

Research Article

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Ground Projects and the Joy of Living

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Abstract: Masahiro Morioka has introduced the concept of “the joy of life” as an element of his critique of prevailing tendencies toward comfort and the alleviation of suffering, which he calls “painless civilization.” I argue that this concept problematizes Bernard Williams’s idea of the “ground projects” that organize and imbue lives with meaning. In light of Morioka’s analysis, ground projects cannot be the exclusive or even primary carrier of meaning in life. Our various undertakings and pursuits may organize and orient life, but they do not hold a monopoly on meaning. Even in the face of destroyed ground projects, we can find joy in living. The dynamic that emerges from considering Williams’s view through the lens of Morioka’s conception of joy, I argue, points to the possibility of the existential transcendence of our reified selves.

Keywords: ground projects; joy; meaning in life; self-transcendence; painless civilization; analytic existentialism

The innermost essence of life is its capacity to go out beyond itself, to set its limits by reaching out beyond them; that is, beyond itself.

~Georg Simmel, “Life as Transcendence” (2010 [1918], 10)

1 Introduction

A prominent conception of life’s meaning stemming from the work of Bernard Williams (1981a) conceives of our lives as organized around “ground projects” that “propel” us through life and provide us reasons for living (11ff). While such aims and ambitions may commonly structure a life and provide an agent with meaning at least in a subjective sense, we might wonder whether this conception places *too* much

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emphasis on our projects as carriers of meaning. What happens, for instance, when our projects flounder and our lives fall into crisis? In answering this question, I will argue that we have reason to turn to Masahiro Morioka's *Painless Civilization* (2021a, 2023a [2003]) (*Mutsu Bunmei Ron*), a fresh philosophical critique of contemporary society. Currently being translated into English, Morioka's work contains much for Anglophone philosophers to appreciate. More specifically, the work so far translated contains fruitful concepts that provide resources for rethinking some lines of inquiry in the current discourse on meaning in life within analytic philosophy or what has come to be known as "analytic existentialism" (Benatar 2004, 3).

This essay seeks to show the relevance of one particular notion, what Morioka calls "the joy of life" (*seimei no yorokobi*), to conceptions of meaning in life indebted to Williams's (1981a, 11ff) notion of "ground projects."¹ In this essay, I will argue that Morioka's conception of experiencing joy in moments of crisis points to a novel way of challenging Williams's influential conception of ground projects. In light of Morioka's analysis, ground projects cannot be the exclusive or even primary carrier of meaning in life as the moments when our projects crumble provide unique occasions for affirming a life that transcends the limitations of our previous selves. Our various undertakings and pursuits may indeed provide structure and organization to a life, but they do not hold a monopoly on meaning. Exclusive focus on them – as is not uncommonly the case in contemporary philosophical discourse – obscures our existential situation.

In what follows, I begin by discussing Bernard Williams's articulation of "ground projects." After situating this concept in its existing field of criticisms and applications, I concentrate on one strand of debate that centers on questions of life's meaning. I then turn to Morioka's concept of "the joy of life" and suggest that it provides a novel way of seeing the limits of Williams's conception. Morioka's conception of joy, I argue, reveals a source of meaning available even in – and most profoundly at – life's darkest hours, when our ground projects have been reduced to wreckage. The dynamic that emerges from considering Williams's view in light of Morioka's conception of joy points to the possibility of the existential transcendence of our reified selves.

2 Williams on Ground Projects

In his well-known reflection on the undesirability of immortality, Williams (1973a, 86ff) imagines an agent deliberating about whether to keep on living. In deciding

¹ My argument will be framed in terms of Williams's concept of "ground projects," but this also has implications for related notions like Christine Korsgaard's (1996, 101) concept of "practical identities."

whether life is worth living, Williams's deliberator considers his grievances with life on one side and the reasons he wants to keep living on the other (86–7). Some things that he otherwise desires won't make the list, e.g., the desire to drink coffee, light a cigarette, or wash the dirty dishes piling up in the sink. These desires are, in Williams's words, "conditional" upon his continuing to live. Some desires, however, are deeper and stronger than these, providing positive reasons for carrying on living. These might include desires centered around one's relationships to friends or family as well as intellectual and aesthetic projects that remain incomplete. These so-called "categorical desires" drive an agent forward in life. Williams (1973a) writes:

In such a calculation, a man might consider what lay before him, and decide whether he did or did not want to undergo it. If he does decide to undergo it, then some desire propels him on into the future, and *that* desire at least is not one that operates conditionally on his being alive, since it itself resolves the question of whether he is going to be alive. He has an unconditional, or (as I shall say) a categorical desire (85–6).

