

EVERYDAY MIND AND LOVE 2018

Session 11 August 23

Reg Grace, who died very recently, was a wonderful man to work alongside when I was on the U3A Committee many years ago. When he was President I was the Blue Mountains vice-President so we worked together quite a lot. He had a sense of wanting to be of service and was still working on the Committee to the end of his life. We think about what a worthy man he was and what his values were. How do we get our sense of worth? Each of your lives has great value. Mine does too. Is there any human being whose life does not have value? What do we mean by individual worth or value? We always come back to this question of **what do we mean**.

This wonderful mind we were born with and have nurtured and developed over many years has fashioned our identity as individuals, mainly by enabling us to connect fruitfully with other people and other doings, and it has carried us to this present moment of our lives. It has brought us a certain amount of **individual strength** (as Alfred Adler likes to say) and partly satisfied complex internal drives for **pleasure and enjoyment** (as Sigmund Freud might put it). We experienced all this subconsciously and captured it as well as we could in our story.

Our minds love to have an explanation – a reasonably satisfying way of explaining what has happened. Maturana used to say we are like babies and an explanation is like the pacifier (dummy) someone gives us to stop us crying and make us feel better. That's not the end of it – it's usually just a brief respite. But it does also put in place some layers in our mind of what we might call **meaning** or understanding that will bring us some comfort and contentment – in fact it's our main source of emotional comfort and peace of mind.

It's difficult to define what meaning really is, but the most obvious thing about it is that our mind will notice it if its missing. Both our individual identity and our social connection are seriously threatened by a sense of **meaninglessness**. If we can't find meaning, both in our story and our subconscious, our very existence is threatened – it's that important. To experience satisfying meaning is the essential **comfort** for our mind that enables us to **feel okay**.

The last Chapter of my book and our Course for 2018, at the end of this Term, is called *The Feeling of Meaning*, a phrase that each of us will interpret differently because our minds are like that. To realise how personal one's own meaning is always feels rather sad to me, but the happy part is the overlap between your meaning and mine – the part we call **shared meaning**. The best bit of all is the meaning we can share in our language and our thoughts as we converse together or reflect on a recent conversation. It's a lovely feeling when your companion 'takes the words out of your mouth' or rephrases an idea that was in your mind in such a way that you know she understands and your minds are closely linked. But the words still don't say it all. Behind the words there is an even deeper **feeling** that this is a **meaningful** experience; in this moment it feels worthwhile – in other words, it has **value**.

Values and Character

Today I want to talk about the processes of mind that we think of as our **values**. To begin I want to say a few things about **character**. A book I recommended some years ago in this

Course, by David Brooks, is *The Social Animal – The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement*. He is a New York author and political commentator, notably conservative in many of his views, so this book about the mind and modern culture came as a bit of a surprise. He said that his wife thought that him writing a book about emotions was equivalent to Gandhi writing a cookbook. He says that politicians generally don't know, or they forget, that the mind is mostly subconscious and emotional, so they make policies that ignore this part of the mind – that do not respect love and character as human traits. The book is a narrative about a fictional family living normal lives with many references to the latest mind science and psychology. The characters go through all the personal and **social** ups and downs that play out in our minds and experience the feelings associated with them.

A few years later Brooks wrote a book called *The Road to Character* which contains biographies of some famous people whose lives illustrate the challenges that our minds have to overcome. At the outset he makes an interesting distinction between our **résumé** virtues and our **eulogy virtues**. In a résumé we put all our skills and worldly achievements, whereas in our eulogy someone will more likely be talking about our character – what kind of person we were. He calls these attributes Adam I and Adam II after the two versions of mankind's creation in the book of Genesis (or for that matter in other creation myths also). Adam I builds, creates and discovers things, makes worldly achievements, while Adam II is the moral side of us, desiring to know right from wrong, to give to others (sometimes sacrificing self) and to honour some higher truth. Adam I conquers the world with accomplishment, but Adam II recognises a more sacred purpose. The logic is quite different – one the shrewd, manipulative logic of economics, the other an opposite need to give rather than receive, surrender in order to win, and forget yourself in order to be fulfilled. This amounts to being strong and effective versus confronting your own actual weakness – two different ways of using your mind.

