I have been exploring only one strand of our moral intuitions, albeit an extremely important one. These are the moral beliefs which duster around the sense that human life is to be respected and that the prohibitions and obligations which this imposes on us are among the most weighty and serious in our lives. I have been arguing that there is a peculiarly modern sense of what respect involves, which gives a salient place to freedom and self-control, places a high priority on avoiding suffering, and sees productive activity and family life as central to our well-being. But this duster of moral intuitions lies along only one of the axes of our moral life. There are others to which the moral notions that I have been discussing are also relevant.

'Morality', of course, can be and often is defined purely in terms of respect for others. The category of the moral is thought to encompass just our obligations to other people. B.ut if we adopt this definition, then we have to allow that there are other questions beyond the moral which are of central

concern to us, and which bring strong evaluation into play. There are

questions about how I am going to live my life which touch on the issue of what kind of life is worth living, or what kind of life would fulfill the promise implicit in my particular talents, or the demands incumbent on someone with my endowment, or of what constitutes a rich, meaningful life-as against one concerned with secondary matters or trivia. These are issues of strong evaluation, because the people who ask these questions have no doubt that one can, following onets immediate wishes and desires, take a wrong turn and

hence fail to lead a full life. To understand our moral world we have to see not only what ideas and pictures underlie our sense of respect for others but

also those which underpin our notions of a full life. And as we shall see, these are not two quite separate orders of ideas. There is a substantial overlap or,

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rather, a complex relation in which some of the same basic notions reappear in a new way. This is particularly the case for what I called above the affirmation of ordinary life.

In general, one might try to single out three axes of what can be called, in

the most general sense, moral thinking. As well as the two just mentioned­ our sense of respect for and obligations to others, and our understandings of

what makes a full life-there is also the range of notions concerned with dignity. By this I mean the characteristics by which we think of ourselves as commanding (or failing to command) the respect of those around us. Here the term 'respect' has a slightly different meaning than in the above. I'm not

talking now about respect for rights, in the sense of non-infringement, which we might call 'active' respect, but rather of thinking well of someone, even looking up to him, which is what we imply when we say in ordinary speech

that he has our respect. (Let's call this kind 'attitudinal'.)

Our 'dignity', in the particular sense I am using it here, is our sense of ourselves as commanding (attitudinal) respect. The issue of what one's dignity consists in is no more avoidable than those of why we ought to respect others' rights or what makes a full life, however much a naturalist philosophy might mislead us into thinking of this as another domain of mere 'gut' reactions, similar to those of baboons establishing their hierarchy. And in this case, its unavoidability ought to be the more obvious in that our dignity is so much woven into our very comportment. The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, of pride or shame. Our style of movement expresses how we see ourselves as enjoying respect or lacking it, as commanding it or failing to do so. Some people flit through public space as though avoiding it, others rush through as though hoping to sidestep the issue of how they appear in it by the very serious purpose with which they transit

through it; others again saunter through with assurance, savouring their moments within it; still others swagger, confident of how their presence marks it: think of the carefully leisurely way the policeman gets out of his car, having stopped you for speeding, and the slow, swaying walk over as he comes to demand your licence.8

Just what do we see our dignity consisting in? It can be our power, our sense of dominating public space; or our invulnerability to power; or our self-sufficiency, our life having its own centre; or our being liked and looked to by others, a centre of attention. But very often the sense of dignity can ground in some of the same moral views I mentioned above. For instance, my sense of myself as a householder, father of a family, holding down a job, providing for my dependants; all this can be the basis of my sense of dignity. JUSt as its absence can be catastrophic, can shatter it by totally undermining





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my feeling of self-worth. Here the sense of dignity is woven into this modern notion of the importance of ordinary life, which reappears again on this axis.

Probably something like these three axes exists in every culture. But there are great differences in how they are conceived, how they relate, and in their relative importance. For the warrior and honour ethic that seems to have been dominant among the ruling strata of archaic Greece, whose deeds were celebrated by Homer, this third axis seems to have been paramount, and seems even to have incorporated the second axis without remainder. The

*'agathos'* is the man of dignity and power.9 And enough of this survives into

the classical period for Plato to have depicted an ethic of power and self-aggrandizement as one of his major targets, in figures like Callicles and Thrasymachus. For us, this is close to inconceivable. It seems obvious that the first axis has paramountcy, followed by the second. Connected with this, it would probably have been incomprehensible to the people of that archaic period that the first axis should be conceived in terms of an ethic of general principles, let alone one founded on reason, as against one grounded in religious prohibitions which brooked no discussion.

