

The View of Person and the Meaning of Life

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Abstract

In Flanagan's *The Really Hard Problem* (MIT Press, 2007), he attempts to, on the basis of neo-Darwinian theory, "dissolve" the supernatural world to the natural world. While attempting to do so, he admits the desire of pursuing happiness as, understandably a part of nature, or more precisely, human nature. This is what he considers the solution of "The really hard problem" which refers to "how meaning is possible in this world?" The book deserves a careful review because it is innovative in the sense that it holds a strong confidence in science to such an extent that the self-conceived consciousness is fully admitted if the naturalistic stance is complied in the first place. In other words, Flanagan is willing to talk about religious and ethical issues in terms of mind science which has a long period of revulsion towards those issues. For this reason, we intend to review the book by first reconstructing its structure of ideas and then criticizing its core point. The review, other than the introduction and the conclusion, is divided in to three parts: the view of person, the meaning of life and the faith in science. Naturally, the first two parts intend to portray the main structure of the book and the third part is a comment added to the work. The conclusion reiterates that taking everything non-scientific into the realm of science is not necessary to launch an argument defending the meaning of life. The very existence of the human society is sufficient to do so.

Key words : View of Person, Meaning of Life, O. Flanagan, Eudaimonia, Naturalism

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Introduction

In Flanagan's *The Really Hard Problem* (MIT Press, 2007), he attempts to, on the basis of neo-Darwinian theory, "dissolve" the supernatural world to the natural world. He says: "How can the scientific image of persons and spiritual and religious impulses, commitments, traditions, and institutions co-exist in the Space of Meaning? Early 21st Century-if, that is, they can co-exist? (187)¹". While attempting to do so, he admits the desire of pursuing happiness as, understandably a part of nature, or more precisely, human nature. This is what he considers the solution of "The really hard problem" which refers to "how meaning is possible in this world?"

The book deserves a careful review because it is innovative in the sense that it holds a strong confidence in science to such an extent that the self-conceived consciousness is fully admitted given the naturalistic stance. In other words, Flanagan is willing to talk about religious and ethical issues in terms of mind science which has a long period of revulsion towards those issues. For this reason, we intend to review the book by first reconstructing its structure of ideas and then criticizing its core point. The review, other than the introduction and the conclusion, is divided in to three parts: the view of person, the meaning of life and the faith in science. Naturally, the first two parts intend to portray the main structure of the book and the third part is a comment added to the work. The conclusion reiterates that incorporating everything non-scientific into the realm of science is not necessary to launch an argument defending the meaning of life. The very existence of the human society is sufficient to do so.

The "Right" View of Person: Naturalism

Flanagan proposes something very much in similarity with the combination of Democritus, the atomist and Protagoras, the sophist. According to Democritus, all things are composed of atoms which collide in void. Protagoras says instead that a human being is the measure of all things and hence whatever is perceived is immediately relativized depending upon the person. The two Abderites are different, to be sure, yet they share an idea in common: the refutation of traditional religious beliefs.² Analogically, Flanagan proposes something very similar to the juxtaposition

¹ As this study concentrated on O. Flanagan's book, all page numbers of the reviewed book refer to the Arabic number inserted in the text in parenthesis.

² Jean-François Revel, *Histoire de la Philosophie Occidentale* (Paris: Nil éditions, 1994), p. 97. For the detail about the difference between Democritus and Protagoras concerning religious beliefs, the analysis made by J. Barnes is quite important. According to J. Barnes's *Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1979), Democritus' religious view is characterized by the etiology of religious beliefs. "According to Democritus, religion arose first from attention to natural phenomena and second.

of these two views. He holds firm a principle of nature (i.e. naturalism) which, though not necessarily related to atoms, expresses itself through atoms. He says as follows.

Even if everything that there is is the way it is because some set of causes made it that way, it does not follow that the only relation or the only interesting relation is the causal one. Science itself recognizes numerical, spatial and temporal relations that are not causal. Atom a is next to/close to b. There are eight distinct atoms left in the chamber. Atom a moved after b hit it (13).