Each of us is a mixture of the two and we live in a world where the Adam I mind is much noisier and more obvious than the Adam II. I make a distinction between our **self** and our **soul**, the main difference being an awareness of the unknown as larger than that which I know. We need both, of course, and, in a eulogy the **values** that others recognised in that person (their character) will be acknowledged alongside their achievements. So when we think about what **meanings** we are making in our lives we will be thinking less about the part of our mind that establishes **things** and more about the part that experiences **love**. This puts our **values** in a more mysterious light because they are associated with **love** – the greatest mystery of all.

Two of the themes in my Course come together here. One is that **meaning** is not precise and objective because a large part of it exists in our feelings, as it is providing the bridge between our subconscious and our conscious mind. That 'feeling okay' we get from meaning will never be complete, but it will be more so when it includes a trust in the unknown and a belief in love. The other theme is the idea that **love** legitimates what we encounter and makes it real. We see reality more clearly through love because we have not contaminated it with preconceived ideas, particularly expectations of our ego. Robert Johnson said love is 'an appreciation – a recognition of value.'

A lot of what philosophers have to say about meaning strikes me as very prosaic and not very poetic, but sometimes they concede that love could be involved. I read an e-book recently by

Susan Wolf called *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* in which she says that if we just attribute meaning either to egoic self-interest (personal happiness) or to a sense of moral satisfaction, or both, we are missing something. She says we also live for ‘reasons of love.’ Meaning arises from **loving something that is worthy of love**, engaging with it in a positive way. Therefore she says it is both **subjective** (the loving feeling and attitude) and **objective** (being worthy of love). The need for the objective component becomes a very debatable and inconclusive issue in philosophy.

Do the things you engage with have meaning and worth in their own right (that is objectively) or is it because you attributed the meaning to them that they have value? So far as other people are concerned we like to think of loving them unconditionally – in other words, it doesn’t depend on how smart or capable or good-looking the other person is, we love him or her anyway. This is the attitude I take to the love that comes from the unknown that I associate with my soul. Our children will probably get the impression that we love them more if they behave in certain ways because we are trying to teach them that not all behaviours have a positive value, some are negative and undesirable. Remember that our process of perception is **proactive** and **subjective** such that we are shaping what we see as we are looking at it. Perception is not objective in the first place. We have some kind of sense of values built in to our mind that influences what we see, which is what we want to see – so where does it come from?

Value-ception

The best explanation of this that I know of comes from the work of an early 20th century German philosopher, Max Scheler. He adopted Roman Catholicism early in his life and his work was the subject of a Doctoral thesis by the man who became Pope John Paul II. Scheler distanced himself from the church later, professing a spirituality he called ‘philosophical anthropology,’ which he was writing about when his life was cut short at age 54 in 1928. The Nazis destroyed much of his work after he died. At the time his standing in European philosophy was very high yet I feel his work has been neglected since then and it’s rarely mentioned in books about the mind.

Scheler’s basic idea is that values are experienced in our feelings. He says that values are not simply feelings, they are meanings, but they reach us through feelings just as colour reaches us through sight. They are not flavours added to improve something nor are they a consequence of something else, they are the **primary facts of reality**. Our attention process, which determines what our world seems like to us, is guided mainly by what Scheler calls ‘value-ception’ – **the perception of value** as we understand it.

In psychology this fits with the ‘primacy of affect’ – the idea that the emotional impact precedes other aspects of perception and thereby forms the framework in which the meaning will arise. The central plank in this framework is what Scheler refers to as **love**. He suggests that love is what creates value whereas hate destroys it and I would add that cynicism and indifference will deprive us of both meaning and value. Scheler warns that **egoic judgments, as distinct from value-ception, are a form of ‘poison for our mind.’**

In other words love is actually the reason that we have values in the first place. Scheler writes about love as the primary animation or ‘movement’ in our mind. It is love that enables our mind to know value because looking with love legitimises what we see. Hatred on the other

hand closes off our sense of value. As he puts it: ‘love and hate are acts in which the value-realm accessible to the feelings of a being . . . is either extended or narrowed.’ Love and hate are not reactions – they are the very ground from which the possibility of value arises. **Love is an intentional act of mind that discloses value.**

We can’t define value precisely because it is neither purely personal (whatever I take it to be) nor purely consensual (whatever we agree it to be). It is pre-reflective like the subconscious component of empathy or compassion in that it comes to us before we have thought about it. What we can say about value is that it engages our attention. When we find we love doing something or being with someone we are acknowledging that we value that experience – we recognise something of value in it, subconsciously at first, then as part of our story. If we don’t continue to appreciate it this value will fade from our awareness, as we know from what happens when we take good things too much for granted.