One of the most important ways in which our age stands out from earlier ones concerns the second axis. A set of questions make sense to us which turn around the meaning of life and which would not have been fully understand­ able in earlier epochs. Moderns can anxiously doubt whether life has meaning, or wonder what its meaning is. However philosophers may be inclined to attack these formulations as vague or confused, the fact remains that we all have an immediate sense of what kind of worry is being articulated in these words.

We can perhaps get at the point of these questions in the following way. Questions along the second axis can arise for people in any culture. Someone in a warrior society might ask whether his tale of courageous deeds lives up to the promise of his lineage or the demands of his station. People in a religious culture often ask whether the demand of conventional piety are

sufficient for them or whether they don't feel called to some purer, more dedicated vocation. Figures of this kind have founded most of the great religious orders in Christendom, for instance. But in each of these cases, some framework stands unquestioned which helps define the demands by which they judge their lives and measure, as it were, their fulness or emptiness: the space of fame in the memory and song of the tribe, or the call of God as made clear in revelation, or, to take another example, the hierarchical order of being in the universe.

It is now a commonplace about the modern world that it has made these

frameworks problematic. On the level of explicit philosophical or theological doctrine, this is dramatically evident. Some traditional frameworks are discredited or downgraded to the status of personal predilection, like the

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space of fame. Others have ceased to be credible altogether in anything like their original form, like the Platonic notion of the order of being. The forms of revealed religion continue very much alive, but also highly contested. None

forms the horizon of the whole society in the modern West.

This term 'horizon' is the one that is frequently used to make this point. What Weber called 'disenchantment', the dissipation of our sense of the cosmos as a meaningful order, has allegedly destroyed the horizons in which people previously lived their spiritual lives. Nietzsche used the term in his celebrated "God is dead" passage: "How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon?"IO Perhaps this way of putting it appeals above all to the intellectuals, who put a lot of stock in the explicit doctrines that people subscribe to, and anyway tend to be unbelievers. But the loss of horizon described by Nietzsche's fool undoubtedly corresponds to something very widely felt in our culture.

This is what I tried to describe with the phrase above, that frameworks

today are problematic. This vague term points towards a relatively open disjunction of attitudes. What is common to them all is the sense that no framework is shared by everyone, can be taken for granted as *the* framework tout court, can sink to the phenomenological status of unquestioned fact. This basic understanding refracts differently in the stances people take. For

some it may mean holding a definite traditionally defined view with the self-conscious sense of standing against a major part of one's compatriots. Others may hold the view but with a pluralist sense that it is one among others, right for us but not necessarily binding on them. Still others identify with a view but in the somewhat tentative, semi-provisional way I described above in section 1. 2.. This seems to them to come close to formulating what they believe, or to saying what for them seems to be the spiritual source they can connect their lives with; but they are aware of their own uncertainties, of how far they are from being able to recognize a definitive formulation with

ultimate confidence. There is alway something tentative in their adhesion, and they may see themselves, as, in a sense, seeking. They are on a 'quest', in Alasdair MacIntyre'S apt phrase. l!

With these seekers, of course, we are taken beyond the gamut of traditionally available frameworks. Not only do they embrace these traditions tentatively, but they also often develop their own versions of them, or idiosyncratic combinations of or borrowings from or semi-inventions within

them. And this provides the context within which the question of meaning has its place.

To the extent that one sees the finding of a believable framework as the object of a quest, to that extent it becomes intelligible that the search might

fail. This might happen through personal inadequacy, but failure might also come from there being no ultimately believable framework. Why speak of

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this in terms of a loss of meaning? Partly because a framework is that in virtue of which we make sense of our lives spiritually. Not to have a framework is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless. The quest is thus always a quest for sense.

But the invocation of meaning also comes from our awareness of how much the search involves articulation. We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our own powers of expression. Discovering here depends on, is interwoven with, inventing. Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate. There is thus something particularly appropriate to our condition in the polysemy of the word 'meaning': lives can have or lack it when they have or lack a point; while it also applies to language and other forms of expression. More and more, we moderns attain meaning in the first sense, when we do, through creating it in the second sense.

