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What is togetherness and why is it good?

Abstract:

To be together with other people, truly together, is a social good. Perhaps it is deeply entwined with other social goods that have been subjected to sustained philosophical discussion such as friendship. Still, in its own right, the topic of the nature and apparent value of togetherness has been largely neglected. This paper advances three claims: i) that togetherness of a certain relevant sort consists in sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things; ii) that this sort of togetherness is a lead candidate for being the internal goal of personal relationships as such; and iii) that togetherness so understood is valuable because senses of the meaningfulness of things are to be shared. The argument of the paper articulates a sense in which even solitary meaningful experiences have a social structure.

Introduction

Attaining a state of togetherness with one's friends and loved ones is a central accomplishment of a life well lived. That is a conviction that many of us share. And yet, it is unclear what exactly togetherness is, and therefore also unclear how to explain the value that we attribute to it. Philosophers – long concerned with understanding the nature of a good life – have developed rich discussions of many of the social goods that living well involves, including friendship, love, recognition, communion and belonging.¹ Perhaps togetherness is another word for some

¹ Some of these social goods have of course been themes of the Western philosophical tradition since Plato and Aristotle. And yet, they are also of renewed focus in contemporary philosophy. A recent blossoming of thought on the topics is represented by, for instance, (Yao, 2020; Dover, 2022; Brownlee, 2023; Laing, 2024; Kirwin, 2024).

or other of these goods, or an essential part of some or all of them, or its own distinctive kind of social good. In any case, little has been written in philosophy to clarify its nature or to account for its importance in our lives.²

In this paper, I argue for three claims: i) that togetherness of a certain relevant sort consists in sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things; ii) that this sort of togetherness is a lead candidate for being the internal goal of personal relationships as such; and iii) that togetherness so understood is valuable because senses of the meaningfulness of things are to be shared. In §1 I will argue for my account of the nature of togetherness, as made in claim (i), via an exploration of the conceptual connection between togetherness and loneliness. In §2 I will clarify the second of these claims, as made in claim (ii), and begin a presumptive argument in its favour, to be elaborated as we proceed. In §§3-4 I will argue for my explanation of the value of togetherness, as made in claim (iii), before considering a clarifying objection in §5, pertaining to the value of solitary experience.

1. An argument from loneliness

Here is a key analytical idea about the concept of togetherness: it is conceptually twinned with loneliness. I submit that the relation between the two concepts is as follows. Togetherness is a feature of relationships. Loneliness is a fitting feeling for someone to feel if and only if their life is lacking in relationships with togetherness. This does not mean that anyone who lacks

² An exception to this omissive tendency is the work of Gerda Walther (1923), which has attracted interest recently (Calcagno, 2018; León and Zahavi, 2016; Osler, 2020; Osler 2022; Szanto, 2017). Walther thinks of togetherness as an affective phenomenon. The view I defend in this paper does not deny that togetherness may always have a distinctive affective character, but does deny that such affect is constitutive of togetherness.

relationships with togetherness has all-things-considered reason to feel lonely, that they *should* feel lonely. Rather, it means that if such a person did feel lonely, then that would be understandable. By contrast, if someone felt lonely when their life did not lack but was replete with relationships with togetherness, then there is something about their loneliness that would not be straightforwardly understandable.

To explain this thought further, it is helpful to distinguish between forms of social interaction, on the one hand, and the social goods that can be manifested in such interaction, on the other. The following are all forms of social interaction: co-presence, joint attention, cooperation, dialogue, interpersonal touch, sex. A life deprived of all of these forms of interaction would be one in which loneliness would be understandable. However, a life full of all of these forms of interaction is also one in which loneliness could be fitting, and would be, indeed, if those interactions were empty of the certain valuable characteristics that we seek in our relations with others.

Goods such as love, friendship, intimacy and belonging are those valuable characteristics.³ They are present in a life only when they are born out through social interaction of some form or other: that is the significance of those forms of interaction. It seems, therefore, that

³ Roberts and Krueger (2021, pp. 191-194) pass over friendship, love and belonging to focus on intimacy, trusting support and care in their discussion of the social goods the absence of which render loneliness fitting. I suspect that trusting support and care are, when properly understood, only of instrumental value and for that reason not themselves conceptually linked to loneliness. I shall not pursue the point, however. Even if Roberts and Krueger's list of social goods is correct, the suggestion of the present paper purports to identify that unifying characteristic in virtue of which each item on the list shares a conceptual link to loneliness.

someone's loneliness is understandable if and only if their life is lacking in social interaction imbued with one or more of these social goods.

I will argue later that as well as having a conceptual connection to loneliness, togetherness has one to the act of relating personally. I will also hold that there is one kind of togetherness that enjoys an explanatory fundamentality in relation to others. To introduce that fundamental notion, it will first help to show that it is, like friendship and the other social goods, a kind of togetherness.

Here is a simple argument, the cogency of which will depend on how the terms are cashed out, which will be my task in this section.

1. A feature of a relationship is a kind of togetherness if and only if loneliness would be fitting in a life lacking in relationships with that feature.
2. Loneliness would be fitting in a life lacking in relationships in which a sense of the meaningfulness of things is shared.
3. So, sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things is a kind of togetherness. (From 1 and 2)

The first premise of this argument has been established above. We have reason to believe it just because it is a plausible analysis of the concept of togetherness. As mentioned previously, if someone feels loneliness but is not at all lacking in true togetherness with friends and loved ones, then there is something about that loneliness that is difficult to understand. Their loneliness does not seem to be a fitting response to such a situation.