A Hierarchy of Values, Needs, Feeling and Meaning.

To remain part of our awareness and our story the experience of value has to consolidate its meaning over time and it is here we see that values are not all the same in terms of their effect on our wellbeing. Scheler ranked them in a hierarchy with the *utilitarian* values of practicality and basic comfort at the bottom, the *sensual* values of what is agreeable and what is disagreeable just above that, the *vital* or *life* values of what is ‘noble’ and what is ‘vulgar’ next highest, the *psychic* values of the ‘ugly’ or the ‘beautiful’ higher again and the *spiritual* values of ‘holy’ and ‘unholy’ at the top of the pyramid.

You might recognise in this description shades of Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ that came much later in 1943 apparently without any reference to Scheler. Abraham Maslow was unusual amongst psychologists of his time because he forsook the study of mentally ill people (whose ‘immaturity led to an immature psychology’) and chose to study only the people he regarded as the healthiest who were the highest achievers in the population. He places *physiological* needs at the bottom; above that *safety and security* needs and above that the *social* needs of love and belonging. That leads to the second highest level, which is *self-esteem and self-confidence*. The highest level he calls *self-actualisation* in which he includes goals that are higher than oneself and for the ‘greater good’ such as altruism and spirituality.

In both cases there are spiritual matters at the top and more sensual and practical matters at the bottom. What is different is that Scheler is talking about **values** that we aspire towards whereas Maslow is talking about **needs** that require our attention and therefore provide the motivation for our mind to develop. Maslow says that deficiencies in the first four needs lead to anxiety and distress. Scheler emphasises the vital values (the third level) as the most common grounds for insecurity and anxiety if they are neglected.

Models such as these may guide us in finding meaning but they also distort meaning if we take them too literally. Maslow was often criticised because these categories do not exist separately even though they do describe a line of development towards wellbeing. Moving up his pyramid from the lower values towards the higher takes us from the more superficial and selfish uses of the mind towards relationships and a broader context. This could be compared to a **maturation** of the mind, which might be expected to occur throughout one’s lifetime.

Another philosophical psychologist, Harry Overstreet, explains very deftly that, although we grow and change as we age, the human mind does not necessarily mature with age. He was 73 in 1949 when he published *The Mature Mind* – a best-selling book in its day and still regarded as a classic – suggesting that psychological age is not the same as chronological age and irresponsible behaviour stems from psychological immaturity. For him maturity is the progress from self-orientation to meaningful relationships. His ‘linkage theory’ that man lives by and through his relationships was prescient of today’s social neuroscience. He says the maturing person is one whose ‘linkages with life are constantly becoming stronger and richer because his attitudes are such as to encourage their growth. A mind grows towards maturity as it widens its relations to the not yet realised,’ which I would equate with the relationship with the unknown.

If our life is a movement in search of wellbeing, which the primary emotion of *SEEKING* promotes, what exactly is it we are hoping to achieve? I’m suggesting it is a satisfaction with life, which will be a set of feelings and a sense of meaning. This is not the same as continuous happiness, of course, certainly not ecstasy or bliss or mystical revelations. It is a certain amount of comfort for our mind, content with knowing that there will be pain as well as pleasure, sorrow as well as joy, and always more questions than answers. There cannot be complete satisfaction – both our feelings and meaning will always be unfinished business. When we get stuck we tend to think of ourselves as a finished product, which is not true – we are always a work in progress.

