

## **Reply to Anders Schinkel on *Education and ultimate meaning* (2016)**

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In his recent article in this journal Anders Schinkel (2015) brackets me with Richard Peters in denying that life has a profound or ultimate meaning. He sees me – in an earlier article in *ORE* (White 2009) – as subscribing to the view expressed popularly as ‘life has no meaning, but we can give it meaning’. On this view, education’s role is to help people to find meaning in life in an ordinary, non-profound, sense of the term. While Schinkel sees this as *part* of what education should be doing, he thinks the latter should go further, and ‘affirm the search for a deeper, higher, ‘transcendent’ or ‘ultimate’ kind of meaning.’ It should among other things ‘foster (people’s) capacity to enjoy experiences of ultimate meaning.’ We are used to such a view of education in traditional Christian, Muslim or Jewish religious thinking, but Schinkel puts it forward ‘as someone who is not religious (in any traditional sense of the word)’, and as having ‘secular’ education in mind.

Later in this reply I comment on Schinkel’s account of ultimate meaning and education’s role in connection with it. But I begin with his account of my own position.

### **Schinkel on White on life’s meaning**

He is right that I reject the idea that the meaning of human life is found in something beyond itself, in its role, for instance, in a larger story about God’s universe and the prospect of eternity for those who lead a good life. This is part of the heritage of those of us living in

cultures shaped by monotheistic creeds and still colours the thinking of some who have rejected religion. Elsewhere (White 2014), I have described how my own scepticism as a young man did not prevent my being captivated by Kierkegaard's and other religious writers' quests for a deeper understanding of what human life is about.

I would like others as well as myself to be free from the hold not only of religion but also of the shadows it still casts. A good first step would be to drop all talk of 'life's meaning'. This is why I cannot accept Schinkel's suggestion that my view is that 'life has no meaning, but we can give it meaning'. The first half of this is true enough if 'meaning' has to do with life's place in something larger; but, if so, I don't hold that we can *give* life meaning in the same sense.

The closest I can come, as a non-religious person, to 'meaning of life' discourse is to acknowledge that there are occasions when some of us feel that our lives are now meaningless. Think, for instance, of someone who has been happily married for sixty years, whose partner has just died, and for whom so much of the structure which held her life together has vanished at a stroke.

What does it mean to say that she now feels her life to be meaningless? When she gets up in the morning, has breakfast, makes the bed and puts on the washing, the framework in which she used to do these things has disappeared. She used to do them as part of a shared life with all its plans, hopes, joys, sadnesses, relationships, memories. Now all these have gone and there is emptiness.

Whether the life that she now feels to be meaningless *is in fact* meaningless is another question – and one that I will not follow up here. More immediately relevant is the thought that if she now feels her life to be meaningless, from her present perspective her previous life must have seem to her to have been *meaningful*. What might this mean?

I go back to her early morning routine, extending this now to include all the other content that used to make up the pattern of her life. It was this framework of activities, goals, norms, relationships, expectations, affective reactions that made the old life meaningful. She was not likely to think of it as such *then*: she was too caught up in living this life to take this reflective attitude to it. This is probably true of most of us, incidentally, most of the time. The meaningfulness

of our ordinary lives is so entrenched a feature of them that we are not aware of it as salient enough to think about or to describe.

Why do we talk in cases like this of meaningfulness and meaninglessness? It has to do with intelligibility within a larger framework. The bed making and meal getting and holiday planning that used to find their place against the larger canvas of a shared life have now lost that place. It is this notion of intelligibility within a larger framework that links this kind of meaningfulness with that of linguistic and other kinds. The meaning of 'chair' is to be understood in terms of the larger role of sitting and its multiple purposes in our lives.

Similarly, religious talk about 'the meaning of life' assumes that our individual lives, as well as human life generally, have their place in a larger structure of divine purposes and eternal existence. Where a secular understanding of a meaningful life takes the larger structure into which specifics fit to end at death, this is not true of 'life's meaning' in a religious sense.

Anders Schinkel states (p. 719) that I think that life is 'ultimately pointless'. I realize he means by this that I think that life has no purpose outside itself. I have no problem about the latter form of words; but I am uneasy, nevertheless, about calling life 'pointless', except in very particular circumstances. Imagine, for instance, someone who has a terminal illness and sees only unbearable pain ahead of him; he may well think that he would do best to commit suicide or be taken to a Swiss clinic. For him there is no point in living longer: life is pointless. This is not generally true of the rest of us: we do not think of our lives as pointless.