Elsewhere, Williams (1981a) returns to this distinction between kinds of desires and puts it as follows:

Some desires are admittedly contingent on the prospect of one's being alive, but not all desires can be in that sense conditional, since it is possible to imagine a person rationally contemplating suicide, in the face of some predicted evil, and if he decides to go on in life, then he is propelled forward into it by some desire (however general or inchoate) which cannot operate conditionally on his being alive, since it settles the question of whether he is going to be alive. Such a desire we may call a categorical desire. Most people have many categorical desires, which do not depend on the assumption of the person's existence, since they serve to prevent that assumption's being questioned, or to answer the question if it is raised. *Thus one's pattern of interests, desires and projects not only provide the reason for an interest in what happens within the horizon of one's future, but also constitute the conditions of there being such a future at all* (11, emphasis added).

In Williams's (1981a, 11ff) terminology, these desires take the form of "ground projects," i.e., certain activities whose status is fundamental in our lives, providing us reasons why we want to keep on living. Typically, as Williams notes (1981a), these are multiple: "in general a man does not have one separable project which plays this ground role: rather, there is a nexus of projects, related to his conditions of life, and it would be the loss of all or most of them that would remove meaning" (13). Thus, the sources of meaning in life need not be unitary or centralized; they are often dispersed, but it is these projects and the desires that motivate them that provide us with meaning in life on his conception.²

² In this paper, I will operate from the broad confines of a subjectivist conception of meaning in life, which includes Williams's theory, as well as others, e.g., Taylor (1970), Frankfurt (2004),

Williams's thought experiment of the rational suicide contemplator thus reveals a more persistent and often veiled phenomenon: each of us has desires, even if unnoticed, that ward off the question of why we want to keep living. The fact that we don't ask that question demonstrates our absorption in projects that give life a point. As Williams (1973a) writes:

But if one is in a state in which the question of suicide does not occur, or occurs only as total fantasy – if, to take just one example, one is happy – one has many such desires, which do not hang from the assumption of one's existence. If they did hang from that assumption, then they would be quite powerless to rule out that assumption's being questioned, or to answer the question if it is raised; but clearly they are not powerless in those directions – on the contrary they are some of the few things, perhaps the only things, that have power in that direction... *The question of the life being desirable is certainly transcendental in the most modest sense, in that it gets by far its best answer in never being asked at all* (86–7, emphasis added).

In Williams's writing, the concept of “categorical desires” is used to critique, respectively, philosophical theses regarding immortality and morality. Briefly put, it is because our categorical desires and the identities to which they give rise are finite that leads Williams to doubt that an immortal life would be desirable, i.e., his famous “tedium” thesis that has sparked much discussion and criticism (e.g., Chappell 2009; Fischer 1994; Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014; Kagan 2012). Alternatively, Williams (1973b, 1981a) uses the ideas of “categorical desires” and “projects” to demarcate some boundaries for morality's demands: requiring us to give up those projects that count as a condition for the desirability of our lives is too much to ask, he argues. This radical thesis has similarly provoked a strong response with some authors challenging Williams's representation of utilitarianism and Kantianism as incompatible with our projects (e.g., Brink 1986; Herman 1993). Other critics have argued that Williams's conception might be used to justify evil and murderous ground projects that should be ruled out by morality (Cottingham 2010, 72; Flanagan 1991, esp. 82–3). Still others, however, think Williams's critique is defensible with qualifications and adaptations (Rivera 2010; Thomas 2015; Wolf 2010, 2015c, 2015d).

The concept of “ground projects” has also nourished a line of thinking about meaning in life. Indeed, Williams's original description of categorical desires and ground projects places them at the center of a life that an agent wants to lead and deploys the concept of “meaning” in connection with this. He writes, “A man may have, for a lot of his life or even just for some part of it, a *ground* project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree

Calhoun (2015, 2018), Svensson (2017). I will thus suspend the broader debates between rival types of theory such as subjectivist, hybrid, or objectivist theory. For hybrid theories of meaning in life see, notably, Wolf (2010, 2015a). For prominent objectivist theories see, notably, Metz (2013), Smuts (2013), Bramble (2015).

give a meaning to his life” (1981a, 12). Other authors have further developed the idea that meaningful lives are organized around such “projects” (Kauppinen 2012; May 2017; Svensson 2017; Wallace 2013).³ Notably, Betzler (2013) articulates in greater nuance several features of projects that are constitutive for appreciating their existential significance: the way they lend unifying coherence to a life, bring it under evaluative norms, involve ends pursued for their own sake, and contribute to an agent’s identity (101ff). It is this last strand of debate that takes Williams’s ground projects as speaking to debates about meaning in life that will orient the discussion below.