Science hence implies more than causal relationship, yet it is still a matter of atoms. From this "presupposition", Flanagan starts to ask the "really hard problem": "What does it mean to be a material being living in a material world? Or, what does it mean to

be a conscious being if at the end of the day we are just a temporarily organized system of particles, or seen at another level, just a hunk of meat? (4)" The point here in telling Flanagan's position by analogically referring to atomism is to indicate that he remains different from a rigid form of "scientism" which "is the source of some of the dis-ease with contemporary science" (22). Flanagan considers scientism unacceptable because it inflates its range of knowledge by claiming being able to "explain" everything (22). He instead accepts another position namely naturalism which "is impressed by the causal explanatory power of the sciences" (2). Now, we have to see what this impression of science means to naturalism. Flanagan indicates first a "constraint" which will serve as a boundary within which mind is free to aspire whatever it sees adequate for the reasons of personal flourishing.

Ever since Darwin, we have been asked to re-conceive our nature. We are not embodied souls, nor are we bodies with autonomous Cartesian minds. We are animals. The fact that we are animals does not reveal who and what we are or what our prospects are as human animals. It serves primarily as a constraint on how we ought to think about our *dasein*, our being in the world (italics are mine; 2).

Once the constraint of naturalism is well-established, then "living meaningfully continues more or less as before with a promising potential" (4). More clearly, the constraint says as follows: "If one adopts the perspective of the philosophical naturalist and engages in realistic empirical appraisal of our natures and prospects, we have chances for learning what methods might reliably contribute to human flourishing. This is eudaimonics" (4).

Apparently, Flanagan offers us a naturalistic view which, without threatening

from attention to the contents of the sleeping mind" (461). Protagoras is instead characterized as an agnosticist who says something like "Of the gods I know nothing; about men I speak thus" (450). In brief, Barnes says: "In scope and in emphasis

Democritus' work and its Protagorean offspring represent a new departure; theology is to be adjured and replaced by anthropology" (450).

anything we human beings consider meaningful, takes into account what before scientists insist to eliminate. Here comes the sophist part of his argument, namely relativism. We have to be clear that Flanagan refutes relativism explicitly as we will see later in the exposition of his argument, but the relativistic part is proposed by D. Wong, to whom the book of Flanagan is attributed. In Wong's book *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Oxford University Press, 2006), he defines what they both mean by "naturalism" as follows :

A related sense of naturalism stands opposed to various forms of ontological dualism between the inanimate and nonhuman "lower" forms of life (rocks, trees, bugs, dogs, and cats) on the one hand and human and "higher" nonhuman forms of life (spirits, ghosts, gods, God). Cartesian dualism between thinking and extended substance provides a paradigm of nonnaturalism in this sense. The root sense of naturalism that is opposed to the supernatural and the ontological nonnature is a belief in one single natural world, in which human beings and other purportedly radically different beings must be situated. The root sense of a single world (comparable with the existence of multiple perspectives of belief on that world) is accepted here (29).

This stance of naturalism is clear in the sense that it puts forward the fundamental idea that there is only one world, the natural world. However, having said so, what appears in the world and its conception do not therefore need to be in conformity with one single set of standards. As a matter of fact, there is no such set, according to Wong :

Even if some claim seems constitutive of our concept of rationality, the very concept of rationality is subject to change and variation across different communities of

inquiry. Rather than conceiving knowledge to rest simply on logical or conceptual truths, naturalists propose that it rests on its etiology, and consequently on psychological facts about the subject. For example, perceptual knowledge depends on the right kind of relation between the knower and the facts known, and part of the task of epistemology is to specify what the relation is. Psychology offers an obvious contribution to that task (31).

Whoever reads that "perceptual knowledge depends on the right kind of relation between the knower and the facts known, and part of the task of epistemology is to specify what the relation is", would certainly think of Protagoras' proverb that "men are measures of everything". This explains also why Wong would defend pluralistic relativism here. Given the admission that there is only one natural world, there should also be various possibilities of conceiving the concept of rationality, depending on divergent ways of thinking, forms of life, styles of reasoning and modes of culture. I would think that Flanagan agrees totally with what Wong says here, except perhaps he is more inclined to relinquish the relativized rationalities under one banner, namely eudaimonics.