Since Schinkel tends to equate the pointlessness of life with its lacking meaning, it is worth mentioning for the sake of clarity that the terminally ill man may well not see a longer life as *meaningless*, despite its pointlessness. If he continues to live, he knows he may still be enmeshed in all sorts of relationships and activities; the structure of his usual life may well not fall away. Point has to do with purpose, not with structure.

### **Schinkel on White on education and life's meaning**

Mention of life's 'pointlessness' brings me to Schinkel's view that education should, in my opinion, help people to come to terms with this (p. 719). As just implied, this is *not* what I think. What I *do* think is that one role of education should be to equip people to lead meaningful lives.

Sometimes those who say this mean or imply that it should help them to lead *good* lives in some sense, prudentially and/or morally. In White (forthcoming), I comment on a similar view in a paper on by Schinkel, de Ruyter and Aviram (forthcoming), also in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.

For me, education's role in equipping people to lead a meaningful life has to do with helping them to acquire the framework, or structure, of goals, relationships, norms, affective reactions and so on, already mentioned. *Another* of its roles is to help them to lead a worthwhile life, prudentially or morally. A worthwhile life must be a meaningful one, but the implication does not hold in the other direction: a wastrel, a mobster or a murderous tyrant may well be leading a life that is far from lacking in goals, norms, relationships and so on: the bad or worthless life they lead is unproblematically meaningful. Although I think education should equip people for a worthwhile life and *hence* for a meaningful one, whenever I advocate educating for a meaningful life it is only on background structure, not on what makes for a valuable life, that I focus. In *JPE* Schinkel et al. (forthcoming) misunderstand me on this, as I make clear in my reply to them (White (forthcoming)).

## **Schinkel on ultimate meaning**

### *Needing meaning*

I now leave Schinkel's views on my position and concentrate on his own thoughts about life's meaning.

He writes of 'people's need for meaning: the need, sometimes even a craving, for a deeper, indeed a 'profound' meaning that we did not bring to the world' (p. 726); and adds that 'it cannot reasonably be

claimed that people's widespread need for and experiences of ultimate meaning are clearly illusory, or cases of self-deception.' He also says that 'doubt about life's meaning is part of the human predicament' (ibid.).

Is he right that (all? some?) people have a need for (profound) meaning? To say this means that it is necessary for them to have this, and implies that in some way they would be worse off if they lacked this. Schinkel does not give us his grounds for this claim.

It is certainly true that some people *believe* in a profound meaning, but whether they need it is a further step. Those who believe in or search for this include devotees of religion as well as those in its shadows – like myself as a young man, for instance. Many non-believers – like myself as a somewhat older man – simply lack interest in the quest.

This does not debar us non-believers from the occasional – or more frequent – cosmic *frisson*. Even city dwellers under a light-polluted night sky can see the moon and a star or two – enough to set them wondering, as surely human beings have always done, about how where they live and their own short time there relates to the vastness beyond. It is understandable that across the millennia human beings should have looked for answers and been relieved to find what they thought were good ones. Only in the last few centuries has it become possible for increasing numbers of us to stop short at the wonder of it all and not press beyond.

### *The two realms*

Schinkel thinks that there are 'two legitimate non-religious ways of thinking about ultimate meaning' (p. 720). These are in the realms of morality and of understanding the universe.

Whether either of these routes can in fact lead us into the profundity that Schinkel is looking for is questionable. To see this, we need to look more closely at the two cases he makes. In each area he is content to mount an argument that provides at least a reasonable possibility rather than necessarily being a copper-bottom justification.

[a] The moral argument is in a nutshell that moral goodness depends on recognizing other people, or sentient creatures, as beings independent of the agent and bearers of intrinsic, or inherent, value. This inherent value 'constitutes a kind of ultimate meaning, particularly when we conceive of this inherent value as grounded in the fabric of the world'.

If we leave out the qualification in the last sentence, there is no reason why moral philosophers who would resist any notion of life's ultimate meaning should not see our moral life as resting on people's being of intrinsic value. On the contrary: it is hard to think of anyone who would deny this. This indeed would be my own position as a secular thinker. Whether I take moral rules about promising, not lying or helping in distress, or virtues like gratitude, friendliness or tolerance, implicit is a concern for others' well-being as ends-in-themselves. I take a Humean view of this basic concern: it is not founded on further grounds, but is a sentiment which most of us would like to see shared as widely as possible.