While Williams’s concept of “ground projects” has had its adherents and enthusiasts, it has also had its fair share of critics, too. Some of these criticisms are internecine, as with Wolf’s (2015a) criticism that the very idea of “projects” seems to be ill-suited for many of the concerns orienting life, notably, relationships:

[talk of ‘projects’] is too suggestive of a finite, determinate task, something one takes on and, if all goes well, completes...there are other forms of meaningfulness that are less directed, and less oriented to demonstrable achievement, and we should not let use of the word ‘project’ distort or deny the potential of these things to give meaningfulness to life. Relationships, in particular, seem at best awkwardly described as projects. Rarely does one deliberately take them on and, in some cases, one doesn’t even have to work at them – one may just have them and live, as it were, in them. Moreover, many of the activities that are naturally described as projects – coaching a school soccer team, planning a surprise party, reviewing an article for a journal – have the meaning they do for us only because of their place in the nonprojectlike relationships in which we are enmeshed and with which we identify (94).

While it’s worth underscoring the variety of considerations that might structure a life, Williams’s initial formulation and deployment, however, makes clear that he intends “projects” in a broad sense that also includes relationships (1981a, 16ff).⁴ Moreover, while Wolf may criticize William’s terminology of “projects,” in some formulations of her hybrid theory of meaning in life, she helps herself to talk of “projects” (e.g., 2015b, 109).

3 While drawing significantly on Williams’s philosophy in general and his idea of “ground projects” in particular, R.J. Wallace’s (2013) theory, however, adopts a critical distance, noting, on the one hand, that “people whose fundamental attachments are to ends that are empty or evil do not thereby acquire a genuine reason to carry on with their lives” and, on the other hand, observing that still other “agents are sustained by ambitions that have real normative significance but that are nevertheless too thin to contribute much on their own to the meaning of the agents’ lives” (190–191). He thus ends up with something of a Wolfian hybrid theory centered on ground projects or, in his variation, “attachments” (196).

4 May (2017, 17ff), who follows and develops Williams’s idea of “projects” also includes relationships, e.g., friendships.

Relatedly, Setiya's (2014, 2017) discussion of midlife crises and the importance of balancing goal-oriented (in his terminology, "telic") activities with those non-goal-oriented ("atelic") activities like spending time with loved ones further underscores the diversity of forms that might guide an individual's life. A defender of the importance of projects might take comfort in Antti Kauppinen's (2021, 92, 105ff) argument that even supposedly atelic activities often involve projects of a different shape – what he calls "reflexive projects," which maintain or preserve something of value over time. But it's clear that Williams broadly uses "ground projects" to capture a range of activities, telic and atelic alike, that anchor or, in his words, "propel" an agent's existence. This is obvious, for example, in his use of "ground projects" to describe why saving one's partner justifiably ought to take precedence over impartial moral demands (1981a, 18). Thus, none of these debates over the nature of projects cut deep enough to challenge the central thesis advanced by Williams: that some set of concerns existentially structure a life and provide it with meaning in the minimal sense of providing reasons for carrying on.

Other criticisms of Williams's ground projects, however, pose a more radical threat. Gaita (2004) calls into question whether we can rightfully identify an agent's categorical desires and projects with a person's distinctive identity, suggesting that there is something even more fundamental than an agent's projects that Williams misses. He writes:

the bare notions of projects and desires (categorical and otherwise) cannot do the work Williams wishes of them. We must not only see that someone has 'projects and categorical desires with which the person is identified'. We must be able to take those desires and projects, and so him, seriously. That is a condition of his having the kind of individuality we mark by speaking of his irreplaceability (153).

This line of critique carries implications for those identity-centered theories of meaning in life that have developed in the wake of William's work (see, notably, Calhoun 2015, 2018; Cholbi 2021a, 2021b; Egerstrom 2018; Wong 2008).