When the combination of the ideas of the Abderites is analyzed, the part of opposing against religious beliefs comes as a matter of course. What happened 2500 years ago was the replacement of religion with anthropology and now for the "naturalists" concerned here, the point turns out to be their adjuration by prohibiting the "supernaturalists" from asserting the following four points :

1. You should not assert that any creation story you believe in is true, or even that it is made up of "warranted beliefs."
2. It follows that it would be irrational to demand, let alone expect, others to believe the same story you do.
3. Although you can't assert that your creation myth is true, you can assert that belief in its truth benefits certain folk.

4. Do not give "supernatural forces" genuine causal explanatory force when making assertions of the form "phi explains omega." That is, do not assert that "Allah created the universe" is true. (195-6)

Why? Why can't some faithful believers assert what he deems true? According to Flanagan, the reason is due to the "restrictions" placed by naturalism. He says:

Naturalism, as we have seen, places restriction on what can be asserted legitimately, with epistemic warrant. Asserting is different from stating or saying, in that asserting is governed by epistemic standards of warranted assertability. Stating or saying is epistemically free range. Self-conscious "myth-making" is an elaborate form of saying with asserting (195).

Nobody can understand according to what kinds of criteria naturalism has the legitimacy to impose such a restriction. Besides, restricting religious people from asserting what he or she states about beliefs it appears to be futile in the sense that there is absolutely no possibility to fully implement the restriction. There is definitely no way to prevent people from asserting what they say. Doing so would be a contravention of liberty. Flanagan says that the asserted beliefs would never acquire a sound epistemic basis, but that applies only to those naturalists who look forward to establishing all statements on the epistemic basis which they appraise. Yet, this is certainly untrue as not all people are naturalists. Moreover, the believers have perfect reason to assert whatever he or she knows in front of people who are willing to accept his or her assertability of the statements. The unsoundness of the point is more than obvious, and Flanagan trades this with the recognition of an enchanted meaning of life which to him is crucial as long as the central dogma is firmly held.

The "Enchanted" Meaning of Life: Eudaimonics

Once the "constraint" and "restriction" is succinctly defined, the meaning of life and its coexistence in the material world is no longer a problem. It then becomes for Flanagan even enchanting.

Naturally there are two levels of hurdles needed to be overcome. One is the very existence of human beings' desire for meaning in life and the other is why this very desire is indispensable. Before starting to address these two problems, Flanagan endeavors first of all to alleviate a stigmatized image of science conflated with that of scientism, especially its stance of reducing or eliminating everything non-scientific from the realm of human knowledge. He says :

Can we bear up and live with what scientific image says about consciousness and causation? Yes. The scientific image, if conceived carefully, need not be reductive, eliminativist, or disenchanting (36).

Science does not need to be reductive or eliminative towards other aspects of human life in order to prevail. Science is presumed an epistemic, if not ontological basis for all sorts of knowledge. At the same token, the pursuit of meaning for life is objective and naturalistic in the sense that it applies to all human beings. The application is unanimous as a necessary part of our physiological structure of brain. Our brain is thus structured that it will enable each particular person to be engaged in a kind of activity belonging exclusively to human species, i.e. giving an account to the outer world. Moreover, the procedure through which an account is given is about what we are is called by Flanagan "phenomenality" (28). This idea is very crucial for him because it says precisely to what extent the brain structure of human being are connected to each other by linking the objective as well as the subjective sense of the brain structure. Objectively, we all have the similar brain structure in the same way to have mental consciousness. And subjectively, each individual person among the human beings certainly has his or her "first-person feel" which is unique, precious and beyond all, human. Human beings are this sort of animals who are not merely doing things in the natural world, but also predisposing to think what they do.

From Jean Ladrière I learn the idea of "phenomenalization"³ which depicts that all human beings have the cognitive capacity to phenomenalize what is going on around him in order to see all events

consciously and comprehensively. If the analogical analysis of the idea of "phenomenalization" with what Flanagan intends to stress here is adequate, then we would say that the act of "phenomenalization" is common among all human being as an essential part of life. By employing the capability of phenomenaling everything we see in the natural world, all human beings are capable of seeking flourishing, having a better life and realizing happiness

³ Jean Ladrière says: "By seizing the phenomena in its relationship with totality, scientific thinking perceives it in the very process of phenomenalization and thereby receives it in the very possibility of its manifest appearing in "Science, Faith and Their Mediation by Philosophy" in *Soochow Journal of Philosophical Studies* 5: (168) 159-197. Similar ideas are also proposed by Flanagan referring to phenomenality, manifest and scientific appearing.