If we now bring in the qualification at the end of Schinkel's sentence, it should be clear that I do not see 'this inherent value as grounded in the fabric of the world', since it is in my view not grounded at all. I do not understand what it would be, in fact, for it to be grounded in Schinkel's way. To see it in this way seems to be *assuming* a profundity that is not argued for.

[b] Schinkel's other route to profundity lies in the area of understanding the universe. He rejects a modern scientific worldview because 'it does not provide us with a narrative we can 'live into' ' (p. 722). He is not explicit about what 'living into' means, but it seems to have to do with his wanting an account that 'allows us to understand ourselves as part of the whole, rather than anomalies' (ibid.). He finds such an account in Whitehead's process philosophy, since this 'allows us to understand ourselves as parts and mirrors of a whole that is suffused with value' (ibid.). Schinkel links this to a quotation from Whitehead: 'the teleology of the universe is directed to the production of beauty' (ibid.).

From a standard scientific perspective, human beings *are*, of course, part of a larger, non-human, whole: they are part of living nature, made up of atoms etc. But Schinkel is looking for something deeper.

He finds it in an account of the universe that is suffused with value: the inherent value of human beings highlighted in his section on morality is of a piece with a value-bearing universe.

Schinkel has only a few lines on Whitehead, not enough to present a plausible argument in justification of his view. I am no expert on Whitehead, but the claims that the universe is purposive and that its purpose has to do with producing beauty would need considerable defence, given how much they go against the grain of current scientific thinking.

I see no grounds for accepting Whitehead's view as 'a reasonable possibility' (p. 723). It may or may not be possible, but we have been given no argument that might incline us to think it is reasonable. Schinkel offers it as a secular account of ultimate meaning rather than a religious one. Yet the picture he presents – of a universe that is purposive and value-laden, and of human beings whose essence is continuous with that of the universe and thus metaphysically sharing an essence with others (ibid.) – looks for all the world like a theory created in religion's shadow. Indeed, if Howe's portrayal (in Schinkel's piece) of the Whiteheadian position as including a non-personal deity (ibid.) is correct, the theory is not so much in religion's shadow as full-bloodedly within it.

### *Unity*

I have a similar reaction to the link Schinkel makes between morality and the universe as he sees these: they are not two separate spheres, as in a modern scientific perspective, the first but not the second being value-laden. They are on his view a unified whole: morality is grounded in the fabric of the world; and the world is shot through with value. Ultimate meaning resides in their unity.

Christians and Muslims and Jews have all believed something similar. Again, Schinkel's account seems indebted to a religious view of the world. Perhaps this is not surprising, given his self-description as 'someone who is not religious (in any traditional sense of the word)' (p. 712), implying, perhaps, a non-traditional religiosity.

### **Schinkel on education**

Schinkel would oppose educators' attempts to get people to believe that there is no ultimate meaning, and would favour their engaging with doubts about life's meaning that are bound to arise from time to time. Education 'should allow people to make up their own mind about the meaning of life' (p. 725).

More positively, education

should further our capacity to enjoy experiences, for instance, of beauty and goodness, oneness and interconnectedness, the kind of experiences that may satisfy our need for ultimate meaning, if only—and perhaps necessarily—in part, provisionally, and delicately. (p. 726)

On his first point, I agree with him. The idea that there is a deeper meaning to life, as expressed in traditional religious thinking and elsewhere, has been and still is a powerful force in human life. It has shaped conceptions of the universe, human nature, society and its government, artistic creations. This provides reasons enough to include discussions of this idea at various points in the school curriculum. A central aim should be, I agree, to encourage students to make up their own minds about the issues.

Schinkel's positive point is more problematic. I have no problem about involving students in experiences of beauty or goodness. This is plainly compatible with, and perhaps required by an adequate secular account of education. But I don't understand what would be an experience of oneness. This seems to go back to the claim that there is unity between the moral realm and the fabric of the world. If so, it would seem to beg the question, for it assumes that this unity exists and can in some way be experienced.

## **Conclusion**

I see no reason, for all the arguments presented in this paper, to go along with Schinkel's views on ultimate meaning. I find myself more in tune with a quotation I recently came across from Chekhov, responding to a question put to him by his wife Olga Knipper in 1904:

“You ask, what is life? This is the same as asking ‘What is a carrot?’ A carrot is a carrot and nothing more is known about it.”<sup>i</sup>

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## Note

<sup>i</sup> From a letter from Anton Chekhov to Olga Knipper-Chekhova, April 1904. See A Chekhov *The Prank – the Best of Young Chekhov* New York: New York Review Books 2015, p.xiv.

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