

A SCIENTIFIC ACCOUNT OF MEANING: DEFLATIONARY BUT NOT DISENCHANTING

by Donald Wiebe

Abstract. In *The Really Hard Problem*, Owen Flanagan maintains that accounting for meaning requires going beyond the resources of the physical, biological, social, and mind sciences. He notes that the religious myths and fantastical stories that once “funded” flourishing lives and made life meaningful have been epistemically discredited by science but nevertheless insists that meaning does exist and can be fully accounted for only in a form of systematic philosophical theorizing that is continuous with science and does not need to invoke myth. He sees such a mode of thought as a new, empirical-normative science, which he labels *eudaimonistic scientia*, that evades the disenchantment produced by natural scientific accounts of meaning. I argue that such an empirical-normative science does not provide us with a scientific account of meaning but is itself simply another way of making sense of one’s life that is open to scientific explanation. Such an explanation will be deflationary in the sense that it presumes no greater scheme of things for meaning beyond the span of human existence (collective and possibly individual) but not disenchanting in that it does not explain away the flourishing lives human persons and communities create for themselves.

Keywords: disenchantment; *eudaimonia*; flourishing lives; meaning; myth/religion; naturalism; science

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

In the Introduction to *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* Owen Flanagan asserts that he will “make an attempt to explain how we can make sense and meaning of our lives given that we are material beings living in a material world” (2007, xii–xiii). Flanagan is fully aware

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of the difficulties he faces in dealing with this “really hard problem”: “How does a naturalist make sense of the meaning, magic, and mystery of life? How does one say truthful and enchanting things about being human? It is not clear” (p. xii). Assessing the import of Flanagan’s argument is at least equally problematic in that one must have a relatively clear conception of the nature of the problem itself as well as patience in unraveling an argument that is not always perspicuous and well formed. I do not intend here to detail Flanagan’s defense of the claim that an adequate account of “meaning in a material world” requires the development of a new science or to critically assess the empirical adequacy and logical cogency of that new science. I instead provide some critical comments about the nature of the problem with which he deals and critical responses to his understanding of the notions of meaning and science in his attempted explanation of how we make sense and meaning of our lives.

The “hard problem” in the mind sciences, claims Flanagan, is to explain how consciousness could emerge simply out of neuronal activity (p. xi), but explaining how meaning is possible in a material world, he believes, is the “really hard problem” (p. xi). Indeed, for him, whether meaning even exists is (unlike the question of consciousness) controversial (p. xii). Contrary to what one might expect given the way he characterizes the two problems, however, Flanagan has no intention of approaching “the meaning problem” within the scientific framework only of biology and the mind sciences. As he puts it, “The question of meaning, if it has a good answer, seems to require more resources than these sciences” (p. xii). Why? Because, says he, “Unlike consciousness, meaning isn’t a matter of what there is or isn’t. Meaning, if there is such a thing, involves more than what there is” (p. xi). He is not suggesting by this that “the more than what there is” involves invoking anything that is nonnatural or supernatural, ideals he (rightly) claims are epistemologically unwarranted and childish.

Flanagan does not altogether deny that biology and the mind sciences—which operate on the presupposition that humans are finite biological beings in a material world—have some bearing on the problem of meaning in the world, but he denies that those sciences alone can provide an account of meaning in the same way that they can account for consciousness. He points out that the religious myths that funded flourishing lives and made life meaningful in the past are no longer epistemically credible but denies that sweeping away teleological and transcendental accounts of the world (that is, fantastical stories) necessarily also sweeps away meaning. Despite the fact that the sciences appear to undermine the belief that value and meaning inhere in the world, human beings still seek to live flourishing and meaningful lives, and Flanagan insists that doing so is not irrational. He rejects the thesis of the scientific disenchantment of the world—referring to it, in fact, as the *disease* of disenchantment—because

he believes that a nonscientific, but also nonmythic, account of the flourishing life, and therefore of the meaningfulness of human life that is wholly compatible with a scientific understanding of the world, can be provided.

Such a rational accounting for meaning, Flanagan admits, will require a new, *normative*, science—which will not be a science in the modern sense of the term. Although the new science he envisages will not be like other modern sciences, it will, he claims, be a fully naturalistic undertaking, an enterprise he characterizes as “systematic philosophical theorizing that is continuous with science” (p. 2) and capable of widening the scope of inquiry into human behavior beyond that taken up by the natural, biological, and social sciences. Meaning that currently or in the past was accounted for in terms of fantastical stories and myths will be open to explanation in naturalistic terms by the new science he calls *eudaimonistic scientia*, or eudaimonics. *Eudaimonia* is the Greek word for “happiness” in the broad sense found in those who live “flourishing lives,” and for Flanagan, therefore, the “science” of eudaimonics will involve an “empirical-normative inquiry into the nature, causes, and conditions of human flourishing” (p. 2), which, for him, is the essence of the meaning that is to be found in the material world.