The problem of the meaning of life is therefore on our agenda, however much we may jibe at this phrase, either in the form of a threatened loss of meaning or because making sense of our life is the object of a quest. And those whose spiritual agenda is mainly defined in this way are in a fundamentally different existential predicament from that which dominated most previous cultures and still defines the lives of other people today. That alternative is a predicament in which an unchallengeable framework makes imperious demands which we fear being unable to meet. We face the prospect of irretrievable condemnation or exile, of being marked down in obloquy forever, or being sent to damnation irrevocably, or being relegated to a lower order through countless future lives. The pressure is potentially immense and inescapable, and we may crack under it. The form of the danger here is utterly different from that which threatens the modern seeker, which is something dose to the opposite: the world loses altogether its spiritual contour, nothing is worth doing, the fear is of a terrifying emptiness, a kind of vertigo, or even a fracturing of our world and body-space.

To see the contrast, think of Luther, in his intense anguish and distress before his liberating moment of insight about salvation through faith, his sense of inescapable condemnation, irretrievably damning himself through the very instruments of salvation, the sacraments. However one might want to describe this, it was not a crisis of meaning. This term would have made no sense to Luther in its modern use that I have been describing here. The

'meaning' of life was all too unquestionable for this Augustinian monk, as it was for his whole age.12

The existential predicament in which one fears condemnation is quite different from the one where one fears, above all, meaninglessness. The dominance of the latter perhaps defines our age. 13 But even so, the former still

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exists for many, and the contrast may help us understand different moral stances in our society: the contrast between the moral majority of born-again evangelicals in the contemporary American West and South, on one hand,

and their middle-class urban compatriots on the East Coast, on the other. In a way which we cannot yet properly understand, the shift between

these two existential predicaments seems to be matched by a recent change in the dominant patterns of psychopathology. It has frequently been remarked

by psychoanalysts that the period in which hysterics and patients with phobias and fixations formed the bulk of their clientele, starting in their classical period with Freud, has recently given way to a time when the main complaints centre around "ego loss", or a sense of emptiness, flamess, futility, lack of purpose, or loss of self-esteem.14 Just what the relation is between these styles of pathology and the non-pathological predicaments which parallel them is very unclear. In order even to have a serious try at understanding this, we would have to gain a better grasp of the structures of the self, something I want to attempt below. But it seems overwhelmingly plausible a priori that there is some relation; and that the comparatively recent shift in style of pathology reflects the generalization and popularization in our culture of that "loss of horizon", which a few alert spirits were foretelling for a century or more.

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Of course, the same naturalist temper that I mentioned above, which would like to do without ontological claims altogether and just make do with moral reactions, is very suspicious of this talk of meaning and frameworks. People of this bent would like to declare this issue of meaning a pseudo-question and

brand the various frameworks within which it finds an answer as gratuitous inventions. Some find this tempting for epistemological reasons: the stripped­ down ontology which excludes these frameworks seems to them more in keeping with a scientific outlook. But there are also reasons deep in a certain moral outlook common in our time which push people in this direction. I hope to explain this more clearly below.

But just as with the ontological claims above underlying our respect for life, this radical reduction cannot be carried through. To see why is to understand something important about the place of these frameworks in our lives.

What I have been calling a framework incorporates a · crucial set of qualitative distinctions. To think, feel, judge within such a framework is to

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?ction with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling IS Incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us. I am using 'higher' here in a generic sense. The sense of what the difference



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consists in may take different forms. One form of life may be seen as fuller, another way of feeling and acting as purer, a mode of feeling or living as deeper, a style of life as more admirable, a given demand as making an absolute claim against other merely relative ones, and so on.

I have tried to express what all these distinctions have in common by the term 'incomparable'. In each of these cases, the sense is that there are ends or goods which are worthy or desirable in a way that cannot be measured on the

same scale as our ordinary ends, goods, desirabilia. They are not just *more*

desirable, in the same sense though to a greater degree, than some of these ordinary goods are. Because of their special status they command our awe, respect, or admiration.

And this is where incomparability connects up with what I have been calling 'strong evaluation': the fact that these ends or goods stand indepen­ dent of our own desires, inclinations, or choices, that they represent standards by which these desires and choices are judged. These are obviously two linked facets of the same sense of higher worth. The goods which command our awe must also function in some sense as standards for us.

Looking at some common examples of such frameworks will help to focus the discussion. One of the earliest in our civilization, and which is still alive for some people today, is that associated with the honour ethic. The life of the warrior, or citizen, or citizen-soldier is deemed higher than the merely private existence, devoted to the arts of peace and economic well-being. The higher life is marked out by the aura of fame and glory which attaches to it, or at least to signal cases, those who succeed in it brilliantly. To be in public life or to be a warrior is to be at least a candidate for fame. To be ready to hazard one's tranquility, wealth, even life for glory is the mark of a real man; and those who cannot bring themselves to this are judged with contempt as "womanish" (this outlook seems to be inherently sexist).

