

**Introduction to *PERSONAL MEANING: HOW WE GIVE RELATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE,
RELATIVE IMPORTANCE, EMOTIONAL FORCE AND MORAL VALUE TO OUR ACTION***
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This is a book about the meaning of action and how we constitute that meaning. We're going to be guided by how we commonly use words like 'meaning.' For instance, we say that someone means to do something when they act intentionally, and that what they mean to do is the meaning their act has for them. It's also common to say that when we give meaning to an act, we 'characterize' it, and we speak of the meaning of an act as its character.

I draw attention to these patterns of everyday usage to indicate something foundational for the chapters ahead, since it is the logic of such common habits of speech that will propel our inquiry. My contention is that tracing the common ways we draw inferences about actions and actors shows us how an action's meaning can come to have relational significance, relative importance, emotional force and moral value. Moreover, tracing the logic of meaning-giving will show us certain systematic limitations in the way we understand people's actions when we think like behavioural and social scientists. Their logic forces us to ignore the meaning actors give to their actions. That, in turn, distorts discussions of these dimensions of our actions' meaning.

There are other features of our deeply embedded ways of thinking about actions that will also guide us. We say, for instance, that to act as opposed to merely behave is to be aware of acting in a certain way. Just now, I am aware of composing these sentences. Just now, you are aware of reading these sentences. Occasionally, part of the character of our action may be hidden from us for several reasons. People sometimes harbour dark intentions that they aren't fully aware of—like passive-aggressive people. Sometimes, we misunderstand what we're doing: 'I didn't know that I was signing up for a monthly contribution.' Sometimes we are absent-minded and forget what we're doing. But for the most part we go through life with an awareness of what we are doing sufficient to our purposes. I'm going to refer to this as our 'active awareness,' the awareness we have of moving to achieve something characterizable.

Something else worth noticing from the start is that we think of the person acting as determining the action's meaning. Another person looking on would be more or less successful in discerning actor's meaning of the action, but the standards for that 'more or less' is the latter. If you, someone I don't know, were to see me just now thumping away at the keyboard, you'd surmise that I was composing sentences. I am aware of doing that too, but I'm also aware of starting a book and trying to get clear about some ideas I've been toying with for decades. And you, just now reading these sentences, are indeed aware of reading these sentences, but perhaps it is also true that you are assessing whether they merit publication or deciding whether to read further, or maybe you are reading them before bed because they've always proven to put you to sleep. Those too are things you mean to be doing. Thus, what we will call 'personal meaning' is likely to have a more complex or multi-faceted character than what others are privy to.

If we are to fathom the logic of giving meaning to action, the place to begin is with an assumption we make when we call someone's movement an action in the first place. Several ways of stating that assumption come to mind, all of which say something about how we are aware of acting. We say that for someone's present movement to count as action, they must be *intending* to move that way. Action involves intending to do something. We also say that an actor must *mean* to be acting the way they do. And we say that they are *determining* the character of their movement. *Meaning* to do something, determining its *character*, and *intending* movement of that character all seem to converge on the distinctive quality our awareness of acting has.

Let me emphasize that the kind of awareness we are examining here—what I am calling active awareness—is a particular kind of awareness whose distinctive features I seek to account for. As a subset of awareness in general, it does not include awareness of the sound of rain or the awareness of the chair I'm sitting on. It is only an awareness of doing something that we will be interested in. I emphasize this because most of us tend to think like the great empiricists of modern philosophy by equating all awareness with experiencing. We are going to see how in several contexts that equation works against understanding the distinctive grasp we have of the meaning of our own action.

One way to site the fault line between the way we commonly reason about the character/meaning/intent of our action and the standard way students of human behaviour reason is to point out that the latter use categories to characterize. Experimental psychologists, sociologists, demographers, and local news reporters

all reason in statements that attribute categories or types of action to people. ‘She refused to take her medicine.’ ‘Social media users of such-and-such profile respond most favourably to candidate C.’ ‘He is a one-issue voter.’ ‘She blew a kiss to the judge when the verdict was read.’ In each case, because the action is identified by a category of action, the problem of categorization for our purposes is that it assigns the same meaning to an action no matter who is doing it.

Suppose A gives B a gift. A would agree that ‘gave a gift’ accurately says what he did. But as to what it meant to him personally, there was more to it than that. A, it turns out, was demonstrating his fondness for B. He was also trying to ingratiate himself with B’s family for business reasons. Moreover, the gift was quite expensive and he meant to convey the impression that he was wealthy. All these intentions were factors in what he meant to be doing. If we think of A as a real person then we must admit that identifying his action by a kind of action, gift-giving, only begins to identify its *personal* character/meaning/intention.

There is, of course, an obvious answer to my complaint, and that is to define the personal meaning of A’s action by conjoining multiple categories. A behavioural scientist, for instance, might insist that we could characterize the personal significance of A’s gift-giving by compiling all the other categories of action he then had on his agenda. A was ‘giving B a gift,’ and ‘trying to ingratiate himself,’ and ‘trying to give the impression,’ etc.

