



Thoughts from Linda:

The Really Hard Problem
Meaning in a Material World

Owen Flanagan
2007

Every time I pick up this wonderfully written book, I am reminded of the lyrics of Madonna's *Material Girl* single, which rose to international success in 1985, helping her to earn the title of Pop Artist for the Year in the UK.

Certainly, Owen Flanagan did not have her in mind when he compiled this book from a series of lectures given in 2006 and prior, as he focused on what he often had described as the 'really hard problem' --how do we explain *meaning* in our material world, i.e., one which consists of a very smart and developed animal (*homo sapiens*) that enjoys a finite human life.

As he notes in his Introduction, "Nearly everyone accepts that consciousness exists. Many wonder whether *meaning* does, even could, exist. Consciousness is. It happens; it is there. It flows like a stream while I live, and how it flows, how it connects to itself is what makes me who I am. *Meaning*, if there is such a thing, is a matter of whether and how things add up in the greater scheme of things. *Meaning* unlike consciousness, is not simply a puzzling feature of the way things are. Whether there is or can be such a thing as *meaning* is a more complicated matter than what there is. 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. Minimally it involves a truthful assessment of what living a finite human life adds up to:"

"I have come to think that how to make sense of living *meaningfully* is the hardest question."

I recently found this book in the most wonderful bookstore in Sydney, Australia. The store has often been in the 'Top 10 Bookstores in the World' list and is called Sappho

Books. I selected the book randomly because of the title and then came to read more about the author, Owen Flanagan. He is a most interesting character and a brilliant writer.

Today, he is the James B. Duke University Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Neurobiology at Duke. He has focused on the philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychology, philosophy of social science, ethics, contemporary ethical theory, moral psychology, as well as on cross-cultural philosophy. He is a 'philosophers' philosopher.'

Flanagan was born in Bronxville, New York, and earned his BA from Fordham and his Ph.D. from Boston University. He taught for 16 years at Wellesley College prior to moving to Duke in 1993. He has written extensively on consciousness and has proposed that there is a 'natural method' to go about understanding the phenomenon. He has isolated three key elements of the developing science of consciousness: paying attention to subjective reports on conscious experiences, incorporating the results from cognitive science and psychology, and including the results from the newer field of neuroscience to learn how neuronal systems produce consciousness.

He was a Rockefeller Fellow at the National Humanities Center and a Berggruen Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. He has written 13 books, including *The Science of the Mind*, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, *Consciousness Reconsidered*, and *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*.

This book has six chapters: Meaningful and Enchanted Lives: A Threat from the Human Sciences; Finding Meaning in the Natural World: The Comparative Consensus; Science for Monks; Buddhism and Science, Normative Mind Science; Psychology, Neuroscience, and the Good Life; Neuroscience, Happiness, and Positive Illusions and Spirituality Naturalized-- A Strong Cat without Claws.

He begins with a question and a definition of the answer. He asks: "What sense can be made of my wish to live in a genuinely meaningful way, to live a life that really matters, that makes a positive and lasting contribution, if my life is exhausted by my prospects as a finite material being living in a material world?" He continues, "To be sure, I, like all other humans, wish to flourish, to be blessed with happiness, to achieve "eudaimonia"—to be a 'happy spirit.' How could this be possible for a short-lived piece of organized muscle and tissue that happens to be aware of its predicament and wishes to flourish?"

He introduces us to the term *eudaimonics* and defines it as “a framework for thinking in a unified way about philosophical psychology, moral and political philosophy, neuroethics, neuroeconomics, and positive psychology, as well as about transformative mindfulness practices that have their original home in non-theistic spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism.” Eudaimonics is systematically gathering what is known about these components of well-being and attempting to engender as much flourishing as possible.

The book takes you through his thinking on this topic, with a deep dive into philosophy and various scientific, ethical, and philosophical arguments along the way. I enjoyed his discussion of science, Darwinism, and religion and found it quite interesting in light of our current state on the planet.

He was born into the Catholic faith and raised as a Catholic, even though he rejected religious teachings early in his life. In the section entitled “Catholicism and Evolution: Can a Roman Catholic Be a Darwinian?” he takes you through a compelling case against the Catholic stated approach to evolution, illustrated by the concept of Papal Infallibility. You’ll learn about the 1950 Encyclical *Humani Generis* of Pope Pious XII and the following adjustments Pope John Paul II made, among others.

He has spent years in dialogue with His Holiness the Dalai Lama (HHDL) and other Buddhist scholars. He shares many stories, revealing how Buddhism reconciles its teachings with science. The section *Science for Monks* is particularly interesting in this light. Generally, when we hear HHDL speak or watch videos of his US tours, we hear the simple messages he brings forth. Flanagan helps us understand more of the profound scientific and philosophical mind of HHDL as he describes many of their conversations and shares writings of His Holiness.

Flanagan shares his personal story toward the end of the book, which is fascinating. He is a witty writer, and the book reads as if we were in a classroom listening to him share his learnings and many, many provocative questions with his students.

He makes intellectual connections with Kurzweil, Csikszentmihalyi, and others in the current study of happiness arenas. He spends much time with the classic philosophers and thinkers, offering a rich dissection of Plato’s theory of “the good, the true and the beautiful,” being the goal of flourishing as a human. He also includes the wisdom of Aristotle, Thrasymachus, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault in this book, among many others. It is a ‘tour de force’ in his topics, making it a fairly dense read.

And it is well worth the work.

I find myself thinking about these questions as I do other things; he has a way of planting a question in the mind so that it 'sticks.' I am sure I will continue to re-read parts of this as I reflect on the enormity of the topic and his treatment of it.

At the end of the day, Flanagan concludes with this piece of wisdom: "We can adopt different legitimate attitudes toward the truth about our nature and our predicament. I recommend optimistic realism, joyful optimistic realism. Life can be precious and funny. And one doesn't need to embrace fantastical stories—unbecoming to historically mature beings—about our nature and prospects to make it so."

This topic of flourishing and making meaning has always been a part of my own psyche. I want to conclude this review by dedicating it to my father, Carl DeWeese, who sat on my bed each night to check in with me and ensure I was working on what he called my "contented spirit." He was constantly exposing our family to philosophy and sought happiness for all he knew.

I just assumed all fathers did this with their children. Little did I know just how fortunate I was. I know that he had never heard of '*eudaimonistic scientia*'—the study of human flourishing-- but his very special gift to me has lived on and greatly influenced my own life and personal search for meaning.

I encourage you to tackle this book!