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The objective states of affairs in brains that are conscious mental events (not all, even widespread, neural activity is conscious) are unique in producing first-person feel-phenomenality. If certain objective states of affairs obtain, then so do first - person feels, and if there are first-person feels, then the relevant objective states of affairs obtain (28).

So, we are that kind of animals who know what we want and aspire to achieve. Now, what should we want and aspire to achieve cannot be something random and whimsical. Why not ? Because doing so would mean something extreme even to such an extent that self-destruction is not definitely excluded. Though that kind of extremity can be meaningful to

some eccentric personalities, it is nonetheless very much in contravention of the general principle of the Neo-Darwinian theory of evolution which somehow stipulates that human beings should seek their well-beings in order to survive the species. Nothing would be more absurd than holding a naturalistic view of human species on the one hand and allowing the possibility of contravening the golden doctrine of evolution on the other. Doing so would hardly be different from committing contradiction which Flanagan would certainly not do. So, for this reason we can understand that he needs to indicate, other than in compliance with the evolution principle, what "should" the meaning of life be in order to be convincing. What does Flanagan suggest then ? He suggests the most originally ethical ideas of Western philosophy, namely, Aristotle's eudaimonia and Plato's wisdom.

A person who lives well, in a way that makes sense and is meaningful, is what the Greeks called 'eudaimon' - literally, "happily blessed." Eudaimonia is flourishing. Aristotle said and I agree, that all human seeks eudaimonia, although importantly they disagree about what makes for eudaimonia. If there can be such a thing as eudaimonics, systematic theorizing about the nature, causes, and constituents of human flourishing, it is because it is possible to say some contentful things about the ways of being and living that are likely to bring happiness, sense, and meaning to persons (16).

Plato assumes that wisdom will reveal what these concepts - the good, the true, the beautiful - gesture at and aim to locate, and, in addition, that wisdom will enable us to see how to (a) embody all three in a consistent, unifies, interpenetrating and uplifting way that (b) will constitute thinking, feeling, being, and living well - eudaimonia. One way sees what is good, true, and beautiful and who understands how they interpenetrate is positioned to flourish, to achieve

eudaimonia; otherwise not (41).

From these two quotations we see clearly that to Flanagan, the aim of life, if intended to be meaningful, is to achieve the long aspired eudaimonia. Although with regard to a more substantial nature of what eudaimonia is, there is no agreement, the result of having a happy life eventually is unanimously anticipated by all. The result will be the end-point of all humans, but due to the difference consisting in modes of lives and forms of traditions, there are divergent ways of achieving the result. This does not matter as ahead of us already a direction which is "normative" yet allows people to make up their mind freely. Most important of all is the truth that this is all very much in line with the evolutionary theory which goes beyond the discussion and serves as a basis of it.

Everything I have said is compatible with the picture of persons that emerges from neo-Darwinian theory and from the best current mind science. According to that picture, we are fully embodied thinking-feeling animals who live and achieve meaning in a world that is fully natural. We are agents, and we act freely. But we do not possess any non-natural faculty or free will that permits circumvention of natural law... This matters. So it is wise to live well, in a way that makes meaning and sense in a manner that alleviates suffering and equips others to pursue what our common humanity makes us seek. If you live with your eye on the prize, then when you die, although you won't go to heaven, you'll have lived in a worthy way and have something to be proud of (61).