Admittedly, for many purposes this does the trick. It provides, for instance, the premise of digital advertising. All those little categories of action revealed in our browsing habits contribute to an algorithmic ID for ad placements. We are, for that purpose, the sum of the categories of action we have revealed by our browsing. But, as an approach to accounting for what our action means to us, conjunction only gets us so far. There is something about our intentional life that no compilation of facts about us can grasp. Stated simply: compilation can comprehend multiple intentions motivating A, but it cannot disclose how he was *co-ordinating* the achievement of those intentions.

It doesn’t take a great deal of self-monitoring to recognize that we are continually attempting to co-ordinate the elements of our life. Yet, that fact about us escapes notice in the behavioural sciences because of the logic of conjoining categories. This is limiting in a crucial way. By ignoring that co-ordinating function in human agency, scientific accounts ignore what distinguishes us among agents. One need only try to imagine a person lacking intentional co-ordination: we’d have to imagine someone who never tries to fit what he’s presently doing with other elements of his intentional life. You’d be depicting an icon of irresponsibility, perhaps even someone too disintegrated to claim the status of a person.

This then is why I am proposing a departure from the standard patterns of reasoning adopted by students of human action. They cannot—logically cannot—focus on how people co-ordinate their intentional life and how that co-ordination informs the meaning of what they do. We co-ordinate our actions using a different reasoning process, one that obeys rules of inference other than those governing categories of action. That means our account will have to discern a different kind of logic. We will be tracing branches of that logic in the chapters ahead. In highlighting its rules and using them to explore how we co-ordinate action, we will come to see how action gets vested with personal meaning, and with its relational significance, relative importance, emotional force, and moral value.

To begin giving definition to this distinctive system of inferences, which I will call ‘character logic,’ we will contrast it with the logic that uses categories, the kind which Aristotle formalized millennia ago. As he laid it out, category logic is based on interpreting the factual claims we make as claims about category membership. ‘All men are mortal’ makes the claim that all beings the we categorize as ‘men’ can also be categorized as ‘mortal.’ The implied promise is that if we think about statements as claims about category inclusion and exclusion, we can draw inferences among statements syllogistically on any reasonable topic.

Aristotle didn’t invent reasoning with categories; he discovered it. Category logic was operational before he codified it, as readers of Plato’s dialogues can attest. But by highlighting how it works he made us more aware of what supports the sense of validity we have when we reason with syllogisms. It’s the same with the character logic I am inviting us to accredit. We can glimpse its form by paying attention to how people draw inferences when, for instance, they deliberate about what to do next or discern someone’s intentions in a moral or legal discussion. My objective in tracing such inferences is to articulate the rules that make them reasonable. Though it may sound presumptuous to say, though I did not invent character logic, I do propose to codify its rules and give an account of the sense of validity we have when we reason appropriately about actions

In distinguishing the character of an action for the actor from its character for a spectator, I suggested that the actor may be aware of having a variety of intentions: A’s gift-giving was meant to do a variety of things. That observation tells us something distinctive about human agency: we are multi-intentioned agents.

We may not be the only animals who do more than one thing at a time, but I trust you'll agree that our linguistic skills allow us to co-ordinate the achievement of more elements of our intentional life than dolphins, chimps and other clever animals can.

Imagine a person—we'll call her Jill—who leads a normally complex adult life. By calling her multi-intentioned, I mean simply that there are multiple accomplishments that she could now affirm intending if we asked her. 'Oh, are you leaving so soon?' 'Are you still paying off your student loan?' 'Are you seeing anyone these days?' 'Are you still reading that Iris Murdoch novel?' and 'Are you planning any travel this summer?' These are all questions about Jill's present intentional life. She presently projects each of them toward accomplishment over time. Though each of these present ingredients in her intentional life represents a course of movement into the future, they are deployed variously with respect to their timing. Some are projected to be completed in the near future, like the novel-reading. Others are ongoing indefinitely, like the relationship. Some are in their inception, like leaving the party, some are amid a long run, like paying off the loan, and some are projected for the future, like summer travel. But they all have in common that they are presently determining how she projects living her life going forward.

I noted earlier that we expect mature people like Jill to undertake her various achievements in a co-ordinated way. It's instructive to notice why we make that assumption. Our very nature as a multi-intentioned agent implies it. Consider: to be an agent is to act. Thus, we actualize ourselves more by achieving more of what we intend. This, I take it, is a mere ontological truism: the more of our intentional life being achieved as intended, the more fully actualized we are as agents. Because the term 'self-actualization' was used prominently by Abraham Maslow, we should note that our usage differs slightly. For Maslow, it is a process of fulfilling one's potentials by cultivating respect for things like truth and a sense of uniqueness, justice, peace, and playfulness. For us, the term designates a mere formal fact of doing ever more of what one intends. I tend to think that doing more would involve cultivating Maslow's qualities, but for our purposes the bare functional definition will suffice.

So then, what self-actualization requires of us as an agent is an intention to co-ordinate our intentional life as best we can. This follows from both the definitional truism—that to be more accomplished as an agent is to accomplish more—and the practical truism—that we get more done when we coordinate what we are doing. If to be is to act, and if acting to achieve as much as we can of what we intend can best be done by co-ordinating our multiple intentions, we can be said to be under a 'personal imperative' to do so. It is an imperative we cannot disobey without stumbling in our agentive task of best actualizing who we are.