The second premise is the one that requires explanation. In fact, each of its key terms calls for clarification: 'sense of meaningfulness', 'things', and 'shared'. I will state abstractly how each should be understood before presenting two illustrative examples of the phenomenon at issue.

We *sense meaningfulness* when we find features of the world to be normatively significant. Things can be normatively significant by being wonderful, horrifying, eerie, excellent, daunting, sad, ugly, and so on. This sense of ‘meaningful’ is thus more specific than another sense of the same term in which it is a synonym for ‘contentful’, where one might say that the sentence ‘the grass is long’ is meaningful in virtue of referring to grass and attributing to it the quality of being long. Long grass can but need not be normatively significant, so to think ‘the grass is long’, is not necessarily to sense any meaningfulness of the sort I wish to focus on. To think, ‘the grass is enchanting’, would be to have a sense of something’s meaningfulness. I use the word ‘sense’ to convey the thought that the awareness of meaningfulness need not be accompanied by a capacity to articulate what is meaningful (see Ebels-Duggan, 2017; Congdon 2024).⁴

As should be clear, many things can be meaningful, and things can be meaningful in many ways. But not all meaningful things are equally relevant to interpersonal togetherness. So, some qualification is needed to specify the kinds of *things* that ought to be in mind. The following general principle will provide apt qualification. The more significant some feature of the world is found to be, the more relevant it will be to togetherness.⁵

⁴ I am not wedded to the view that meaningfulness is never in principle fully articulable, that it contains an ineffable element. However, if that were so, then meaningfulness would bear an interesting resemblance to the notion of ‘feeling’ as it is found in the works of the German Romantics, Hölderlin and Novalis (see Bowie, 2003, pp. 87-93).

⁵ One tempting way to elaborate this notion of significance is as significance to the life-narrative of the subject of the meaningful experience (the sort of narrative that some philosophers think is constitutive of the self (see, e.g. Heersmink, 2018)). Such a strategy for understanding the kind of significance that is relevant for interpersonal togetherness would

For multiple people to *share* a sense of something's meaningfulness is for them to mutually acknowledge the fittingness of the experience of that thing as meaningful. Mutual acknowledgement of this sort requires that each party is aware of: i) the fittingness of the experience; ii) the other's awareness of (i); and iii) the other's awareness of (ii).⁶ Togetherness is a feature of one's self-conscious life. While it is possible that two people might both have sensed something to have a certain meaningfulness, this coincidence of sensings is not shared in the relevant way unless the coincidence itself is the object of mutual awareness.

Acknowledgement of the fittingness of some sense of meaningfulness can be more or less fine-grained, and can be achieved through testimony as well as joint experience. Suppose I tell you that my neighbours put their rubbish bag out yesterday – two days before the collection – whereupon it was picked at by sea gulls and the contents strewn about the street. Knowing only this much, you may acknowledge that my neighbours' behaviour is disappointing, irritating, and somewhat embarrassing too, since the shortcomings in their neighbourly qualities come between them and me, but not in a way that can easily be addressed. The description of the object of my (meaningful) experience is fairly coarse-grained. Still, mutual acknowledgement

run the risk, however, of being unable to account for the significance that some meaningful experiences in one's past can have for one now, even if one has presently lost sight of them (on which, more below in §4).

⁶ The question of exactly what mutual acknowledgement is, as a self-conscious, social form of thought, is a matter of controversy among contemporary philosophers, and not one that I should seek to settle here (see, for instance, Peacocke, 2014; Salje, 2018; Laing, 2021). So, for my purposes, the conditions stipulated in this sentence should be understood as necessary for mutual acknowledgement, but not as sufficient. I thus leave open the question of whether something further is required, such as an 'irreducibly social act of mind'.

of the fittingness of even this coarse-grained description of the experience would be an instance of togetherness. The more fine-grained your grasp of the meaningful thing, the richer the resultant togetherness. At the extreme, rather than relying on testimony, we acknowledge the fittingness of one another's experiences by having them together, each first-personally, through multiple sensory modes, against a backdrop of common understanding. This is the paradigm form of the sharing that is at issue.

With these abstract definitions in place, it is possible to present some examples. Consider, first, a child. Better still, imagine that you are a child, of five years in age. There is a place in which you like to play. The shape of the space, its objects and colours and lights are imbued with many associations. They form an imaginary world. This shady area is scary, forbidden, demonic; the carpeted platform hallowed, revered; the fresh, smooth conker in your pocket is unspeakably precious, and so on. These are a set of things that you sense to be meaningful. Their meaningfulness is highly significant to you.⁷

⁷ Susan Wolf (2010, p. 7) holds that the meaning that things can have in one's life involves 'subjective and objective elements, suitably and inextricably linked'. The subjective element is that someone must be personally invested in things in order for them to have meaning for that person; the objective element is that the things in question must warrant being so invested. Like other philosophers discussing the meaning of life (see also, e.g., Kappunen, 2011), the conception of meaningfulness that Wolf has in mind is narrower than mine: it is just that set of things that make one's life worthwhile, excluding the far broader set of things we are attuned to that have normative significance even if they do not contribute to making one's life worthwhile. Nonetheless, Wolf's view is a guiding inspiration of my approach in this paper. It may seem that the example in the case of the childhood playmates represents a departure from Wolf, in that it lacks the objective element that meaningful things need.