Against this, we have the celebrated and influential counter-position put forward by Plato. Virtue is no longer to be found in public life or in excelling in the warrior *agon.* The higher life is that ruled by reason, and reason itself is defined in terms of a vision of order, in the cosmos and in the soul. The

higher life is one in which reason-purity, order, limit, the unchanging­ governs the desires, with their bent to excess, insatiability, fickleness, conflict. Already in this transvaluation of values, something else has altered in addition to the content of the good life, far-reaching as this change is. Plato's ethic requires what we might call today a theory, a reasoned account of what human life is about, and why one way is higher than the others. This flows inescapably from the new moral status of reason. But the framework within which we act and judge doesn't need to be articulated theoretically. It isn't, usually, by those who live by the warrior ethic. They share certain discrim­ inations: what is honourable and dishonouring, what is admirable, what is

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done and not done. It has often been remarked that to be a gentleman is to know how to behave without ever being told the rules. (And the "gentlemen"

here are the heirs of the former warrior nobility.)

That is why I spoke above of acting within a framework as functioning with a 'sense' of a qualitative distinction. It can be only this; or it can be spelled out in a highly explicit way, in a philosophically formulated ontology

or anthropolpgy. In the case of some frameworks it may be optional whether one formulates them or not. But in other cases, the nature of the framework demands it, as with Plato, or seems to forbid it, as with the warrior-citizen

ethic he attacked: this does seem to be refractory to theoretical formulation. Those who place a lot of importance on this latter tend to downplay or denigrate the role and powers of theory in human life.

But I want to mention this distinction here partly in order to avoid an error we easily fall victim to. We could conclude from the fact that some people operate without a philosophically defined framework that they are quite without a framework at all. And that might be totally untrue (indeed, I want to claim, always is untrue). For like our inarticulate warriors, their lives may be entirely structured by supremely important qualitative distinc­ tions, in relation to which they literally live and die. This will be evident enough in the judgement calls they make on their own and others' action. But it may be left entirely to us, observers, historians, philosophers, anthropol­ ogists, to try to formulate explicitly what goods, qualities, or ends are here discriminated. It is this level of inarticulacy, at which we often function, that I try to describe when I speak of the 'sense' of a qualitative distinction.

Plato's distinction stands at the head of a large family of views which see the good life as a mastery of self which consists in the dominance of reason over desire. One of the most celebrated variants in the ancient world was Stoicism. And with the development of the modern scientific world-view a specifically modern variant has developed. This is the ideal of the disengaged self, capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world but also his own emotions and inclinations, fears and compulsions, and achieving thereby a kind of distance and self-possession which allows him to act 'rationally'. This last term has been put in quotes, because obviously its meaning has changed relative to the Platonic sense. Reason is no longer defined in terms of a vision of order in the cosmos, but rather is defined procedurally, in terms of instru­ mental efficacy, or maximization of the value sought, or self-consistency.

The framework of self-mastery through reason has also developed theistic variants, in Jewish and Christian thought. Indeed, it is one of them which first spawned the ideal of disengagement. But the marriage with Platonism, or

with Greek philosophy in general, was always uneasy; and another, specifi­ cally Christian, theme has also been very influential in our civilization. This is the understanding of the higher life as coming from a transformation of the





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will. In the original theological conception, this change is the work of grace, but it has also gone through a number of secularizing transpositions. And variants of both forms, theological and secular, structure people's lives today. Perhaps the most important form of this ethic today is the ideal of altruism. With the decline of the specifically theological definition of the nature of a transformed will, a formulation of the crucial distinction of higher and lower in terms of altruism and selfishness comes to the fore. This now has a dominant place in modern thought and sensibility about what is incompara­ bly higher in life. Real dedication to others or to the universal good wins our admiration and even in signal cases our awe. The crucial quality which commands our respect here is a certain direction of the will. This is very different from the spirit of Platonic self-mastery, where the issue turns on the hegemony of reason, however much that spirit may overlap in practice with altruism (and the overlap is far from complete). And for all its obvious roots in Christian spirituality, and perfect compatibility with it, the secular ethic of altruism has discarded something essential to the Christian outlook, once the love of God no longer plays a role.