Of course, there may be moments in Jill's life when her intentions get tangled so that she finds herself undoing or impeding something else she is intending to do. But these are likely to be rare occasions, and she blames herself whenever they arise. She seldom finds herself, for instance, planning her summer travel without budgeting for her loan payments or getting so immersed in her novel that dinner burns on the stove. Early in adolescence, she learned that her life would be filled with setbacks, frustrations, and disappointments if she didn't practice projecting what she did in mutually accommodating ways.

How might we imagine Jill trying to co-ordinate her life? Most of the time, it's realistic to expect her to be doing so on a small scale, that is, making little adjustments in how she is doing what she does. Take today. She's doing her weekly house-cleaning. Usually, that doesn't take much concentration, so she has leisure to direct her active imagination to plan, ponder, and day-dream. But not today. Her mother is arriving for a visit and she intends to impress her with a meticulously cleaned apartment.

We can say about Jill's intentional life just now, while she is cleaning, that she is intending to both clean and to impress her mother. Both characterizations of action reflect what she presently means to be doing. As we noted earlier, it is this complexity in the personal significance of her action that make it impossible to grasp with a category like 'house-cleaning.' Categorizing the character of her action fails to recognize *how* her intention to impress her mother is manifest *in the way* she is housecleaning. The way she is moving bespeaks her awareness of advancing both projects. Anyone can see that she is house-cleaning, but in the way she is doing so—exerting herself more, moving more furniture and dusting more shelves—she manifests the simultaneous advancement of her intention to impress.

This process of projecting two or more intended achievements in one course of action is an imaginative feat we will call 'resolving' her action. Much of our action is resolved in this sense, and by considering how such little acts of resolve co-ordinate our lives, we will understand better how our life is unified optimally.

We are going to use the term 'resolve' in a systematic way as we piece together our account of meaning-giving, so let me pause to mark what calling an action 'resolved' will mean in this account. An action is resolved provided it is intended to advance or accommodate more than one item in our agenda. Jill was resolved to impress her mother in the way she cleaned. In that sense, she acted with resolve. Though I

am stipulating a formal meaning for the term, I believe that it squares nicely with common usage: if we asked Jill why she was cleaning in such a determined and thorough way, she might answer that she was resolved to show a clean apartment to her mother. The same goes for anyone who is highly resolved upon some great endeavour, say like running for President. We presume that they are accommodating a great many other parts of their life to support that resolved-upon action. Obversely, if I stumbled upon a TV show that looked interesting, I wouldn't say that I was resolved to watch it. But if I really got interested in it and decided to postpone dinner to see it through, it would be reasonable to say that I was now resolved to see it.

Let us call the occurrence of such decisions 'moments of resolve.' Each is a moment of revising our way of projecting action in the interest of other things undertaken. Such moments of resolve are hardly rare. We resolve anew as conflicts arise, and one arises whenever the way we are intending threatens to counteract some other element of our intentional life. That's why being conscious requires being present in the moment. Every active moment is not a moment of resolve, but for "active" people such moments are frequent. Our agentive posture is to be always on our toes so that we can negotiate the conflicts as they arise. I find it reasonable, then, to depict our active awareness as refreshed continually by moments of new resolve. Such moments are needed to sustain our continuing co-ordination, or at least to approximate it. That means the vigilance of keeping such things in mind can also be seen as an obligation prompted by the personal imperative.

Perhaps it is already clear how personal identity emerges from such ongoing acts of resolve. If their moments create a measure of continuity in actions over time, and if enough of our intentional life is included in that continuity, we find ourselves supporting a sense of projecting a single course of action and thus attain agentive individuality. The ongoing moments of resolve support identity as a global character of action, one that aims to co-ordinate the whole body of our action. That sense of an overall resolution, by identifying us as an individual, identifies us as a person. We will call it "personal resolve." Our personal resolve is the imagined trajectory of our life, projected as a coherent course of present action going forward, that we think will best accomplish what we presently intend.

Chapter one describes how we bring co-ordination to our agency and how we are aware of doing so. We will consider how successive acts of resolve come to support a sense of unifying personal resolve. Certain formal qualities are reasonable to ascribe to awareness of personal resolve. By doing so, we are able to understand how their presence together gives action its personal meaning. We're going to discover that our sense of personal resolve is narrative in form. But it is a distinctive kind of narrative, one that reflects its distinctive function in sustaining our aspirational integration. It spins out its developing sense of active meaning in episodic threads weaving our commitments to prevent them from getting snarled. We shuttle continually, and with each new pass we try to contextualize what we're doing in our life. Each resolution is an episode in the ongoing narrative project of integrating as much of our intentional life as we can. Since such continuity as we can muster is narrative in form, we make it our personal imperative to tell a 'personal' story.