There is a certain solitude in the scene as described. You are alone in being the only one to see the contours of your imaginary world. To even try to share it would risk disenchanting the space, forcing you to occupy a standpoint external to your imaginary world, from which it could look absurd. And once outside in that way, you may never be able to return within. But let us suppose that no matter how long the odds, a new playmate happens along and the two of you strike up an instant complicity. They intuitively join you in play, quickly learning the ways in which things are meaningful in the space. When initiation is complete, the playmate fully appreciates the contours of the imaginary world as you do. They have become an equal partner in the continual creation of that world. It is just as much theirs as it is yours.

Putting that first example aside, consider now a case of a pair of amateur musicians, late in life. They first played music together in their youth, and have gone through phases of playing together often. They would compose new music to play together, sometimes performing in public. Though each has had other musical connections, for both of them it is this one that has

However, two points. First, it may be that the children are exaggerating in fantastical ways upon genuinely, non-imaginarily meaningful aspects of the world (such as the real beauty of a conker). Second, and even if the first point is granted, to the extent that the children's make-believe world is only subjectively meaningful, they could and should come to see in later life that as such, that world is not really meaningful at all. To that extent, the example illustrates a kind of togetherness forged over a shared sense of apparent meaningfulness, rather than actual meaningfulness. One might wonder: can people attain real togetherness by sharing an incorrect sense of something being meaningful in some way? My own view is that such togetherness grounded in error is deficient, as togetherness. Much of my account of the nature and value of togetherness in this paper, though, could be consistent with the alternative, subjective view.

lasted the longest and is most cherished, partly because of how closely aligned their musical sensibilities have been. When one plays unusually well, the other notices. When one encounters a new piece or a new style and finds it to be a certain way – striking, beautiful, intriguing, cool, or derivative, clunky, uninteresting – the other invariably agrees, not out of deference, but because of an uncanny synchronicity of musical perspectives.⁸

Perhaps these two examples paint an overly optimistic picture of interpersonal life.⁹ It may be that connections in which people’s perspectives match up to such extents are unusual. But naïvely or not they illuminate an important possibility in our relations with others. For both the

⁸ In a series of recent articles, Nick Riggle (2022; 2024) has advanced what he calls a communitarian theory of aesthetic value. In developing that theory, Riggle draws welcome attention to the social aspects of aesthetic life, including, for example ‘the special connection between improvising musicians’ (2022, p. 25). My view of togetherness, including that between musicians in an ensemble, differs from Riggle on a quite fundamental point. On my view what is explanatorily basic to an adequate understanding of such forms of human connection is the meaningfulness of things themselves. The aesthetic value of the music is a good example of a meaningfulness of something in the world. On Riggle’s view, the order of explanation is inverted. The value of the interpersonal connection is invoked to explain the nature of aesthetic value. He says (2022, p. 26), ‘something’s being aesthetically good is its being worthy of the practice of aesthetic valuing’, where attaining musical togetherness is an example of that practice.

⁹ Such optimism is opposed to a pessimistic tradition for which Sartre is the standard bearer. Despite Sartrean sympathies (on which, more in §5, footnote 15), part of my motivation in this work is to make the case against a deep pessimism about the possibility of interpersonal connection.

children and the musicians, their interpersonal connection involves a shared sense of the meaningfulness of things. The things in question, the meaningfulness of which is mutually recognised, are significant to the people involved, they are the kinds of things engagement with which gives meaning to their lives. We will find further examples of this aspect of social life wherever people bond over important features of the world: comrades in arms, co-parents, members of spiritual community, and as many other instances as there are things of significance in the world.

The observation that I wish to press regarding these examples is this. If the individuals in the examples lacked the connections of the sort that the examples describe, it would make sense for them to feel lonely, no matter what other social goods were attained by other relationships in their lives. Without connections of the sort described, rather than sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of the imaginary world or the music, each person would be alone with that sense of meaningfulness. To be alone in that way is a lonely thing. No amount of love or community with others could quell the fittingness of loneliness in response to such circumstances. Only sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things could do that.¹⁰

I will return to these examples for further help below. For now, if I am granted this point about the fittingness of loneliness when one lacks relationships in which a sense of the meaningfulness of things is shared, then the second premise of my argument is secure. It follows that such sharing is a kind of togetherness.

¹⁰ My emphasis on the value of sharing experiences with others may seem to be at odds with the value of solitude, and of keeping experiences to ourselves. I will consider this matter in §6.

2. To relate personally

I have made my case for thinking that togetherness is that thing the lack of which renders loneliness fitting; and that sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things is a kind of togetherness. With a view to casting light on the notion of togetherness and its importance for thinking philosophically about how we ought to live, I wish now to mention a pair of further conceptual conjectures, though the remainder of my argument will not depend on them. They are: that sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things is fundamental to all kinds of togetherness; and that togetherness is the internal goal of relating personally to others. Though I will not dwell too long on these speculations, I will say a little to explain and motivate each, starting with the notion of an ‘internal goal’, and that of ‘relating personally’.