Although I agree with Flanagan’s critique of the mythic-religious accounts of meaning in the world as epistemically incredible, and have some sympathy for his own project, I am not persuaded of the need for or possibility of a rational account of meaning in the world beyond what the sciences can tell us about the human need for its construction. Given the complexity of the problem meaning presents and the intricacies of Flanagan’s extrascientific (philosophical) argument for meaning in a world that we can account for scientifically, I am doubtful that my response to Flanagan will do justice to his argument or to my misgivings about it.

A central issue for me in reading Flanagan is that I remain unclear as to what he means by “meaning” and “material world” in the book’s subtitle. As for “meaning,” he talks much of “the flourishing life” as being the essence of “a meaningful life” and equates those notions with meaning per se without any clarification, and throughout his discussion of “the flourishing life” he speaks confusingly of it as both “finding” and “making” meaning. I question, moreover, whether his extrascientific (philosophical) account of meaning and the flourishing life, insofar as it is different from a deflationary scientific account of them, is not in some sense equivalent to the meaning provided in the fantastical religious stories he criticizes in chapter 6. Furthermore, I question whether our knowledge that people negotiate their practical lives in such a way as to support growth and fulfillment to one degree or another constitutes anything more than social scientific knowledge about how one kind of animal solves the problems of social existence and thereby overcomes the “disease of disenchantment” (p. 108). Finding

out that persons live more or less flourishing lives in terms of social-ethical norms that constitute the universal and local ecological conditions of “human world making” is not in itself a bit of normative knowledge. In this regard I find Flanagan’s normative injunction (p. 108) that “we ought to seek to flourish with the truth by our side” (that is, without invoking fantastical stories) somewhat odd. The evidence clearly shows that people will—necessarily, it appears, given their cognitive proclivities—create meaningful lives for themselves whether by buying into fantastical stories or not. And there is no necessary connection between the utilitarian value and the epistemic credibility of the accounts of meaning, given his recognition of the usefulness of wishful stories in the making of meaning in the past.

Unlike Flanagan, then, I do not see the need to go beyond the sciences in order to provide an acceptable account of the meaning (perhaps better, “meanings”) we find to exist in the world. Nor do I think a *wholly* scientific account of “the meaning that exists in the material world” is necessarily disenchanting, even though it will almost certainly be deflationary compared to what one finds in religion (and, I suspect, in Flanagan’s “naturalized spirituality” [chap. 6]). It seems to me, unless I have seriously misconstrued Flanagan’s argument, that his attempt to widen the scope of the sciences by adopting a “broad philosophical naturalism” amounts not only to a compassionate attempt to shield us from unjustified scientific (for Flanagan, scientific) claims about human life as disenchanted and meaningless but also to the espousal of an implicit or unelaborated metaphysical worldview within which meaning is more than just a subjective or socially constructed reality, although less than the “reality” promised by wishful and fantastical stories about the “true nature” of the universe.

This is to say that I am not convinced that Flanagan’s claim that the only appropriate account of meaning is one that “goes beyond” what the natural, biological, social, and mind sciences can tell us about meaning or that such an expanded, naturalistic philosophical account supports a picture of meaning that is both “naturalistic and enchanting” (p. xiii). Flanagan does not clearly delineate the difference in the character of the meaning “found” between those who “find” it in wishful stories and those who “find” it in expanded philosophical accounts of the world. For those who espouse religious myths (fantastical stories) a meaningful life depends upon a material world that in itself has meaning, and Flanagan, as I read *The Really Hard Problem*, does not clearly indicate whether his empirical-normative science challenges the scientific conception of the material world as meaningless; nor does he tell us, if it does not, what exactly his new empirical-normative science adds to our knowledge about how people create meaning and live flourishing lives that exceeds what we know of this by way of the mind and social sciences.

MEANING

I want to explore here exactly how the meaning that exists in the world as described by the social and mind sciences differs from that described by Flanagan's expanded philosophical account. Furthermore, I want to assess whether the "deflationary" impact the scientific account has had on religiously inflated accounts of meaning in and of the world necessarily amounts to a "disease of disenchantment" as Flanagan suggests.