We shall have to tread carefully in calling it a story though; the kind of imaginative projection we make of the overall resolution of our agency is unlike that of a conventional story in several respects. To avoid being misled, we will mark those differences the better to keep them in mind. But, the sense in which the character of our personal resolve qualifies as a story—by being the imagined resolution of our intentional life—justifies calling it a personal story. Because we can only intend present tense agentive coherence by intending singularity as a character of resolve, we are determined to make ourselves coherent autobiographically, to project our life in a character of narrative resolve.

Assume for a moment that chapter one succeeds in describing a narrative form that functions to integrate our intentional life enough to make each of us an individual person. One conceptual advantage we then have is to avoid the 'which-came-first' puzzle. I can reasonably say that my personal story gives me my character and, in that sense, identifies *who* I am; yet I can also say that I author my identity, in that it is I, a multi-intentioned agent, who intentionally projects imagined courses of co-ordinated actions. My story authors me in that the resolution it achieves gives me the active coherence I need to understand myself as an individual, and I author it in that it is my act of resolve that co-ordinates my competing intentions and determines it as a character of resolve.

Another advantage of finding the character of a person in the character of their action is that it enables us to gainsay the post-modern denial that any narrative can have legitimate authority over anyone's life. Our account finds a personal story's legitimacy as 'authoritative' over us in its promise to actualize us more fully than any other way of putting our life together.

In outline, the first chapter argues that:

- a. To be an agent is to achieve intentionally.
- b. As multi-intentioned agents, we are achieving in multiple ways at any one time.
- c. Since our being as multi-intentioned agents is best actualized in accomplishing as many of those intentions as we can, the better we coordinate them, the more actualized we are aware of being.
- d. Thus, we are prompted by the distinctive form of our agency to coordinate as much of our intentional life as we can. This is our personal imperative.
- e. The narrative projection governing our life by virtue of actualizing us best has legitimacy as our personal story.
- f. That story contextualizes the meaning of our action so as to make it personal and in so doing makes us personally present in the meaning of our actions.

Chapter Two explores how the character of some of our action bears interpersonal significance. Some action does not, of course. When we brush our teeth or search a website, it is our intention to co-ordinate only our own movements. On the other hand, when we interact with someone—consult a doctor, sing a duet, have a dinner conversation—the character of our interaction is not exclusively ours to determine. Rather, it has significance as a collaborative project. This suggests that when we interact with people, we co-ordinate our movements with them in a way comparable to how we co-ordinate our own movements when we act on our own. We will explore the analogy between resolving our own intentions and co-ordinating our actions with those we interact with. In both cases, it is reasonable to recognize a shared intention as the basis of the co-ordination. Just as when we resolve our own actions, we are actively aware of enacting a greater body of intended movement, so when we interact successfully, we are aware of enacting a greater body of intended movement. In other words, the same logic of agentive expansion applying to moments of resolve applies to relationships. The greater the body of movement we mutually intend, the greater the range of movement we determine by the character of our individual resolve. That is the fundamental reason—if you will, the ontological reason—for why we are disposed to social and communal lives: healthy interactions—those intended by both parties to serve both parties’ interests—exert a lure toward greater self-actualization for both parties. We are going to see how this works even in impersonal relationships, but it is only when we discern what it is to relate to another personally—by co-ordinating the characters of our personal resolves—that we project the greatest relational meaning for our actions.

Thinking about healthy interactions as shared intended accomplishments also underlies and justifies our sense that the boundaries of personal agency are more porous than the standard models of agentive identity allow for. When we think of a person as a character of resolve, we can account for the sense we have of living *into* one another’s lives. We sense it because in interactive moments we are aware of the body of our own movement being determined in character by both of us. In the logic of agency, that means we are aware of actualizing what we intend in one another’s movements. Momentarily then, in those moments of interacting, we share not just certain intentions but an intention to resolve two stories.

Accordingly, our agency expands; we become more actual. The greater richness of relational meaning is accompanied by a sense of ‘getting more out of life.’

This correlation expresses itself poignantly when people react to losing a friend, particularly a life-partner. A widow may report feeling as though she’s lost part of herself. Agentively speaking, that is exactly what has happened.

We shall test the descriptive advantage of this way of grasping personal self-actualization by using what we have discovered about human agency and the personal imperative to describe the nature of friendship. The imperative prescribes that friendships are limited to those who can enter them in good faith, that is, in the belief that it will enrich the meaning and aggrandize the scope of their agency. A friendship is only possible if it allows both parties to pursue courses of action that promise to actualize them to the greatest degree. As we will discover, that is true. Friends become friends when they believe they can make themselves accountable for the requirements of one another’s personal story in good faith. I believe it can be insightful to describe how the personal imperative, being irrefragable, sets conditions for friendship—including marriage—both for when it can flourish and for when it must be broken.

In outline, the second chapter argues that:

- a. Healthy interactions—those intended to add to the life of both agents—involve shared intentions.
- b. Shared intentions represent an expansion of a body of intended movement and, accordingly, the enrichment of that movement’s meaning.
- c. The personal imperative—to actualize our intentional life as much as we can—creates a telic pull toward interactivity.

d. When personal interactions succeed in actualizing two people's characters or resolve optimally, friendship is possible and compelling.

e. But, to be sustainable it must continue to promise each partner's greatest actualization.

f. Both the telic pull of the imperative and the limitation it imposes determine the scope and meaning our friendships can have for us.