As I shall use the term, the internal goal of an action is a value that the action seeks to realise, where seeking to realise that value makes that activity comprehensible as the kind of action that it is. An action’s internal goal need not be the only the goal that it seeks to realise. Nor need that kind of action be the only kind that seeks to realise that value. So, seeking to realise that value is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an agent to be doing that action. There is nothing about the concept of an internal goal that requires an agent to consciously have that goal in mind in order to be seeking to realise it: such seeking is implicit in the form of the action they are doing.

In claiming that truth is the internal goal of belief, Williams (2002, chpt. 4) claimed that an act would not be one of believing unless it sought to realise the value of being true. Similarly, an action could not count as attending to an artwork unless it sought to realise the value of appreciating it. So, in the same spirit, the inviting claim that I wish to pursue is that an action is one of relating personally only if it seeks to realise the goal of togetherness. This action may

sometimes have other goals and other action may have this goal, but there are no other goals that this action necessarily has.

There are two ways that we might relate to others: personally, or not. When we relate to others as patients to medics, students to teachers, customers to cashiers, or as interlocutors in civic discourse, we do not necessarily relate in a personal way. By contrast, our typical relations to lovers, family members and friends are personal relations. This contrast is reflected in two ways of relating to strangers. Stopping a stranger to ask for directions may not typically involve relating to them in the manner of a personal relationship. In that respect such an encounter is unlike the open-ended conversation one might have with a neighbouring passenger on a long journey.

It may of course be that there is no one aim uniting all instances of relating personally to others. Still, if relating personally aims at togetherness, then it is distinguished from other ways of relating to others by aiming for this kind of valuable closeness between parties, rather than maintaining a corresponding kind of distance. This seems apt: whenever one relates personally to another person, in doing so, one is not indifferent to whatever distance there is between oneself and the other. Rather, at least some interpersonal distance is to be diminished. This basic analysis of what it is to relate personally to others is the initial motivation for my conjecture that relating personally aims at togetherness.

Two kinds of apparent counterexample are worth noting in response to this first conjecture: personal relationships in which parties seek to be apart, rather than together; and those that are valuable as personal relationships at least partly in virtue of the difference between parties' outlooks and experiences, rather than what they share. Consider first the case of a person's

relationship with a family member who they simultaneously love, and simply cannot abide.¹¹ Suppose that this describes a niece's relationship with her uncle: she loves him, but strongly desires not to be in his company. The niece's way of relating to her uncle seems to be a way of relating personally, but one that does not aim at togetherness. As such, the case looks like a counterexample to the idea that relating personally is an action whose internal goal is togetherness.

Perhaps the bond between the niece and her uncle does realise a social good. The two parties may, for instance, be comforted by the other's care for them, even if they prefer not to spend time together. They may draw a sense of belonging from living in a community of which the other is a fellow member. These are social goods the lack of which, in a life, would render loneliness fitting. So, they are instances of togetherness. Therefore, despite initial appearances, even ways of relating to others like the one described may aim at togetherness insofar as they aim to realise and preserve such social goods.

Still, there is an element of truth to the idea that the niece's way of relating to her uncle does not aim at closeness, nor at the diminution of interpersonal distance. But the antipathy in their relationship casts favourable light on my conjecture about the internal goal of relating personally. The niece's inability to abide her uncle's company is a deficiency in the way she relates to him (and no-one need be to blame for that). It would be better as the kind of relation that it is – i.e., a loving, familial one, a way of relating personally – if she found his company desirable. This deficiency of the niece's relationship to her uncle is explained by the idea that personal relationships aim at togetherness. What's more, the explanation thus provided offers a potentially illuminating characterisation of the deficiency. That is, to the extent that her desire to avoid his company precludes the two growing closer, the niece's way of relating to her uncle

¹¹ Velleman (1999, p. 353) argues for the possibility of this conjunction of attitudes.

is deficient as a way of relating personally. As such, it is a less personal way of relating than it might otherwise be. Recognising one's own familial or other loving relations as being impersonal, in this way, can be a valuable diagnostic insight into an aspect of one's life.

So, perhaps despite initial appearances, the idea that the action of relating personally, as such, aims at togetherness is consistent with there being personal relationships characterised by parties seeking to be apart. What, then, about cases in which interpersonal difference, rather than commonality is integral to the value of a personal relationship?

Consider a friendship built around political discussion. One is a died-in-the-wool anarchist, the other a liberal-minded social democrat. Political events which to one friend inspire hope, to the other inspire dread, and the friends regard each other's reactions respectively as naïve, foolish; cowardly and reactionary. On the matters central to their discussions, they do not share a sense of the meaningfulness of things. Still, each friend may respect the other, think them wise, and find those discussions deeply valuable for their own sake, besides the instrumental benefit they imaginably bring in deeper understanding of the matters at hand. So, their relationship might be valuable as the close, personal relationship that it is not in spite of the divergence between the friends' outlooks, but in virtue of it. This appears to be at odds with my suggestion that personal relationships as such aim at sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things.¹²

In reply, let me note three things. First, that discussing a disagreement, exploring one another's reasoning, is, paradigmatically, a means to togetherness.¹³ Even if there is no even distant

¹² This thought resonates with Nehamas' (2007, p. 83) claim that universal agreement on aesthetic matters would be a 'nightmare'.