More radical yet is Frankfurt's (2006) critique of Williams's position. He suggests that Williams's conception of "ground projects" which drive a person through life doesn't faithfully capture the experience of most people but rather Williams' picture "pertains just to people who are seriously depressed" that "have no natural vitality" (36). He goes on to argue that rather than projects grounding a desire to live, a thirst for life itself drives us to look for things to stay occupied. He writes, "Surely Williams has it backward. Our interest in living does not commonly depend upon having projects that we desire to pursue. It's the other way around: we are interested in having worthwhile projects because we intend to go on living, and we would rather not to be bored" (36–37). Frankfurt concludes his thrashing of Williams by pointing us to the phenomenon of self-defense: "When we learn that a person has acted to

defend his own life, we do not need to inquire whether he had any projects in order to recognize that he had a reason for doing whatever he did” (37). If Frankfurt is right that we’re guided more deeply and covertly by a sheer desire to live, then ground projects arguably lose their grounding role in life. There is no need to draw up a list of categorical desires that keeps suicide at bay; most of us would like to keep on living without a clearly articulable reason.

A defender of Williams has available several lines of response to Frankfurt’s objection. For starters, it is not clear that Frankfurt has fully escaped from a logic parallel to that of Williams’s ground projects. Frankfurt’s (2004) own theory of meaning in life, too, emphasizes that it is *loving* that generates the final ends that give us something to do. And these *final ends* are the ultimate source of meaning in life (54–55, 99). Thus, Frankfurt’s final ends might be seen as a conceptual proxy not that different from Williams’s ground projects (cf. Millgram 2004, 180ff). Moreover, we can find in William’s (1973a) work an indication of how he might reply to Frankfurt. Our reasons for living must go beyond the mere desire to live on pain of risking coming up empty. The desire to be alive may sustain many a life, but it isn’t yet an answer to the question of why I should stay alive, especially for those in moments of existential doubt and despair:

humanity would certainly wither if the drive to keep alive were not stronger than any perceived reasons for keeping alive. But if the question is asked, and it is going to be answered calculatively, then the bare categorical desire to stay alive will not sustain the calculation – that desire itself, when things have got that far, has to be sustained or filled out by some desire for something else, even if it is only, at the margin, the desire that future desires of mine will be born and satisfied (86–87).

Otherwise put, the impulse to live must be something that can be provided a reason, when pressed. The debate between Frankfurt and Williams touches on the deepest grounds for finding life desirable. It is on the terrain of this debate that I see Morioka’s conception of “the joy of life” as offering a fruitful intervention worth unpacking and exploring.

3 Morioka on the “Joy of Life”

Morioka’s *Painless Civilization* (2021a, 2023a [2003]) is nothing short of a broad cultural critique of our deepest tendencies toward comfort and ease. He sees this as an outgrowth of the process of “self-domestication,” whereby human beings have transformed themselves and their world in a way conducive to certain fundamental animal drives, e.g., minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure, making our lives

stable, providing easily or even automatically for our physical needs, rendering our environments safe, and exercising control over nature, all of which spring from “the desire of the body” (2021a, 4–18; 2023b, 61ff). Embedded in this ambitious undertaking is a concept that allows us to move productively beyond the impasse between Williams and Frankfurt on the deep grounds for existence. In the following, I will examine Morioka’s idea of “the joy of life” in relation to the debates sketched above. What follows should thus be read as a creative adaptation of Morioka’s conception and an attempt to build bridges across academic conversations.

On Morioka’s scheme, our lives are built around “frameworks” that lend our lives comfort and stability, although these are not necessarily without their own dimensions of struggle and sacrifice. One of his examples of “frameworks,” for instance, concerns someone who quits or is fired from a demanding job that also is a source of internal struggle and impetus towards unhealthy forms of distraction (2021a, 22–23). Morioka’s talk of “frameworks” within “painless civilization” may, thus, involve various internal tensions and conflicts. While he develops the notion of “frameworks” as an element of his critique of contemporary civilization’s excessive contempt of suffering, his concept of “frameworks” functions in ways that allow for fruitful comparison with Williams’s notion of “ground projects.” In what follows, I will treat Morioka’s “frameworks” as interchangeable with Williams’s “ground projects,” at least for our purposes.

Among the most interesting and novel points in Morioka’s philosophy, from the perspective of the above debates at least, is the claim that the possibility of a profound joy in life lies not only outside these “frameworks” but manifests itself most obviously in the destruction of these frameworks. When the previously orienting aims and ambitions are rendered inoperative, it is possible, although certainly not guaranteed, that an agent can feel a deep sense of the goodness of living.⁵ As he puts it,

This is the ‘it’s good to be alive’ sense of joy that comes when a new self of which I had been completely unaware emerges from within me, breaking through the husk of my old self with newborn vitality – the revitalizing, bracing sense of joy that comes when I know I am capable of being reborn in this way. It is also a sense of being able to wholeheartedly affirm the fact that I exist in the form of a life whose essence is growth, transformation and death (2021a, 20).