Chapter Three. Our argument so far has assumed that we discern our action as a body of movement, discern it in a way that assesses its volume relative to other possible courses of action. Now we examine that assumption and what justifies it. We follow the logic we employ in discerning volume in intended movement. That volume, by definition, is temporal in measure. It represents the combined moments of movement we intend in order to achieve what we intend to do. Since we are not aware of that temporal volume of movement in the tangible way that we are aware of our physical body's movement, we cannot measure those combined moments of what we intend mathematically. Yet, movements take time, so we must assume that the movement implicit in any resolute intention represents a multitude of temporal spans. Our ability to imagine them, we will find, is sufficient to justify us in making *relative* judgments. In our ordinary, non-systematic ways of thinking, making such judgments comes naturally. We perceive some actions as being "of little moment" and others as 'momentous'. Once we find ourselves able to accredit philosophically what we affirm in ordinary language, perhaps we can restate our understanding of the personal imperative yet again: it obliges us to project the most momentous character of action.

Having established how a measure of moment is implicit in an intended character of an action, we go on to observe the correlation of that measure with the relative personal importance we tend to attach to action. In many contexts, our use of 'momentous' and 'important' as interchangeable adjectives testifies to that measure for importance. By implication, what we are aware of as 'imported' into whatever action we see as 'important' is the cumulate moments of movement represented in how we characterize that action.

We put this account of relative importance to the test by seeing what it mandates about how people commonly deliberate about what to do in the present situation. The test is: does that entailment plausibly describe such deliberations? Can we plausibly represent the way we deliberate as aiming at our greatest self-actualization?

I hope you agree that there's at least initial plausibility in the claim that we can: if Jill reasoned, 'It's important for me to file my income taxes by the end of March since I'm going to be travelling the first two weeks in April,' she'd be voicing her awareness that filing early promises to achieve her intention to file *and* her intention to travel. If she filed at the last minute as she usually does, she could either file but not travel or travel but pay a tax penalty. The difference in the scope of the moments of movement she could make in satisfying her intentions makes commensurately more important for her to file early.

If the more textured illustrations we will explore bear this formula out, several doors open for us philosophically. One of them leads to a personalized understanding of practical reasoning. As it is typically represented, practical reasoning has a means-end form: we have some end in mind and we figure out what moves will best provide the means to achieve it. It's a time-honoured form of reasoning, but while it describes many of our moment-to-moment practical decisions adequately, it doesn't lend itself to describing the reasoning it takes to resolve intentions that would otherwise threaten to undo one another as they are now projected. Decisions at junctures like that tend to be relatively important, since they usually involve more moments of successful intentional achievement. That being the case, the form of reasoning going into important deliberations can better be described as means-ends (plural) reasoning: we project the course of resolve promising best to actualize multiple intended ends.

To clarify this means-ends deliberation, I'm going to contrast it with the means-end reasoning Elizabeth Anscombe describes in her influential work, *Intentions*. She invites us to think of an act's intention as the actor's answer to the question 'Why?'. A man is making up and down movements with his arm. Why? To operate a pump. Why? To replenish the household's water supply. Why? To poison the inhabitants. Why? To prevent bad people from seizing the reins of power. Why? To make it possible for good people to control the government and usher in the Kingdom of Heaven. Roughly speaking, Anscombe's illustrations do seem to bear out a correlation between the increasing importance of successive statements of intention and increasing the range of movement intended. But when we consider multiple intentions being advanced by an action, gains in an action's importance grow in ways other than those indicated by her linear succession of 'Why?' answers. If Anscombe's political pumper is to count as a real person, we must assume that his pumping is co-ordinated with other of his intentions, that they are modified in time and mode to support that co-ordination. If he is a normally complex person, we might imagine him entering into this plot to impress his girlfriend. Maybe he fancies himself a new Hemming way and means to gather material for a novel. If

so, we also need to count these other undertakings in the range of his intended movement. They too lend personal importance to his action.

Using this understanding of an action's importance to complement the one implicit in Anscombe's account, I think we have the basis for a better account of deliberation. It is a rational process, but not in the category-reasoning sense. As its etymology indicates, 'deliberations' make inferences based on "weighing." Our account designates what gets weighed as the relative moments of achievement that the possible courses of action promise to advance. The weighing counts as rational by virtue of our imaginative ability to access which option promises to actualize the most momentous achievement in our life.

In outline, the third chapter argues that:

a. In intending to do something, we are aware of intending a body of movement that, in principle, has temporal measure. It is an achievement that fills the time it takes.

b. Thus, intended movement is relatively momentous.

c. Deliberations make relative judgments by projecting alternative courses of action to assess which promises to actualize us most. Those judgments can be seen to correlate with what we regard as the most important thing to do at the time.

d. Because we deliberate with multiple intentions in mind, when we decide important matters, our reasoning is means-ends in form.

e. Our deliberations yield informed judgments about the relative volume of moment implicit in the alternatives before us. Thus, personal importance can be reasonably assessed. Since that assessment is being made of a character of action, it represents another dimension of that action's meaning.