¹³ On the idea that disagreement aims at convergence, and contrary to Nehamas (n. 12 above), see Hansen and Adams (2024).

anticipation that either friend will ever fundamentally change in their political outlook, parties might sometimes persuade one another of certain particular claims, and other times come to see that their views align in some respects that had not been apparent before. So, antagonistic discussion such as that between the friends is valuable at least partly for the sake of the togetherness it can afford, towards which it seems to be directed.

Second, in cases of resolute impassioned disagreement, parties are united in feeling the importance of the matter over which they disagree, in getting to the truth of the matter. Though it sits besides antagonism, such shared feeling constitutes a point of togetherness.

Lastly, and in a more conciliatory spirit, there are other values at play in social relations beyond togetherness, including the value of individual autonomy, of peaceful co-existence and cooperation. The friends may cherish their respectful difference in views as an accomplishment which promotes these other goods. This is consistent with the possibility that insofar as the two relate personally to one another, they aim for togetherness. Thus, it may be that respectful difference, however valuable, is an attitude germane to civil, rather than personal relations.

I have offered some motivation for thinking that there is an action familiar to social life that is relating to others personally, and that this action is characterised by being aimed at the realisation of togetherness, where that is a social good (or class thereof) the lack of which renders loneliness fitting. Let me turn to give voice to my other conjecture: that the kind of togetherness presented in §2 is fundamental to the others.

I mentioned, earlier, a list of social goods: love, friendship, intimacy and belonging. A philosophical puzzle arises from the appearance of there being such a list. In virtue of what are the items on this list goods? Is the explanation of their being good different in each case, or is there a single, unified explanation of what makes social goods good?

A unified explanation would be a theory identifying a feature common to all social goods and articulating why this common feature is valuable. My motivation for suggesting that togetherness – qua sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things – is fundamental to the others is that it seems to fit the two conditions of this description: it is common to all social goods, and it is valuable. Moreover, it is difficult to think of another feature that meets both conditions.¹⁴

Even if it transpires that sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things is not, as I have proposed, fundamental to all interpersonal togetherness, it is more general than social goods like love, friendship, intimacy and belonging. It can be instantiated in a wide range of social interactions, varying in intensity. It is there in a mere moment of eye contact between strangers sharing, say, a feeling of alarm at an unexpected loud noise in public space. But as my earlier examples illustrate, it can also be one of the characteristic features of life-long relationships. Its generality makes this particular kind of togetherness especially worthy of philosophical attention: it stands to illuminate other aspects of our relations to one another.

3. When emotions succeed

Because I think it occupies a privileged status among kinds of togetherness, and for ease of reference, from now on I will put the other kinds aside and use the word ‘togetherness’ to refer to sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things. I have offered an answer to the question of what togetherness is. The next question is why it is good. Some clarification of this question is in order.

¹⁴ I will not canvass further possibilities here, and there is little philosophical discussion of this question elsewhere, to my knowledge. However, for one rival view, see (Laing, manuscript).

It may well be that togetherness is instrumentally valuable. Plausibly, it is a means to the prudential end of being happier than one otherwise would be. It may also be a means to the epistemic end of confirming one's convictions, and lending further credence to one's value-judgements. Perhaps it is also a means to the ethical end of fostering pro-social attitudes which themselves tend to cause more cooperation, and in that way to lead to other good outcomes. But the question I wish to focus on is about the value that togetherness seems to have irrespective of its consequences. If we know nothing more about the consequences of the connections between the children or the musicians in my examples, the fact that they have this togetherness, rather than lacking it, seems to be a good thing for them, and therefore a good thing simpliciter. We ought to want an explanation for this non-instrumental value.

It is possible that no explanation can be given, that togetherness is simply good and loneliness is simply bad, and that these are brute facts. Before we can rest at that conclusion, though, it is worth exploring routes into greater explanatory depth. Explanations of the values to which we are attuned deepen our understanding of our lives as agents. Such explanations contribute to a vindication of our ways of acting as rational responses to value.

Here, then, are some intermediary steps in an argument for the view that togetherness is finally valuable. If sound, the argument promises to explain that value.

4. Meaningful experience calls for emotional expression.

5. Emotional expression succeeds by attaining mutual recognition of the fittingness of the emotion.

6. Therefore, meaningful experience succeeds in mutual recognition of its fittingness. (From 4 and 5)

7. So, meaningful experience succeeds in togetherness. (From 3 and 6)

I will explain and motivate the two premises (4 and 5), and articulate the inferences that follow (6 and 7). But, first, here is a general statement of the spirit of this argument. The value of togetherness is disclosed by the implicit social dimension of meaningful experience itself. To live, and to apprehend in the world things that matter or are normatively significant, is an emotion-riven way of being. It is a way of being that realises its internal logic in togetherness.

When explaining what we ought to have in mind as meaningful experience, I listed some adjectives that might be attributed to things, from 'wonderful' to 'ugly' and onwards indefinitely. The fourth premise of my argument has two parts, the first of which is the observation that all these meaningful features of the world call for emotional responses. To find something wonderful calls one to feel wonder. Wonder is an emotion, which is to say it is a bundle of bodily and mental states with a phenomenal character, a physiological character, an intentional object, and fittingness conditions. Just as the wonderful calls for wonder, so the ugly calls for a response that is an emotion in the same sense, one that we might call aesthetic dislike. What goes for the wonderful and the ugly goes too for every feature of the world that is a way of things being meaningful in the sense under discussion.