Morioka thus describes “the joy of life” as an existentially powerful feeling that can move us in the face of suffering and in moments of rebirth:

⁵ Morioka’s conception of the “joy of life” arising from the breakdown of “frameworks” can be interpreted both in accordance with “internal reasons” and “external reasons” theories. I will thus bracket this debate stemming from Williams (1981b). For noteworthy responses to William’s view see McDowell (1998) and Chappell (2022, 105ff).

The joy of life only comes to me when, in the face of suffering or anguish, I dismantle my self, transform it, and cause it to be reborn without attempting to run away from this suffering. If through some capacity or manipulation I manage to make the external cause disappear, the suffering right in front of me vanishes but there is no change in my own framework. All that comes to me then is security and relief (2021a, 21).

Central to Morioka's claim is that the "joy of life" requires suffering, at least for its most profound occurrence. This is why it stands in opposition to what he calls "painless civilization." The society that neutralizes suffering also, on his view, neutralizes one of the most profound experiences possible in human life – one that allows us to see life as desirable outside of our existing "frameworks." As he puts it in a more recent summary of his theory of painless civilization:

sometimes a very strange thing occurs to us – after having gone through such pain, the psychological framework we have strongly maintained is dismantled, and a new framework, or a new view of life that has been unknown to us, appears in front of us. The place that we considered a hell becomes another good place in which to live. A huge reformulation of our worldview occurs to us. We are reborn at the bottom of our life. We feel an unexpected sense of joy (2023b, 66).

He continues:

I have called this kind of unexpected joy that we feel after going through huge suffering the 'joy of life.' This 'joy of life' is indispensable to being able to lead an authentic and meaningful life. Because we are not robots that maintain the same framework throughout our lives, this kind of rebirth experience plays an extremely important role in our lives. Without the 'joy of life,' many of us feel suffocated as if we were drowning in a sea of sugar, unable to escape from the framework of a painless civilization (2023b, 66).

Some of Morioka's examples concern mundane instances of suffering, e.g., the smoker overcoming nicotine withdrawal and learning to live with and transcend the physiological and psychological pangs of addiction:

While suffering from nicotine withdrawal and being plagued by doubt over whether they can survive without smoking, they have no choice but to find a new self that can live with the psychological swings and physical cravings they are experiencing. An unexpected, indescribable joy emerges when they succeed in stopping smoking, the self as it has existed until now is destroyed, and in this way a new self is reborn (2021a, 22).

Yet even in such quotidian forms of suffering, the emphasis falls on the joy that comes from learning one can live with suffering and loss – not on what replaces it. Suffering itself provides an occasion for a powerful existential insight into the possibility of transcending our existing modes of being.

Another example of "rebirth" provided by Morioka is more trenchant: the loss of one's job. He writes:

let's say that one day I give up constantly running away from my own contradictions and make a firm decision to quit my job. Or I lose my job involuntarily. I had believed that if I lost my job it would be the end of me, and while immediately after losing my job I am indeed beset by crushing despair and feelings of emptiness, after a bit of time has passed something huge and unexpected occurs. As a result of losing my job, my self that had existed up until that point is dismantled, a self I had not foreseen emerges from inside me, and a world I had not imagined opens up before my eyes. The unexpected joy that comes to me when this happens, the joy of a new self I had known nothing about blossoming from inside me without warning, leaving me reborn as a fresh, unencumbered being as a cleansing breeze washes over me, is 'the joy of life' (2021a, 23).