Chapter Four explores this sense of relative moment for what it reveals about our emotional life. To understand how emotions register in a person's active awareness, we need to highlight the shift in the temporal logic required to construe a 'moment' as a 'moment of action.' To keep this shift before us, I will sometimes refer to the moments resolved in a person's life by the etymological root of that word: emotions reflect changes in our *momentum*. Positive emotions like enthusiasm, joy, gratitude, and love are feelings of increased *momentum*, an inflation of agency; negative ones like fear, anxiety, and depression register decreased *momentum*, a deflation of agency.

To show how positive and negative emotions are correlated with agentive activation and deactivation, we will explore that connection on all the vectors of a person's agency—individual, interactive, and a third vector we will also discuss, the actualization of someone's resolve in others' future lives, or what I will call its 'legacy' meaning. Because all of them represent awareness of movement determined in character by the character of our resolve, all of them can register expansion or contraction. The positive emotion we will use to illustrate this formula is enthusiasm, and we will focus specifically on political enthusiasm. We'll look at how political enthusiasm waxes or wains according to how well candidates cultivate it on all three agentive of the vectors of those they appeal to.

Anger will exemplify negative emotion. Philosophers have long tended to classify all emotion-driven behaviour as irrational, but many of them have singled out anger with special opprobrium. Stoics in particular have urged people to dispel their angry impulses by putting whatever situation occasioned them into rational perspective. That advice endures and it continues to be honoured because, for the most part, angry responses do more harm than good to everyone involved.

But the rule doesn't isn't always wise to follow. We can imagine situations where angry action, agentively speaking, is helpful, rational, and constructive. Stoic abhorrence of all anger, I shall argue, stems from mistakenly seeing it as irrational rather than differently-rational. Angry action can qualify as rational in two ways. First, the surge of anger we feel, say at some 'slight,' registers an actual loss of agency. So, anger need not result from failing to see things rationally (though it can); an angry person's awareness of what has happened to his active possibilities can be judged to be reasonable or not according to whether their active possibilities really have been diminished. Second, an angry action qualifies as personally rational if it promises to actualize its agent most. That there are such unruly cases needs to be acknowledged. We're going to see that under certain not-uncommon circumstances, expressing anger can be crucial to sustaining the health of a relationship. When it is, it determines the rational way for a person to behave.

Having recommended our change-in-*momentum* account as insightful in the way it leads us to describe emotional life, the chapter goes on to recommend it as useful in negotiating current discussions about whether emotions are rooted in feelings or evaluative judgments. By recognizing them as rooted in changes in personal *momentum*, we accommodate both sides of that dispute without contradiction. An emotion is a feeling—in that we are directly aware of changes of *momentum* in our agency—and it is an evaluative

judgment—in that we judge that our *momentum* has increased or decreased based on our evaluation of the relative moment of our actions.

Interpreting ‘feelings’ and ‘evaluative judgments’ as discrete determinants of emotions has also confronted philosophers with the question of which causes which. But it’s problematic to hold either that our feelings cause us to judge as we do or that our judgments cause us to have the feeling we have. To show how a *momentum* account of emotions avoids this which-causes-which problem, we will transpose the logic of an argument recently advanced by a philosopher of cognitive science. By restating its premises, we can preserve its force—which is to establish a cognitive basis for emotions—without resorting to a causal explanation.

In outline, Chapter 4 argues that:

- a. Our *momentum* rises and falls with the volume of movement we intend.
- b. Positive emotions register increased *momentum* and negative emotions decreased *momentum*.
- c. Understanding them in that way allows us to describe specific positive and negative emotions more insightfully.

d. It also gives us a way to reconcile current positions on the nature of emotion.

Chapter 5 considers how action can take on moral significance. On the face of it, the topic may seem to pose a special problem for our account. Having established that every person is acting under an imperative to self-actualize in the most momentous way possible, we seem to have assigned ourselves to a position that can only be called ethical egoism. True, we’ve observed that healthy interactions, particularly personal ones, add to the moment of what we do, and that such additions recommend themselves as personally advantageous. But we’ve left a loophole: however richly our relational life *might* contribute to the momentary meaning of what we do, it remains an open question as to whether healthy interactions are *always* personally advantageous. Our account leaves open the possibility that someone could attain the most meaning and greatest *momentum* by exploiting people.

There is only one way to avoid drawing that conclusion. It begins with a stipulation that seems reasonable to assume—that to count as moral an interaction must be such that both parties intend for both of them to benefit personally. It must be what I am calling a *healthy* interaction, one that is meant to be mutually edifying. We’re going to assume, then, that if one party betrays another by exploiting them—robbing them of active possibilities—that makes the interaction unhealthy and renders it immoral.

Adopting this ‘healthy’ requirement for moral interaction allows us to specify a claim that, if we have grounds to believe it, exonerates us from the egoism charge. Consider: our account leads to ethical egoism only if it is possible to extend our agency by exploiting others. That’s because, if we could occasionally exploit another and gain agentive advantage, at those times our personal imperative would trump our moral imperative. In that case, our moral imperative—to have only healthy interactions—would lose its status as our personal imperative, meaning that our moral obligation wouldn’t always be our personal obligation.