This paragraph says everything we can imagine what is in Flanagan's mind concerning the aim and hence meaning of life. It is a "normative recommendation" intending to challenge the social conditions that make the virtue one that only a few can display (123). Having said so, the "recommendation" does not however imply that Flanagan attempts to change others' moral sense in order to forge a situation in which the aim of life would be fully and

universally implemented. This was the mistake the famous philosopher J. Rawls has once proposed. Initially, Rawls projected his principles of justice with universal validity and urged people to comply without exception. Then, Rawls found he made a mistake by setting forth something like universal moral intuitions which simply does not exist. Though Rawls was not successful in the contents of his theory, his method of reflective equilibrium which intends to bring all people concerned to reach consensus is a successful one. At least, Flanagan thinks that insofar as 'there are almost certainly universal necessities across all human environments that pull for and thus make rational certain prohibitions such as ones against murdering innocents, stealing rightfully owned property, and so on' (123), we need something efficient to eventually make all apparently incommensurable views of various tradition understandable to each other and reach consensus after a long process of reflective equilibrium. After all, "the method of reflective equilibrium is the only method ever proposed to do the job of [acquiring meaning in life]" (124). With the method, Flanagan basically achieves all he intends to do in solving the really hard problem. So, he says :

When there is any pressing issue about norms, virtues, etc., engage in the process of wide reflective equilibrium. There are prospects both in the "relatively homogeneous" singleton cases and in cases where there is socio-normative interaction among groups that abide different norms, and especially in very heterogeneous cultures, or when globalization is in play, to develop meta-norms. But the key meta-norm is especially important. It can do real substantial work when there are pressing conflicts or conclusions about what norms to avow. Furthermore it is premised on a humility that is based on accepting fallibilism.

With trial and error, Flanagan reiterates the way through which human species can be happy. This, according to him, first corresponds to the naturalistic

picture of evolutionary theory and then withholds what we all aware even long before there is anything called science around the world. "The hard problem" as well as "the really hard problem" both are hence solved "apparently" all at one once by the argument offered in the book.

The "Pious" Faith in Science: Atomism

Flanagan's argument can be roughly divided into two parts : scientific and moral. Obviously, these two parts do not stand on equal footing as the scientific part mainly represented by the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution holds a more fundamental position than that of the moral part. If we are asked to check out what reasons Flanagan offers to explain this positions of difference, I am afraid of the fact that other than urging people to look at the achievement (not development) of science, there was no other reasons has been offered. The resort to the scientific achievements made in the last hundreds of years might be a good remind of the power of science which happens to be the most efficient form of problem-solving knowledge. Living in a world of attempting to solve all problems like us, it is understandable to say that we need to admit the power of science in order to be consistent. After all, nobody can deny the explanatory power of science today; nor would it be necessary to do so. Yet, with regard to the really hard problem and its solution, that is entirely another thing.

The really hard problem deals with the meaning of life in the material world. It is "really hard" because it comes after another hard problem which deals with the nature of our consciousness. The strategy Flanagan adopts is this. It is perfectly reasonable to admit the human aspiration of seeking meaning in life as long as the horizon of building meaning is founded on the basis of naturalism. I expose previously that naturalism is a very friendly disguise for atomism which is characterized by its mechanistic and materialistic images. Once the horizon is set, then all human dimensions (e.g., the Goodman set of sestet (11)) are not only reasonable, but also enchanting. Flanagan says:

We humans are cognitive-affective-conative creatures who live as beings in time, with our

feet on the ground, interacting in and with the natural, social, and built worlds. Living is a psycho-poetic performance, a drama that is our own, but that is made possible by our individual intersection and that of our fellow performance in a Space of Meaning. How we act, feel, move, speak, and think in the world depends in large measure on how we weave a tapestry of sense and meaning by participation in various subspaces within the spaces of meaning that constitute the Space of MeaningEarly 21st Century... The neo-Darwinian picture of our nature allows, I claimed, a similar picture without actually positing such things as genuine Forms of these things (187).

The arbitrator is the evolutionary theory which decides the coming into being of everything non-scientific. Moreover, what it judges is purely verbal; stating or expressing religious faiths is allowed, but asserting them is not. Flanagan admits that his ideas have a great deal to do with his personal religious history and the American society in which it is embedded, but this does not argumentatively say anything. What he did argue is the reasonableness of pursuing happiness as the meaning for life with one additional condition, i.e., do not admit anything supernatural or nonnatural. Obviously, this is an argument with a pre-established idea set in advance. It is like someone who tries to look for his lost key under the street-lamp without however being certain if the place is the right place, but only because that is the easiest place. In this analogy, we see the street-lamp as the fundamental idea of atomism which looms, but itself does not say anything about the right location to find the key. The fantasy about atomism is imaginary; it is nearly a new faith, and a pious one.