In the first instance, it seems to me that whatever sense it makes to talk about "making sense of one's life in a material world," it is fair to say—given the contrast he sets up between meaning and the material world—that the meaning of which he speaks is not drawn from the world. Rather, for Flanagan, the material world in itself is without a meaning that can somehow be "discovered." The question of meaning, then, is an existential and subjective rather than a scientific matter. He maintains that "even though conscious mental events are objective states of affairs, they have a subjective feel as an essential aspect of them" (p. 28). "It is simply a unique but nonmysterious fact about conscious mental states that they essentially possess a phenomenal side" (p. 29). That is, they involve the subjective character of a "lived world" that is experienced "first-personally" (p. 16), with which biology and the mind sciences cannot deal.

I am not convinced that this move by Flanagan is as simple and straightforward as it appears and that there is no hint of meaning implicit in his argument that goes beyond the question of the temporary meaningfulness of a life lived. The question of the meaningfulness of a life lived, he points out, is nevertheless existentially pressing because "it might be true that there is nothing that could make this aspiration real, nothing more than a wish that comes with being a conscious social animal" (p. xii). The phenomenal, subjective, existential issue is not left entirely on its own; for him, a central aspect of meaning in the material world means responding to such questions as "What and how, in the greater scheme of things, does any human life matter?" (p. xii) This, I think, suggests that meaning must be something more than ephemeral products of self-cultivation or mindfulness in an otherwise meaningless world but that cannot be delivered to us in fantastical stories and myths. Hence his challenge to what he calls science's imperialistic methodological claims that operate with the assumption that "what there is, and all there is, is what sciences say there is" (p. 72; see also pp. xi, 22). He mentions, for example, that science's deflationary claims about the material world have never been scientifically confirmed (p. 72).

In the past, claims Flanagan, making meaning was dominated by fantastical stories and myths. Today, he insists, such narratives of meaning include religious and spiritual "spaces" that are naturalized (chap. 6) as well as spaces of science, technology, art, and ethics, which he labels the

“Space of Meaning/Early 21st Century.” According to him, each period in history and each local community/society seeks to establish norms of behavior that will embody the Platonic goals of “the good,” “the true,” and “the beautiful” (p. 9), which he also calls spaces of meaning. Flanagan takes these goals very seriously, because it is the human aspiration to achieve the good, the true, and the beautiful that, as I understand him, puts the lie to the claim that science disenchant the universe (that is, that science not only sees the material world itself, so to speak, to be without meaning but also considers the meaningfulness that flows from the flourishing life to be as ephemeral as human life itself). He claims, however, that he does not accept Plato’s views of these goals as immaterial Forms that exist in some realm other than the one in which we live our daily lives and that he attempts to make sense of them in naturalistic terms (p. 223 n9). He obviously is aware that a Platonic metaphysical position is no more capable of coexisting with the scientific image of persons than are the supernaturalist worldviews of religions and other forms of spirituality that he attempts to naturalize. And he seems to claim that living life meaningfully is really nothing more than a psychopoetic performance “that is made possible by our individual intersection and that of our fellow performers in a Space of Meaning” (p. 197). These spaces, however, are made up of several spaces of meaning that are themselves products of human behavior, and if that is the whole story to be told it seems that Flanagan would need only to engage in some straightforward historical and social-scientific research in order to determine the ways, mythically or otherwise, by which diverse people(s) historically and geographically at various stages in their lives claim to “experience” or “detect” meaning in the material world. But this, it seems to me, is something Flanagan rejects as being a scientific approach to the problem of meaning in the world.

Whether this suggests, even if inadvertently, that in the process of living meaningful lives (without resorting to the use of fantastical myths and wishful stories that attribute meaning to the world/universe) persons make an otherwise meaningless world “make sense” and “have meaning” is a question that needs to be raised. Flanagan’s adoption of nonmetaphysical Platonism may be indicative of such a claim.