To avoid debasing moral reasoning that way, we have to find it reasonable to believe that no one could ever self-aggrandize at another’s expense. Only if we have evidence for believing that can we make room in our account for the authority of moral value. I’m going to call this required belief a belief in ‘universal moral community,’ ‘universal’ because it holds that *no* person can profit from exploiting another, ‘moral’ because it fulfils our health condition for moral interaction, and a ‘community’ because healthy interactions integrate the lives of parties to them in ways that create community among them. Ultimately, whether we are always obliged to be moral depends upon whether we have evidence-based reasons for believing in a universal moral community (or UMC).

I have been describing UMC abstractly as the belief that all people can lead exclusively healthy interactive lives in good faith. We should remind ourselves, however, that the imaginative expressions of UMC are myriad and culturally specific. We can find the belief at the core of any number of philosophical and faith-based positions. Plato, for instance, argued in *The Republic* that injustice is not more profitable than justice. The Buddha taught compassion for all other beings as the way to Enlightenment. In the West, the deepest running traditions of UMC have been fostered by the monotheistic religions, all of which, in their mature orthodoxies, teach that doing right by all people is God’s will and that doing God’s will is tantamount to personal salvation, one’s ultimate actualization.

Today, most people are unschooled in any philosophical tradition and many are unaffiliated with any religious one. Yet, I would contend that most of us continue to reason with UMC as our assumed premise. The Golden Rule is still deferred to, one still hears unhealthy interactions called “bad karma,” and people still ask about an immoral action, “how can he live with himself?” All of these reflect a commitment to UMC as the scope of mutual accountability wherein the parties to it are most fully actualized. There are

always a few Nietzsche-like figures who deny the belief as a matter of principle, but the conviction that healthy relations are always better for us than unhealthy ones maintains its hold on most of us and—I hope you will agree—deserves to be interrogated as to whether it has a reasonable basis.

Much of the discussion in chapter 5 concerns how someone could rationally justify believing in UMC. We've admitted that it cannot be deduced from the fundamental claims about personal agency we began with. If we come to find it reasonable, it must be because we can imagine living in accord with any person who didn't intend to harm us. In earlier chapters, by representing movements as coordinated by an intention, then representing interactions as shared intentions, and then representing a personal relationship as a shared story, we discovered that each of the successive imaginative feats called for had to be more comprehensive than its predecessor. Each thereby adopted a more comprehensive level of accountability and each thereby intended to actualize a greater body of achievement.

The question of whether it is reasonable to believe in UMC turns on whether we can confirm its truth in the same way we confirm the truth of an intentional commitment, namely by enjoying an expansion of our agency in the exercise of its expanded accountability. Usually, when we talk about evidence for the truth of a belief, we are talking about the truth of stated facts. Scientific beliefs, historical beliefs, philosophical beliefs, economic beliefs: they all depend on the support of relevant facts. But UMC is a belief about the truth of intentional relationships. That means we must think in terms of how we confirm *relationships* as "true" or disconfirm them as 'false.' Truth claims about relationships, it also turns out, answer to a different logic of confirmation than claims made with categories.

To understand the logic of confirmation for UMC, we will begin with an examination of how people stay "true to" one another and how that truth is confirmed in their lives. We are going to see that in all agentic reasoning, the pattern of confirmation is consistent. A relationship is true if the increased accountability interactors take on is more than compensated by the enhancement that they become aware of in their agency. UMC obliges us to be accountable to a universal community of good-willed people, so its confirmation can only come with an awareness that living into this higher level of accountability enhances us personally. Whether it does, of course, can only be answered personally. If one commits to this UMC range of accountability and finds membership in it edifying, it is reasonable for them to believe in the truth of UMC. If that's the case, there is a reasonable basis for assigning moral value: an action is moral if it promises to actualize the most personal *momentum* in the character of our resolve.

If it is true that UMC, a belief in many guises, is wisely as well as widely held, it seems worth the challenge to examine how the dominant accounts of moral value appear in its light. We're going to see that the modernist limitation—always representing actions as kinds of action—bears part of the blame for the apparent inability to reach philosophical consensus about the source of moral value. Most ethicists take one of three positions on the matter: that an act's moral value is determined by its utility for creating happiness, that it is determined by its adherence to what reason determines as the actor's duty, or that it is determined by its accord with human virtues. What makes Ethics classes so endlessly intriguing is that utilitarian accounts confirm our moral sensibilities in some situations, but duty or virtue accounts confirm it in others. None of the three positions fully captures the logic of our reasoning in all moral matters.

We can break through this impasse by transposing each account of moral value by restating its crucial insight using the logic appropriate for reasoning about personal actions. In doing so, we derive an alternative version of utilitarian ethics, an alternative version of duty-based ethics, and an alternative version of virtue ethics, versions that are congenial with each other's insights. We will show this by substituting utility in actualizing moment for utility in occasioning happiness, by substituting the personal imperative for the categorical one, and by thinking of people's virtues as habits that keep them optimally actualized.