Although struggling against the pangs of physiological and psychological dependence may cause suffering, the loss of a job, especially in a world where social status and even survival depends on it, may induce an even greater sense of disorientation and loss. And yet – this is the key point – in these nadirs of life, we discover a power available to us that remains otherwise imperceptible in our everyday preoccupations.⁶

Morioka connects the possibility of experiencing “the joy of life” with the very nature of being a living being. He sees life as having a deep-seated capacity for self-transcendence, i.e. the possibility of moving beyond whatever reified forms our existence has taken thus far: “‘Life’ is a drive that dismantles the ‘framework’ supporting your current self and attempts to transcend it. When you try to step outside this framework you experience the fundamental anxiety that comes from throwing away what has been supporting you” (2021a, 23). Indeed, life itself, Morioka tells us, is the persistent overcoming of its own limits: “Life, indeed, is this very sequence of ceaseless, reckless attempts at transcendence. As long as we embrace life, we can never cut ourselves off from this kind of striving” (2021a, 24). From this perspective, it is our attachment to our comfortable lives that inoculates us against the transformative power of suffering:

those who have power and money are more deeply bound by their ‘desire of the body’ than those who do not. They seek pleasure, comfort, painless situations, the maintenance of the current framework, and the maintenance of their preferable lives. These lives look gorgeous, but they have almost lost the possibility of experiencing the ‘joy of life,’ which can only be granted when their stable framework is destroyed by encountering the Other or the advent of otherness (2023b, 68).

The above recounting of Morioka’s conception of the “joy of life” is admittedly limited and partial. It brackets some important aspects of his project, including his critique of “the desire of the body” as well as his defense of the possibility and significance of

⁶ Morioka’s “joy of life” can be understood as a species of epiphany. On epiphanies, see the illuminating analysis in Chappell (2022).

“unconditional love.”⁷ It also leaves in the background his critique of the directional tendencies of what he calls “painless civilization” as well as its broader implications for ethics, especially bio-ethics (e.g., 2023a, 53ff; 2021b). For our purposes, the key point is that the joy of life happens in the transcendence of selves – not in the rebuilt self. His conception lights the way to a view of meaning that lies outside the reified frameworks of moral agents. Meaning in life, on Morioka’s view, is not to be found in finding and developing new projects but in the more immediate affirmation of life in spite of our failures and frustrations. It is this, on his account, that modern society’s pursuit of painless ease threatens, rendering inactive the transformative potential of suffering.

4 Finding Meaning Beyond Ground Projects

Morioka’s “frameworks,” as I’ve argued above, provide a useful reference point for reexamining William’s concept of “ground projects” and their implications for thinking about leading meaningful lives. What is most striking about Morioka’s position vis-à-vis the current analytic debate over meaning in life is the way in which the breakdown of our “frameworks” provides an occasion for experiencing a profound sense that life can still be worth living, even in our darkest hours. Setting aside Morioka’s juxtaposition of “the joy of life” with the primal biological springs developed in his notion of the “desire of the body,” I will treat Morioka’s discussion of “frameworks” as directly bearing on how we think about the possibility that our projects might ground our existences and function in the manner described by Williams.

To appreciate Morioka’s conception of the “joy of life,” I want to contrast it with three other conceptions that pose, at least on the face of it, alternatives to Williams’s view. First, the threat of failure to our ground projects has been acknowledged by several authors, including Wolf, who characterizes these as cases of the “bankrupt” (Wolf 2015a, 93; see also Cottingham 2003, 66ff; May 2017, 22–23). Elsewhere I have described these as instances of “project collapse” (Scripter 2022, 256). However, the breakdown of our projects does not imperil Williams’s view, if the agents find no further reason to go on. Indeed, this would underscore the centrality of our projects in finding existence desirable. And even if agents do find life worth living in virtue of their remaining commitments or concerns, this, too, would not fundamentally

⁷ Indeed, one of Morioka’s central criticisms of contemporary society is that it forecloses a serious consideration of love being unconditional: “Unconditional Love...is an emotion that painless civilization wants to avoid as much as possible, because it is something that carries within itself the destructive power to shatter our comfortable frameworks in a single blow” (2023a, 71).

challenge Williams's theory of ground projects. It would only prove that amidst the wreckage of a life, one can carry on if one is able to tether on to the lingering pieces of one's previous existence. So long as not all of one's projects fail, Williams can maintain his thesis. After all, he describes, the typical structure of an agent's ground project as a "nexus" (1981a, 13) or as it has been aptly glossed, "a rope of overlapping threads" (Chappell 2009, 34). An agent who clings to remaining shreds of meaning in her life, e.g., other ground projects that have yet to give way, would be positioned to carry on even in the face of failure and develop new sources of meaning in life. Indeed, for this reason Iddo Landau (2017, 24) counsels the diversification of sources of meaning.