The second part of premise 4 is a phenomenological observation about the nature of emotions in general: they have a communicative or expressive dimension (Brewer, 2002; cf. Goldie, 2000). Feeling overwhelmingly sad calls for one to cry out, to wail and sob. Wailing and sobbing are attempts at communication. I will come in a moment to discuss what it is that such expressions seek. The point for now, though, is that one would not understand sadness without grasping this communicative expression for which the emotional experience calls.

Sadness may seem exceptional, but it is not. All emotions call for forms of expression that are communicative. Consider again the childhood playmates. You do not need your friend to tell you that they are feeling awestruck in response to the exaggerated, make-believe preciousness

of the conker. The feeling is there to be seen on their face, in their manner, their actions. We may not always let out the expressions for which our emotions call, but they are called for, nonetheless (see Macnamara, 2015).

What is it, then, that the communicative expression of emotion seeks? One might think that sobs seek comfort, empathy, sympathy or recognition of the fact that the sobber is sad. But these responses are missing something important, namely, recognition of the fittingness of the emotion. Resentment provides a vivid example. Suppose you feel resentment towards me, and you express as much, emotionally. Suppose too that I respond by acknowledging that you are feeling that way, by empathising, expressing concern or compassion or sympathy, but that I do not share your sense that your resentment towards me is fitting. In that case it would be understandable for you to redouble your expressions of resentment as the communicative goal of the emotion has not been met.

The other emotions are like resentment in this respect. If you wrap your arms around me and murmur ‘there, there’, but you do not share my sense that my sadness is fitting, then I am alone in my sadness and the plea made by my sobs has not been heeded. The communicative expression of emotion succeeds if and only if it attains mutual recognition of the fittingness of the emotion.

It is worth noting a subtlety, here, connected with the idea that truly mutual recognition of the fittingness of the emotion is what is required. One might think that something less than mutual recognition will do. Suppose that you are having a coffee in a café. A television on the wall shows an odious public figure, pictured here doing something especially odious. You feel contempt. Someone behind you utters an expletive, clearly in response to the same images on the screen, but their expression seems to have been addressed to the room at large rather than anyone in particular. You had a feeling of something being meaningful in some way – the

pictured action being odious and contemptible. You came to learn, quite quickly in this case, that the fittingness of that feeling was recognised also by someone else. The fact of the feeling being held in common is not common knowledge between the two of you. Does such less-than-mutual recognition satisfy the social, communicative aspect of emotional experience?

One way to answer this question is by asking another. Would it be understandable to want to turn around in this moment, to seek eye contact with the person whose utterance echoed your own feeling, and to signal your concurrence in some way? I submit that it would. Turning around would make sense not just because it would satisfy your curiosity about the speaker's identity, or because it may afford some further worthwhile exchange with a likeminded person, but irrespective of whether one stood to gain anything by the interaction beyond the immediate goal of mutual recognition of the fittingness of this feeling held in common. To keep your head down in the café would be to remain alone with one's feeling. Without fully mutual recognition, the situation is a microcosmic illustration of the fittingness of loneliness.

From these premises, 4 and 5, it follows that meaningful experience succeeds in the mutual recognition of the fittingness of the experience, whatever its emotional content (6). I argued above that such mutual recognition of the fittingness of meaningful experience constitutes togetherness, which therefore transpires to be the interpersonal state that represents the success of meaningful experience itself (7).

Before moving on, there is another way to illuminate this notion of 'success' that I have invoked, in saying that meaningful experience succeeds in togetherness. In the example of the child playing alone in the space, before being joined by a playmate, there are countless ways in which the situation for the child could be enriched by valuable things. There could, for instance, be treasure to be discovered somewhere in the space. What is illuminating is that there

is a clear contrast between the relations that the child's playing bears, on the one hand, to the possibility of happening across some treasure, and on the other, to the possibility of sharing the world of play with another. The former is entirely incidental to the kind of action in which the child is engaged – to their playing. The latter, though, is related to the playing in a way that is decidedly less incidental. To be shared with another – one who could authentically and spontaneously join in – is the paradigmatic way that solitary play stands to be enriched. Indeed, being shared with another is the paradigmatic enrichment of a musician's appreciation of a tune, or, as is my point, of meaningful experience in general.

4. Fidelity to what is found

There is one further premise required to reach my conclusion.

8. It is good for one's meaningful experience to succeed.

9. Therefore, togetherness is good. (From 7 and 8)

Premise 8 seems stubborn, resistant to elucidation. Earlier, I sounded a note of optimism for the explanatory potential of ethical inquiry. If my argument since the beginning of §3 has been successful, then we do not have to take the value of togetherness as a brute fact. Rather, it is a fact that is explained by the way that togetherness constitutes the success of meaningful experience: it is that for which meaningful experience calls. The question now is whether this line of ethical inquiry can yield any further explanation. Must we take it as a brute fact that it is good for one's meaningful experience to succeed?

With the same optimism as before, I do not think so. Even without a deductive argument that explains the value of the success of meaningful experience, I think that we can come to understand such value more thoroughly by considering the social structure of meaningful

experience from another angle. The result will be that premise 8 is not an arbitrary assumption, but one that fits together with a broader view about the sociality of meaningfulness.