We gain two advantages by making these transpositions. First, the resulting versions of utilitarian reasoning, duty reasoning, and virtue reasoning track better with how we make moral judgments in practice. Second, they are immune to the standard criticisms each position on moral value seem to attract.

In outline, Chapter Five argues that:

a. Acting in obedience to the personal imperative in all cases need not make us ethical egoists, not if we have reason to believe in universal moral community, which is to say in the assurance that every person, each in obedience to their own personal imperative, is able to resolve their actions with those of any other person open to that healthy possibility.

b. UMC has roots in a variety of religious and philosophical traditions and it continues to inform the moral sensibilities of a great many people, even those who no longer justify it with reference to those traditions.

c. While we cannot prove or disprove UMC with the impersonal reasoning of this account, we can describe the form evidence would have to take in order to confirm or disconfirm the belief on rational grounds.

d. Those who do find the belief reasonable enough to live their lives trusting in its truth are able to adopt the doctrines of utility, duty, and virtue in ways that accommodate their core insights without incurring the standard vulnerabilities critics charge them with.

Chapter 6 closes out this account of personal meaning by taking on everyone's favourite philosophical question, one that's as inevitable as it is clichéd, 'What is the meaning of life?'. Given that we've represented the resolved character of a person's action as the only conceivable portal into their life's meaning, we should at least be able to address the question. If we think of the meaning of life as the meaning of an active life as a whole, our account determines it as the meaning of a story. This reframes the meaning-of-life question in a way that allows it to make better sense. We have seen that the function of our personal story is to contextualize our active moments *in the present*. Whether in an incremental retelling or in a major plot shift, that story is told to function in the present moment. It is a creature of that moment. It represents the way someone *presently* resolves their multi-intentioned life. In that sense, the meaning of our personal story is momentary.

We are pre-disposed by modern thinking to hear 'momentary' as 'ephemeral,' whereupon the notion of life having only momentary meaning sounds paradoxical at best. But when we transpose "momentary" into its active sense, we no longer ironize the question. Active presence as a character of resolve understands its moment according to a co-ordinated context of meaning, narrative in form, spanning time, and characterizing *who* we are. I'm going to contend that transposing the 'meaning of life' question into the temporal logic appropriate to agentic reasoning makes the question not just more manageable but one that we can answer cogently.

As usual, we will play referee among philosophical disputes on the topic. For example, those who celebrate the contingency of meaning are led to discuss the notion that someone's life could have meaning as a symptom of self-deception. But ironically, by trading on the notion of contingency, those post-structuralists have tended to adopt the modern meaning of "moment" as an instant and thereby rendered meaning as an event. Alternatively, those who do not reject the question of life's meaning out of hand tend to split between those who construe it as subjective and those who insist on its objectivity. But the temporal logic of active moment detaches us from the subjective-objective dichotomy at the root of that dispute. The source of life's meaning is whatever character of action we find it reasonable to resolve ourselves in advancing. If one person's life contains only his individual actions, its meaning is circumscribed as much as it can be without becoming impersonal. If one is embodied with others in friendships, life deepens in meaning. It deepens still further if the good acts one does promise to outlast them. Finally, as we will have seen in the previous chapter, it is at least conceivable that one can live in hope of acting in accord with the resolution of all the healthy personal resolutions projected by all informed people of good will. In that sense, we must recognize a spectrum of personal answers to the question, one that reaches from a life of little meaning to one of ultimate meaning.

In outline, chapter six argues that:

- a. The question, 'What is the meaning of life?' makes sense if it is about active meaning.
- b. Asking it in that way makes life's meaning momentary in an expansive reading of the term, and that allows us to avoid calling it either subjective or objective.
- c. It also allows us to answer the question personally on the basis of the body of movement we act accountably to and share in the being of.

One more concluding remark:

By now, it's abundantly clear that I am well aware that what I am proposing represents a radical departure from the dominant professional ways of reasoning about people's actions. By showing how we characterize our action other than with categories, I am inviting the reader to resist some of the dominant habits of modern scientific thinking. I am inviting you to listen for pre-modern ways of hearing the vocabulary we commonly use to discuss actions. When we reason about action in non-professional settings, it is these original meanings that will guide us. From the standpoint of how thinkers have reasoned about people's actions throughout history, the character logic I am calling attention to recalls old but enduring ways of reasoning. It is reasoning that may have been overshadowed in modern systematic contexts, but it persists in the way we real-life actors think real-life thoughts.

In one respect, that should make it easy to follow this account: you are already intimately familiar with the patterns of inference it explores. In another respect though, this account unavoidably puts a challenge

before the reader. Because in reasoning about characters of action we can often revert to pre-modern meanings of action terms, we will occasionally find ourselves in an awkward tension with the current use of those terms in systematic contexts. That may make our usage sound stressed in spots, as we've already seen with regard to 'moment' and 'intention.' Since character logic is at least as long-established as category logic, we will occasionally try to recover the older usages and better hear them resonate in our common usage by calling etymology into service. However, if our exercise in linguistic originalism ever become disorienting as we explore its implications, you may find it helpful to consult the glossary at the end of the book.

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