For the purpose of this Course and my book I have my own version of a *hierarchy of meaning* for the human mind, which is also a *hierarchy of feelings*. At the bottom is *physiological utility*, which is the basic autonomy and connectedness that keeps us alive – the baseline for feeling and meaning to occur. The next level I call *physical comfort*, which includes basic safety and security and the sensual pleasures or otherwise pains that are an obvious part of our everyday experience of mind. The third level is *psychological comfort* including anxiety or peace of mind, equivalent to Scheler’s vital values and very much a product of Maslow’s social needs at this level. On the fourth level, *aesthetic comfort*, are feelings and meaning that only occur when our mind can distinguish what is beautiful from what is ugly. At the top is *spiritual comfort*, which is a relationship with the unknown that may bring joy or fear or is often disregarded altogether.

Scheler warns against ‘**value inversion**,’ which he refers to as a ‘self-poisoning of the mind’ that leads to negative judgments about oneself and others manifesting as disapproval, anger and passive aggression. He suggests that nothing will ever be sacred or highly valued to a self-poisoned mind. His idea of a ‘self-inflicted personal sense of inadequacy’ reminds me of my own worst experiences and the recurring theme of not knowing that you are loved. Scheler foresaw, at a time when neuroscience and psychology were much less developed than they are today, that the values that our mind believes in and is guided by bring about the kind of experience that we are having. I equate his idea of value inversion with the improper use of my mind.

But once again the model is just a flimsy contraption that our left-brain logic creates as an outline and we do well to let it pass through our mind and disappear. Each of us decides what we value and what we need using our unique combination of intuition and rationality. I think it is helpful to stop and reflect from time to time on what one’s values are and how they are

affecting one's wellbeing. If we have the general idea that there are options for how we use our mind and the priority that we give to one or the other does make a difference to how we feel in our everyday mind.

Ethics and Morals

Tied in with our sense of values are our ideas about ethics and our moral judgments, both of which are big subjects in their own right. I can sum up what I want to say about **ethics** by referring back to the biology – whether something is life-promoting or life-destroying. Much of what is happening by way of the destruction of our environment, antisocial and hateful behaviour is unethical without any doubt. Mankind is its own worst enemy in this regard.

Our sense of meaning is shaped a lot by the **moral judgments** that we make. These are part of our personal values so they predispose our attention towards some things and away from others and are a major factor in the **shared meaning** within a group. This works to bind our societies together in a beneficial way, while at the same time it is what produces most of the division and antagonism between different societies. This is described by a Harvard psychology professor, Joshua Greene, in his book *Moral Tribes*. He says there are two kinds of moral problem: 'me versus us' which is the being and belonging I have been describing here and 'us versus them' which is the issue of tribal conflict. He explains (as I have) that our biology equips us to deal with the first issue well enough. He is more pessimistic about the tribal conflict, which he says can only be solved rationally – if we can manage to negotiate rationally!

Our mind by its nature is aptly called *The Righteous Mind*, which is the title of an important book by Jonathan Haidt. He said he could have called the book 'the moral mind,' but that would not have conveyed the idea that we are 'intrinsically critical and judgmental.' His point is that this kind of mind made it possible for human beings to form large, cooperative societies in which altruism abounds while at the same time guaranteeing that, between these different groups, there will always be moralistic strife. **Morality 'binds us and blinds us'** he says.

The classical explanation for moral judgment describes it as a 'dual process' arising from both emotion and reason. However, Jonathan Haidt's first principle of **moral psychology** is that '**intuition comes first, moral reasoning second**' and the latter is used to justify the former. He developed a 'social intuitionist' model of moral judgment in which 'the intuitive dog wags the rational tail.' Our adaptive unconscious makes quick and quite rigid judgments which our conscious mind then rationalises and justifies after the event. Its main motivation for doing this is to satisfy the requirements of social relationships. Haidt gives examples of how we are all quite like 'politicians' in that it is more important to look good and fit in than it is to be absolutely honest. We lie so well we believe what we are saying, which will generally be whatever supports our 'team' best.

There are no simple answers to the question: what are my values? There are, however, ways of using our mind that point us in the right direction. In seeking to go beyond physical and psychological comfort we are reaching into realms that imply spirituality in that they draw us towards our relationship with the unknown. In the next session we will explore our great need for aesthetic comfort in order to nourish our soul.