Consider the following passage from a blog post by the philosopher and cultural critic, Mark Fisher (2018, p. 38):

Is it possible to reproduce, later in life, the impact that books, records and films have between the ages of fourteen and seventeen? The periods of my adult life that have been most miserable have been those in which I lose fidelity to what I discovered then, in the pages of Joyce, Dostoyevsky, Burroughs, Beckett, Selby...

Literature, music and film can be enlivening, especially at formative, impressionable stages in life. The sense of inspiration that Fisher alludes to in these experiences is a paradigm case of sensing the meaningfulness of things. It is a paradigm case because this meaningfulness is very difficult to articulate, it is highly significant to him, and sharing it would constitute a profound togetherness. His sense of the meaningfulness of these things is all the more inarticulable for being synoptic, i.e. by encompassing the inventiveness and vitality of a web of different artworks. In the youthful moment he describes, Fisher was alive to a far-reaching sense of things being enchanted.¹⁵

Meaningful experience, especially of this paradigmatic, enlivening sort, demands fidelity. To be unfaithful to such experience is to lose sight of the significance of the things that one sensed. In Fisher's case, it is to lose sight of the inarticulable sense of creativity, social-critical

¹⁵ In this Fisher example, it seems as though it were *things in general* that was enchanted with meaningfulness by the impressions made through films and music and books. This is another resonance of the German Romantic sense of an ineffable feeling of meaningfulness that was mentioned in footnote 5.

intelligence, existential awareness, and subjective vitality that are there to be found in the work of the writers he lists. If one lost sight of such things, it would make sense for life to seem duller. If one came to realise that one had been living in a way that was unfaithful to those earlier experiences, it would make sense to feel wretched. Fisher's insight into the demands of fidelity that are implicit in paradigmatic meaningful experience contains a lesson about the social structure of such experience.

Fidelity is a concept that implies two standpoints. There is the standpoint of one who must remain faithful, and another from which they may be held accountable for doing so. In this respect fidelity is similar to other concepts that imply demands: promise, blame, resentment, guilt, command, apology, forgiveness. All such concepts imply both first- and second-person standpoints: the addressor and the addressee of a demand (Darwall, 2006, chpt. 1).¹⁶

To experience things as being deeply meaningful comes with an implicit demand for one to remain faithful to those things the meaningfulness of which one senses. So, meaningful experience spawns two perspectives, one demanding the other to remain faithful to the sense of meaningfulness.¹⁷ When the demand is met, and the two perspectives coincide, each

¹⁶ Note a contrast between the way meaningfulness has a social structure, on my view, and the way that meaning in general has a social structure according to various related post-Kantian and pragmatist philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Rorty and Brandom. My claim is not that meaning(-fulness) could not be thought or appreciated were it not possible for it to be shared, but that it *calls to be shared*.

¹⁷ Consider, by contrast, a weaker view of the sociality of meaningfulness, proposed by Wolf (2010, p. 91): '[t]he things one loves doing must be good in some independent way. Why should this be something that matters to us? If having this in one's life answers a human need, what human need is it? At least part of the answer, I believe, has to do with a need to be able,

maintains their sense of the meaningfulness in question and there is togetherness between them. In Fisher's case, what he seeks is an imagined, diachronic togetherness with himself. The bifurcated perspectives implied by his thoughts of fidelity are within him. But in the examples of togetherness given earlier, this social or intersubjective structure of meaningful experience is manifested externally. Two people sense something to be meaningful, and each cannot help but implicitly attribute to the other the defeasible authority to hold them accountable to that sense of meaningfulness. Each child could hold the other accountable to the demands of fidelity to their shared sense of meaningfulness; likewise each musician.

My claim in premise 8 is that it is good for our senses of the meaningfulness of things to succeed. We can see that such success is good by reflecting on examples like the childhood playmates and the collaborative musicians. The lives of the children and the musicians are better off for the togetherness that they have attained through sensing things to be meaningful, and through this experience succeeding in interpersonal recognition. We can also reflect on cases in which an individual senses something meaningful, where that sensing calls to be shared, but where it is not: the meaningful experience does not succeed. When this happens, the subject of the meaningful experience is alone with their sense of meaningfulness, and the calls made by whatever emotion their experience involves are left unmet. The fact that such a lack of communicative success is bad is self-evident.

But in being self-evident, that loneliness is bad and togetherness correspondingly good need not be thought of as an unexplained assumption. Rather, it is a conviction that makes sense in

or at least an interest in or concern with being able, to see one's life as valuable in a way that can be recognized from a point of view other than one's own.' Wolf's view is that meaningfulness is social in the sense that anything meaningful could be grasped and appreciated as such by another; my view is that, beyond that, it calls to be.

the context of the social form of the normative thought involved in meaningful experience. That form is such as to imply intersubjective standpoints from which subjects who share a certain experience can hold one another accountable to the demands of its meaningfulness. Given that experiences of meaningfulness have this implicitly social form, it makes sense that realising that sociality through actual interpersonal togetherness is a good thing in its own right.