Other authors have discussed how we can rise from the ashes by discovering and replacing those sources of meaning that have been lost. Landau (2017) describes how projects may "regenerate," enabling agents are able to discover and latch on to new sources of meaning:

In extreme cases, what had given meaning to our lives may be destroyed...Although it is often hard to find new sources of meaning, it is frequently possible to do so. Most of us are quite flexible when it comes to meaning, and when we fail to achieve something of value, or it is destroyed, or it turns out not to be as meaningful as we had expected, we can often compensate or regenerate meaning by enhancing some other, already existing aspects of value or finding completely new ones (221).

May (2017), too, articulates a related vision of how a life can be redeemed since a "person can be capable of developing other projects" (22–23). Indeed, Herman (2007, 269–271) suggests that the inability to spawn new projects and concerns may signal something pathological in an agent's ground projects. Call this the *project-regeneration thesis*. Crucially, these theorists point to the replacement or regrowth of ground projects. As one project fails or falters, agents can fill the void by discovering new projects to orient their lives.

This picture poses no fundamental challenge to Williams's thesis. It simply stresses a point with which he would no doubt agree: that our projects are dynamic and evolving. Crucially, Landau and May underscore how generating new projects furnishes the grounds for finding meaning in life. This presupposes that an agent is able to discover new ground projects, even in the face of previous failure. But Morioka's view, by contrast, does not emphasize finding meaning in the *rebound* but rather in the *nadirs* of life. His conception of the "joy of life" does not occur when an agent has successfully established a new identity and new ground project, even if these begin to take root and form after life's letdowns. Rather the "joy of life" *precedes* the development of new identities. It is worth underscoring that Morioka's conception of joy is available to an agent in these darkest moments. It is not the discovery of new projects but rather the discovery that life can be worth living even

when one's projects or "frameworks" have been destroyed. Morioka's conception of joy points to a source of meaning that lies outside of our former and potential future ground projects, in what would appear to be a barren existential interstice. His position thus poses a radical critique of Williams that points not to alternative possible projects but a source of meaning outside of the orbit of projects altogether. Morioka's idea of "the joy of life," as I read him, is thus not simply that we might find another project, and thereby restore meaning to our lives. This conception would simply see meaning as restored when a new project is restored. Rather, as I understand Morioka's conception of "rebirth," there is a more powerful affirmation of life at play in those agents whose lives have lost everything and yet still find joy in life. To borrow Mawson's (2016, 31) term, it is "existential repletion" in desolation.

Second, Morioka's picture should not be conflated with other positions that point to sources of meaning in the power of aesthetic experiences. As the mid-twentieth century environmentalist Rachel Carson observes:

Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and the mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement to living. Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts (1998 [1956], 98).

The experience of nature can stimulate us in ways that lie outside the scope of our floundering or failed projects. Recently, Cochrane (2021) has advanced a more theoretically sophisticated version of this thesis. He writes, "Basically, when our lives are going badly, the value of the world offers solace and the grounds to rebuild" (xii). Indeed, he construes aesthetic value generally as the basis on which our projects can find a footing, especially in challenging times:

For much of life, the value of the world is a background upon which our personal projects operate. Sometimes we have only an implicit sense of this value. But, particularly when times are hard, it is important that we can feel its solid ground (2021, 5).

Cochrane presents an argument that aesthetic experiences function like a backstop that is present even when our projects falter. We can fall back on finding value in aesthetic experiences like a striking sunset, even when our business has gone bust or love life is in ruins. Thus, call this the *backstop conception* of aesthetic experiences.

But there are still other ways of seeing aesthetic experiences as full of existential significance.⁸ With appeal to reports of aesthetic experiences in Kolnai (2008) and Holland (1980), I have elsewhere argued that some sorts of aesthetic experiences – notably those of beauty, including those of imperfect things – can "edify" a life,

8 Cf. Maes's (2022) conception of "existential aesthetics."

providing it something like an existential booster shot that helps one find life livable (Scripter 2023). These experiences build us up as we pass through life, reaffirming the goodness of being alive. Call this the *edificatory conception* of aesthetic experiences.

Both backstop and edificatory conceptions point to how experiences outside of our projects can provide inspiration for living, offering us what we might call *the thesis of non-project-centered sources of meaning*. However, these differ fundamentally from Morioka's position. The joy of life, as presented by Morioka, does not flow from any sort of aesthetic experience. Nor is it an experience of wonder (cf. Schinkel 2019). In his presentation of the concept, Morioka importantly doesn't say that we can find joy when our frameworks have been destroyed by looking to the aesthetic experiences that remain. It is rather a more immediate feeling of joy that is accessible in the nadirs of life, irrespective of beautiful sunsets, the warmth of the sun, or the calming sensation of a cool ocean breeze. While Morioka's joy of life is located outside of our existing ground projects, it is not tethered to any more specific type of experience. It lies in a liberatory suffering, whereby agents are able to affirm their existences and find life worth living, even in the face of existential wreckage. And therein lies its profundity and novelty.