In elaborating his naturalistic picture of persons as social animals who live meaningful lives within the Platonic spaces of meaning (p. 187) Flanagan notes that human beings are born neither fit nor flourishing but have a thirst for and the equipment to achieve both (p. 56). He maintains that attaining fitness “is the orientation we are *thrust* into the world to achieve,” and only as fitness is achieved do humans “begin to strive for meaning and happiness” (p. 56). Humans, he therefore claims, are a “mixed bag” in that they have two natures (p. 54), with our “second nature” kicking in as we are on our way to achieving fitness (our “first nature”). Flanagan sees our second nature as involving “a prepotent part of our cognitive-affective-

conative constitution as human animals” (p. 198) that disposes us “to makes sense of things and thereby to live meaningfully (p. 199). Such a disposition amounts to having an urge or impulse to locate and live in the vicinity of “transcendent realities,” which is to say in “spaces that are truthful, good, and beautiful” (p. 187).

This account raises some serious questions. One wonders, for example, why Flanagan calls these values transcendent rather than immanent given that they are the product of our social nature and involve psychopoetic performances in the publicly available and inherently social “spaces of meaning” that constitute societies at particular periods of history. These performances may connect individuals to goals beyond their personal desires, but this hardly provides them a transcendent quality or reality (p. 201). Integration within a society, living harmoniously within a community, is a significant aspect of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, making “making sense of their lives” just another aspect of their fitness. Moreover, according to Flanagan, as I have already noted, human beings are collectively (consciously or unconsciously) the manufacturers of the “spaces of meaning” and the Platonic ideals as spaces of meaning; they are themselves the products or by-products of the evolution of human persons which, I think, permits description of them as, at most, pseudotranscendent.

I also find problematic Flanagan’s dualistic view of *Homo sapiens* here. The radical distinction between the “fit person” and the “flourishing person” has no more justification than drawing a distinction between the physical and the spiritual human person. A coherent evolutionary account of the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, it seems to me, must see “flourishing” as but another element in the fitness of the person. And if this is so, it seems that the new science of eudaimonics is more of an apologetic than an epistemic exercise.

SCIENCE

In his discussion of the Dalai Lama’s views on the relation of science to Buddhism, Flanagan seems to accept the claim that science is essentially the search for knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone and that it is not concerned with meaning (p. 66). Modern science for him, moreover, is essentially concerned with causal relations (p. 14) and, insofar as human persons are finite material beings, capable of providing a wholly naturalistic account of them as of all other material objects (p. 1). On this basis many in the scientific community, he maintains, assume that science is reductionist and ultimately disenchant the universe (pp. 2, 4). But, for Flanagan, such a naturalism is scientistic rather than scientific, for genuine science, he claims, acknowledges that more than causal relations matter, including numerical, spatial, and temporal relations (p. 14). The purely causal view of human persons therefore illegitimately shrinks the notion of

genuine agency (p. 33) and makes it impossible to account for the subjective character of the “lived world” that is experienced by them “first-personally” (pp. 16, 28; see also 29, 72).

Flanagan is well aware that his new science of eudaimonics is not a science in the modern sense of that term (p. 2), but he insists that, at least in part, it is an empirical inquiry into human behavior because it includes the results of research in such fields as history, the history of religions, positive psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics as well as evolutionary biology and the mind sciences (p. xiii). However, this is far from the whole story about eudaimonics, for besides being concerned with “empirical knowledge in a general sense” (p. 110) it also involves Eastern and Western philosophy that, in addition to obtaining knowledge, are concerned with the knowhow related to personal growth and fulfillment and the development, individually and collectively, of “our nobler potential” (p. 126). Eudaimonics, therefore, is an “empirical-normative” science and involves—in addition to gaining knowledge—moral habits, transformative mindfulness practices, wisdom (pp. 4, 126), and other skills and methods not normally part of observer-independent sciences (p. 124).

The notion of eudaimonics as an empirical-normative science is not, I think, perspicuous; the description may well be simply incoherent. Perhaps Flanagan is aware of this himself, for in his chapter on what he calls “normative mind science” he refers to such a science as “empirically inspired” (pp. 107–8) and speaks of it in a kind of apologetic tone as something that can “cure the disease of disenchantment” (p. 108). Yet he is aware that “oughts” (norms) in the world are the product of human persons and that knowledge of them is gained through the natural (biology and the mind sciences) and social sciences. Indeed, he recognizes not only that we have empirical knowledge of them but that we also can explain them, although he rightly insists that they are not thereby eliminated (p. 107). In his words, “We are biological beings living in a material world that we have constructed. Our norms and values are designed to serve our purposes as social mammals living in different social worlds” (p. 107). To recognize that such norms and values (oughts) emerge and evolve in the process of social interaction and make possible forms of social existence that benefit not only the group but individuals within the group is to recognize that the meaning (“seeing” the sense of things) that makes for a flourishing existence is really nothing more than an aspect of human fitness—that is, such values are both the foundation for and the product of social interaction.