The problem comes out from Flanagan's idea of free will. In the previous quotation on p. 61, he says something appear in contradiction as follows : "We are agents, and we act freely. But we do not possess any non-natural faculty or free will that permits circumvention of natural law". I am puzzled here by

what would be the difference between "the freedom to act" and "the free will as a non-natural faculty" ? As far as I see, there is no difference if "to act" concerned here includes also "to think". Think freely is also a way to demonstrate to act freely. What is prohibited here is an action of "thinking free will as a faculty", but we can think freely if the evolutionary theory of the underlying atomistic theory is true or false. Prohibiting this act is futile because having ability to think freely is a first-person self-conceived consciousness which cannot be arbitrated in any sense. It is a contradiction if Flanagan insists that taking away this faculty of free will from us would be a "better" way to assist people to combine the meaning of life with the material world. To this point, M. Midgley has these words to offer :

Humans are bond-forming animals. When all the bonds are cut – when the various kind of freedom are added together – when a general vision of abstract freedom from every commitment replaces the more limited aims – then, it seems, we might be left with a meaningless life. It begins to seem doubtfully whether any kind of human society is then possible at all.⁴

I do not think Midgley can prove what she says here on the scientific basis, but that does not matter now. Why does it not matter now ? Because after all, the point concerns us all now here is not if everything can be explained on the basis of science. That is Flanagan's faith, not ours. We are concerned here with the meaning of life which breeds as a matter of course from the human society to which each individual belongs. People of these various societies might like Flanagan reiterates all the time that they see their meaning of life by pursuing happiness or eudaimonia. And they might indeed go through a long process of reflective equilibrium to reach consensual understanding for a better future. However, the point is this. All these can be carried out by holding faith in human society, not one in science. If faith of something beyond is inevitable, then I do not see why it must be a specific kind rather than other kinds which might happen to be more "natural".

Conclusion

In this paper, I have reconstructed Flanagan's ideas in terms of two parts: one is about his basic view of person, the other the meaning of life. They are introduced in an order which demonstrates their difference in importance. Obviously, the naturalistic view is more important than the self-conceived meaning of life because having the scientific view of person is a correct answer to the question. When the "right" view of person is established, then the second part concerning the meaning of life proceeds remarkably well. Life remains an enterprise of enchantment and all the efforts of trying to enrich it remains matters of intrinsic value. The problem with regard to this argument is this. The view of person, though "right", is atomistic by its very nature. And the meaning of life, though "freely proposed", is limited by the previous view. In this limit, can there be a real plan for the meaning of life? The question is answered by a variety of people depending on their pre-established ideas. If there are truly the sort of people who hold naturalism an essential part of the world, then the whole argument of Flanagan works perfectly well. However, the same idea says precisely that we do not need to establish a naturalistic view in order to withhold the meaning of life. That explains also why having meaning in life might have nothing to do with the naturalistic presupposition. If this is correct, then we should pay more attention on how to achieve a better life than vindicating that human beings are by nature naturalistically atomistic organisms.

⁴ M. Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 21.

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人觀與生命的意義

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摘要

在《真正難題》書中，Flanagan企圖在新達爾文演化學論的基礎上，「解消」超自然世界，融入自然世界中。在提出這個企圖的同時，他也認為追求幸福的欲求，不但是自然的，也是人性中的一部份。這是「真正難題」所想要解決的問題，也就是在物質世界中意義如何可能的問題。這本書值得評論的原因在於作者對於科學信心之強，以致於他認為，只要能夠接受自然主義的立場，所有從自我意識所建構的內容都可以承認其價值。換句話說，Flanagan願意從心靈科學的角度接受長期其他學者所不願意談論的那些有關宗教與倫理方面的議題。我們在評論中，將這本書依照「人觀」、「生命意義」與「科學信仰」分為三部分。前兩部分在於說明這本書理念的結構，後一部份則是批判。最後在〈結論〉中我則強調，解除非科學的信念並融入科學中，並不是論證生命價值的必要部分。人的社會本身長期的存在，就足以說明這一點了。

關鍵詞：人觀、生命意義、幸福、自然主義。