Alongside ethics of fame, of rational mastery and control, of the transformation of the will, there has grown up in the last two centuries a distinction based on vision and expressive power. There is a set of ideas and intuitions, still inadequately understood, which makes us admire the artist and the creator more than any other civilization ever has; which convinces us that a life spent in artistic creation or performance is eminently worthwhile. This complex of ideas itself has Platonic roots. We are taking up a semi-suppressed side of Plato's thought which emerges, for instance, in the Phaedrus, where he seems to think of the poet, inspired by mania, as capable of seeing what sober people are not. The widespread belief today that the artist sees farther than the rest of us, attested by our willingness to take seriously the opinions about politics expressed by painters or singers, even though they may have no more special expertise in public affairs than the next person, seems to spring from the same roots. But there is also something quintessentially modern in this outlook. It depends on that modern sense, invoked in the previous section, that what meaning there is for us depends in part on our powers of expression, that discovering a framework is interwoven with inventing.

But this rapid sketch of some of the most important distinctions which structure people's lives today will be even more radically incomplete if I do not take account of the fact with which I started this section: that there is a

widespread temper, which 1 called 'naturalist', which is tempted to deny these frameworks altogether. We see this not only in those enamoured of reductive

explanations but in another way in classical utilitarianism. The aim of this philosophy was precisely to reject all qualitative distinctions and to construe

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all human goals as on the same footing, susceptible therefore of common quantification and calculation according to some common 'currency'. My thesis here is that this idea is deeply mistaken. But as I said above, it is motivated itself by moral reasons, and these reasons form an essential part of

the picture of the frameworks people live by in our day.

This has to do with what I called in section 1.3 the 'affirmation of ordinary life'. The notion that the life of production and reproduction, of work and the family, is the main locus of the good life flies in the face of what were originally the dominant distinctions of our civilization. For both the warrior ethic and the Platonic, ordinary life in this sense is part of the lower range, part of what contrasts with the incomparably higher. The affirmation of ordinary life therefore involves a polemical stance towards these traditional

views and their implied elitism. This was true of the Reformation theologies, which are the main source of the drive to this affirmation in modern times. It is this polemical stance, carried over and transposed in secular guise, which powers the reductive views like utilitarianism which want to denounce all qualitative distinctions. They are all accused, just as the honour ethic or the monastic ethic of supererogation was earlier, of wrongly and perversely downgrading ordinary life, of failing to see that our destiny lies here in production and reproduction and not in some alleged higher sphere, of being

blind to the dignity and worth of ordinary human desire and fulfilment.

In this, naturalism and utilitarianism touch a strong nerve of modern sensibility, and this explains some of their persuasive force. My claim is here that they are nevertheless deeply confused. For the affirmation of ordinary life, while necessarily denouncing certain distinctions, itself amounts to one; else it has no meaning at all. The notion that there is a certain dignity and worth in this life requires a contrast; no longer, indeed, between this life and some "higher" activity like contemplation, war, active citizenship, or heroic

asceticism, but now lying between different ways of living the life of production and reproduction. The notion is never that *whatever* we do is acceptable. This would be unintelligible as the basis for a notion of dignity. Rather the key point is that the higher is to be found not outside of but as a

*manner of living* ordinary life. For the Reformers this manner was defined

theologically; for classical utilitarians, in terms of (instrumental) rationality. For Marxists, the expressivist element of free self-creation is added to Enlightenment rationality. But in all cases, some distinction is maintained

between the higher, the admirable life and the lower life of sloth, irrationality, slavery, or alienation.

Once one sets aside the naturalist illusion, however, what remains is an extremely important fact about modern moral consciousness: a tension between the affirmation of ordinary life, to which we moderns are strongly drawn, and some of our most important moral distinctions. Indeed, it is too



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simple to speak of a tension. We are in conflict, even confusion, about what it means to affirm ordinary life. What for some is the highest affirmation is for others blanket denial. Think of the utilitarian attack on orthodox Christianity; then of Dostoyevsky's attack on utilitarian utopian engineering. For those who are not firmly aligned on one side or the other of an ideological battle, this is the source of a deep uncertainty. We are as ambivalent about heroism as we are about the value of the workaday goals that it sacrifices. We struggle to hold on to a vision of the incomparably higher, while being true to the central modern insights about the value of ordinary life. We sympathize with both the hero and the anti-hero; and we dream of a world in which one could be in the same act both. This is the confusion in which naturalism takes root.