

On William James's "Is Life Worth Living?"¹

In his piece 'Is Life Worth Living?', William James considers what he calls "the nightmare or suicidal view of life" (James, 6). On this view, life is not worth living because

(1) life could be worth living only if there exists "an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained" (James, 15),

and

(2) there exists no such unseen order.

Many philosophers (both before and after James) have rejected (1). That is, they have claimed that (what James calls) the "visible" world contains all that is required for our lives to be worth living. James, however, finds this response unsatisfactory. He says that for life to be worth living it would need to be "a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the Universe by success" (James, 23), in which our "bravery and patience...[bear] fruit somewhere in an unseen spiritual world" (James, 20).

James instead rejects (2). We have reason, he argues, to believe in the existence of such an unseen order. He begins by noting that our current science is merely

a drop, our ignorance a sea. Whatever else be certain, this at least is certain: that the world of our present natural knowledge *is* enveloped in a larger world of *some* sort of whose residual properties we at present can frame no positive idea. (James, 17)

It shows “a lack of scientific imagination”, he says, to think that “all the fundamental conceptions of truth have already been found by Science, and that the future has only the details of the picture to fill in” (James, 17).

But why believe that the part of the universe that science has yet to uncover includes the sort of unseen order in (1)? James admits that there is (as yet) no strong *evidence* for this claim. (Although: “If needs of ours outrun the visible universe, why may not that be a sign that an invisible universe is there?” (James, 19)) Instead, he argues, we have a powerful *practical* reason to believe it (or, at least, to try to do so). Namely, if life *is* a real fight, then it is only if we *believe* that it is, and carry on with a sense of purpose, that we may attain a victory in it. In the same way a mountaineer facing a perilous gulf may be able to clear it only if he can get himself to believe that he can, so our lives may be worth living only if we can get ourselves to believe that they are.

How should we evaluate James's response? To start with, we need to distinguish between three different senses in which a life may be worth living. In the first sense, a life is worth living just in case it is worth living *for its subject* (i.e., this person has more *self-interested reason* to go on living it than to end it now). In the second sense, a life is worth living just in case its subject has *all-things-considered* reason to go on living it (where the relevant reasons include, but are not limited to, self-interested ones). In the third sense, a life is worth living just in case, when all is said and done, it is *good, on balance, that its subject existed*.

It may be thought obvious that our lives can be worth living in the first sense without an unseen order. But there is room for reasonable disagreement here. An unseen order may be necessary for things to be good or bad *for us*. Moreover, even if things can be good or bad *for us* without an unseen order, it may be that we can have reason to do what will benefit us only if it is good *that* we are benefited, and nothing can be good without an unseen order. Indeed, many people feel that the inevitability of death (where death is the permanent cessation of consciousness) calls into question the value of anything.

However, I must admit I share the common view that without an unseen order things can be good or bad *for us*, and that it can be good *that* we are benefited. So, I am inclined to believe that without an unseen order our lives *can* be worth living in the first sense. If this is so, then it follows (trivially) that without an unseen order our lives can be worth living in the second sense, too.

But what of the third sense? In this sense, *individual* lives can be worth living without an unseen order, for the obvious reason that it can be good for others – and so, good – that one existed. (I assume that it cannot be good for *oneself* that one existed.) But now – and here, I think, is the truth in James’s view – without an unseen order, it cannot be true that *taken collectively* the lives of all beings in the visible world are worth living in this third sense. This is because our collective existence cannot be good *for* anybody unless there is some unseen order *that includes other beings* (a god, perhaps, or alternate versions of ourselves). (I assume that for something to be good it must be good *for* some being or beings.)

Is there such an unseen order? James’s piece serves as a useful reminder that science is (likely) still only in its infancy, and so it would be premature to rule out the existence of such an order.

Of course, we needn’t accept James’s own view of what this unseen order would need to involve (i.e., his appeal to ‘a real fight’). Instead, we can think of his piece as an invitation to think more creatively than traditional religions have done about how our collective existence might benefit beings who are not of this world.

Note that if there *is* such a value to our collective existence, then this may provide us with *further* reasons to *go on* living, and so further reasons why our lives are worth living in the second sense.

A final worry: Could the lives of all beings *everywhere* (i.e., in the visible world and in all other worlds combined) taken collectively be worth living in

the third sense? If what I have said is right, then no. But this shouldn't distress us. What matters is just that our lives are worth living in the *second* sense. What matters is just that each of us has all-things-considered reason to go on.

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