This explanation of it does not explain away the values (and the attached oughts), but neither does it provide them an independent existence as Flanagan’s eudaimonistic science seems to do. I agree with Flanagan that the explanation removes, as he puts it, “whatever undeserved enchantment comes from mystifying analyses” that allow the invocation of the divine or

some other supernatural agency as explanatory (p. 107). Nevertheless, his account of the Platonic ideals/spaces of meaning (truth, goodness, and beauty) retains more than a whiff of such enchantment, because the source of those ideals—if it is other than the account of them as products of human social interaction that contributes to human fitness—is unaccounted for. Demystifying accounts of meaning “that incorporate superstition and wishful thinking” (p. 108), of course, accounts for the disenchantment that persons who hold such views experience, for such demystification denies meaning to the material world and therefore effectively denies (real) meaning to religious believers’ existence. Replacing “assertive myths” with “expressive myths” in a process of “naturalizing religious and spiritual traditions” (which Flanagan carries out in chap. 6) denies the truth of their beliefs about the meaningfulness of the material world. In naturalizing the religious myths, the meaning gained does not measure up to the (religious/metaphysical) meaning lost because the meaning gained is one that can be wholly accounted for in terms of biology and the mind sciences.

In my reading of *The Really Hard Problem*, however, I get the feeling that Flanagan denies the latter claim—that he believes that eudaimonics can tell us more about meaning than the sciences can (but less than what is given in assertive religious myths). I am not sure of this, but it seems to me that his project of naturalizing fantastical religious and spiritual stories implies that the material world is in itself meaningless but that it need not remain so; that human meaning-making changes the character of the world, somehow reenchanting it. But if that reenchantment amounts to anything more than saying that we are profoundly astonished by the richness of the material world and our emergence in it, and that we find in that knowledge an emotional response to the world—in short, that the material world instills in us a sense of wonder—we will have given a teleological and transcendental grounding to the world comparable, I think, to that given by the fantastical stories and myths of the religious and spiritual modes of thought.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I am in no position, as should be obvious from the foregoing discussion, to bring this “meditation” on Flanagan’s book to a crisp and tidy logical conclusion. I end, therefore, with a few categorical statements that I think summarize my understanding of the problem of meaning in light of Flanagan’s work.

First: I agree with Flanagan, with some qualification, that there is meaning in the world and that science does not wholly disenchant “the world,” only “the material world.” By this I mean that “the material world” by itself has no meaning, whereas “the world” in the larger sense of including human persons and communities of persons does. I agree, that is, that

explaining meaning as a product of human flourishing does not explain it away in the sense that the larger world is, meaning-wise, indistinguishable from the material world in itself.

Second: I agree with Flanagan that the meanings attributed to the world by religious myths and stories are not epistemically justifiable; that therefore science disenchants the larger sense of meaning espoused by the religious mythmakers, which involves inclusion of the notions of intention and design with respect to the processes of nature (the material world).

Third: Unlike Flanagan, I hold the view that science entirely disenchants “the material world” but that it does so without denying historical agency. And historical agency, it seems to me, can account for meaning in the world in a narrower (deflated) sense, as something related only to private and local social needs (and therefore simply as an aspect of biological fitness). I believe this view runs contrary not only to that of the mythmakers and storytellers Flanagan criticizes but also to Flanagan’s “story” about meaning. My view of meaning in the material world, moreover, is wholly sufficient to ground what we can think of as an ethically significant life. (There is no “ought” derived from an “is” here, nor is there any other source of “oughtness” but the human agent in community.)

Fourth: It seems to me that, in denying the disenchanting (not merely deflating) effects of the scientific account of the material world, as Flanagan appears to do, his view of what is necessary for the flourishing and meaningful life is not continuous with science (as his *eudaimonistic scientia* claims to be) and therefore bears some at least shadowy resemblance to the religious views that he sets out to naturalize.

Fifth: I find myself in agreement with Max Weber’s judgment that the material world (with us in it) is bereft of a meaning that somehow transcends the contingencies of the material world and our contributions of order, meaning, and justice within the framework of those contingencies. But this is not to say that humans cannot live flourishing lives in terms of values created by them and not seen as teleologically or transcendently grounded.

Finally: Unlike Flanagan, I think the really hard problem is consciousness rather than meaning. Given the existence of conscious, self-conscious, and critically self-conscious beings, meaning becomes readily explicable.

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