Finally, in locating the joy of life in sheer existence, exposed once our blinding frameworks have been undone, we may wonder whether Morioka's conception ultimately lands him in agreement with Frankfurt when he appeals to vital drives as providing us with reasons to go on in a more fundamental manner than Williams's ground projects. Call Frankfurt's view the *vitality thesis*. This conclusion, however, would be a mistake. Morioka's "joy of life" differs importantly from Frankfurt's appeal to a subterraneously operating *Ur-vitalism*. In contrast to Frankfurt's view, Morioka's theory captures not a general vital drive, but rather a possibility for experiencing rebirth in the face of failed frameworks. It is not that agents fall back on an ever-present drive to keep living. Under the conditions of painless civilization, this can be stifled or even extinguished as we become accustomed to only finding life worth living if it falls within narrow parameters set by what he calls our "psychological frameworks." Morioka's conception of the joy of living is a precarious and contingent experience rather than a primal urge, the desire of our organism to avoid pain and death, which is on Morioka's view an expression of "the desire of the body." Rather, Morioka's conception of joy points to the possibility of the transcendence of one's reified framework without appeal to underlying instinctual self-preserving tendencies.

Moreover, Frankfurt's criticism of Williams commits him to the claim that we have reasons to live that outstrip our ground projects. Morioka's notion of the "joy of life" underscores that these reasons may not be evident or even available to agents within their existent frameworks. He, thus, strikes a mediating position between Williams and Frankfurt. What Williams gets right is that for many agents their

ground projects do count as the reasons they would and could list for continuing to live. The possibility of finding life worth living even in the face of the breakdown of our frameworks may seem absurd or incredible to someone truly living in the grip of certain ground projects. What Frankfurt gets right is that we may be driven to keep on living, even without ground projects. In the face of obliterated life projects and dreams, we can still find life worth living. However, *contra* Frankfurt, this is not a given, guaranteed by an underlying current of vital energy. Rather it counts as a discovery made possible through the suffering and breakdown of our previously blinding frameworks. Reading these reasons to carry on as an underlying surge of vital energy is misleading, as we may not feel the desirability of life without our projects. Morioka's position allows us to make the most of each of these positions while avoiding, on the one hand, Williams's overly reified conception and Frankfurt's appeal to a primal vital energy. Morioka's "joy of life" is thus a discovery of the possibility of going on when the stabilizing constraints of an agent's ground projects have been cleared away. We may normally live under the influence of various ambitions that shield us from all that life has to offer. Suffering may, as Morioka suggests, offer a transformative occasion in which we can transcend our previous selves or ground projects. In the nadirs of life, we may experience a unique sort of joy in living, as Morioka maintains, that is neither to be found in our reified ground projects nor in an underlying vital drive. These reasons for living may not be listable, as supposed in Williams's imagined scenario of the rational suicide contemplator, until the worst happens. Only then do we discover a source of meaning in life that was in a real sense *absent*, until life bottomed out.⁹

5 Conclusion

This essay has explored Bernard Williams's conception of "ground projects," those orienting and structuring pursuits that provide us with reasons for living. While this has been an influential model for thinking about meaning in life in the contemporary analytic philosophy, I have argued that Morioka's *Painless Civilization*, now partially translated in English, provides a valuable corrective to Williams's thesis. More specifically, Morioka's pregnant concept of a powerful, uplifting feeling available to us in moments of profound suffering, what he calls the "joy of life," gives expression to the possibility of finding reasons for living even in moments of desolation, when our projects have been demolished. Morioka's observation that in the nadirs of life a

⁹ Overcoming the blinding tendencies of our reified frameworks can occur in powerful moments of suffering and subsequent joy, as in Morioka's philosophy, but there may be still other paths to liberation from our existential entrenchment. Cf. Williams and Scripter (n.d.)

unique joy of living becomes accessible allows us to think outside of Williams's framework without falling into Frankfurt's appeal to an underlying vital drive. If Morioka is right, in moments of despair, it is possible to find joy in living, even while staring down shattered ground projects, identities in tatters. While this may be a rare experience, the fact that it *may* occur is existentially significant, and one that might provide solace in life's bleakest moments.

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