5. Meaningful solitude

I have argued that one kind of togetherness consists in the sharing of a sense of the meaningfulness of things, and I have further argued that such togetherness is valuable because it constitutes the success of meaningful experience. In other words, meaningful experience is inherently *to be shared*. A striking objection to this argument comes in the form of a putative counterexample: an instance of a sense of something being meaningful, where that sense is not to be shared. The example is of meaningfulness that is inherently solitary.¹⁸

It is dusk on a hilltop field, several miles from the nearest village and it is snowing. You have been on a stomp, alone, but now you stop and appreciate the silence, the snow, and the emptiness of the field and the valley below, visible in the fading light. Understandably in such circumstances, you feel wonder and awe at the very emptiness of the scene, and, in particular, at how special it is to be entirely alone there.

Your solitude in that moment warrants the awe. In feeling awe, you sense the meaningfulness of the solitude. And yet, of course, this is not a meaningfulness that could in principle be shared. If it were, then you would not be alone with it, and so the scene would not be awe-inspiringly

¹⁸ Thanks to Sophie Côte for raising this line of objection.

solitary. The meaningfulness of solitude seems to be impossible to share.¹⁹ Nothing can intelligibly call for something that is impossible. So, this appears to be a sense of meaningfulness that does not call to be shared. The example seems to speak against premise 6, above.

There are three points for me to make in response to this objection. Each will help to clarify the view I am seeking to advance. The first point is defensive. The example putatively shows a kind of meaningfulness that cannot be shared. But some meaningful aspects of solitude can be shared, and there is nothing paradoxical about such sharing. Consider, for instance, if upon arriving home late from your walk in the snow, you wrote a blog post describing the experience for a forum populated by loners who wrote of their own analogous experiences of being in their own company. Such online communities exist, centred around analogous experiences of solitude. They exist because solitude as a kind of experience has characteristic meaningful

¹⁹ Interestingly, a famous discussion of solitude in recent philosophy holds that the value of solitude can be shared with others. Velleman (2013, p. 9) argues that such value lies in ‘one’s capacity for being company to someone – in this case, to oneself’. One could just as well enjoy that same capacity together with another (ibid., pp. 6, 10). A more famous and less recent philosophical discussion represents an interesting contrast. Sartre (2003, p. 278), in his passages on ‘the look’, gives a well-known description of the impossibility of sharing solitude. The scene is a public park that is, necessarily, utterly different for me when I am alone, or when there is another present. The presence of the other reorients everything else in my surroundings: ‘instead of a grouping *towards me* of the objects, there is now an orientation *which flees from me*.’ If there is any meaningfulness to be found in Sartrean solitude, as seems plausible, then that is what we should have in mind in the counterexample to my argument.

qualities that might often make one person's experience of solitude similar in some meaningful respects to that of others.

Naturally, the blogger does not share the experience in the sense of having it jointly, where multiple parties each have first-personal experience of the same object. As discussed in §1, though, the kind of sharing that is invoked in togetherness can be accomplished through testimony. Testimonial sharing will typically be coarser-grained than can be attained through joint experience, but regardless, testimony is one way by which an experience of solitude can be shared and its meaningfulness appreciated. So, it seems in principle possible – and plausibly desirable in some contexts – to share with others some aspects of the meaningfulness of one's solitude.

Secondly, the privacy of a solitary experience may itself be valuable, and thus one may have reason to preserve it. Perhaps keeping the evening walk to yourself is a way of preserving its specialness.²⁰ Acknowledging as much does not in fact conflict with my claim that meaningful experience calls to be shared, since we can and often do have countervailing reasons speaking at once for and against given actions. To describe the solitary moment to someone, or to return to the hilltop with them, would in some way constitute the success of your experience; and yet, at the same time, the preciousness of the experience is best protected by being held in private.

However – and this, the third point, is concessionary – there is also something about solitary experience which the counterexample correctly characterises as unsharable. What is unsharable is the way that when you are alone in the field in the snow it is you who is alone there. Others can join you in appreciating the meaningfulness of your solitude qua solitude, but

²⁰ Indeed, perhaps cultivating the capacity for solitude, and learning to keep things to ourselves, is constitutive of a healthy and mature subject (Winnicott, 1958).

no-one can join you in appreciating its meaningfulness qua yours. In fact, even experience had jointly with others has this aspect – it's 'mine-ness', so to speak – which seems something that could be meaningful, and yet is unshareable. Thus, there seems to be a kind of meaningfulness that cannot be shared, and thus does not call to be shared, and so my premise 6 remains in question.

As such, the objection invites a clarification. I have been claiming that togetherness consists in sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of things. Interestingly, what the example of solitary experience illustrates is that the meaningfulness the sharing of which constitutes togetherness must be a meaningfulness that things have in their own right, rather than as a function of one's idiosyncratic relation to them. Suppose that in a moment of abstract reflection I notice and appreciate that my experiences have the quality of being my own. What I attend to is not just that experiences must belong to a subject, but that these ones belong to me – I notice their 'mine-ness'. This is an idiosyncratic relation between me and the experiences. People do not seek the recognition by others of such idiosyncratic features of experience. Such features cannot be sites of togetherness. It is not a coincidence that they cannot be shared.

Co-parents might share a sense of the gravity of their responsibility as parents. In so doing they might find togetherness between themselves. There is an aspect of the responsibility of being a parent that for each of them is irreducibly theirs, and in that respect unsharable. One parent may vicariously acknowledge the gravity of the other's unsharable responsibility that is irreducibly their own. This is an instance of the more general phenomenon of vicarious emotions of feeling joy, pride, sadness or whatever else on behalf of other people and in response to conditions that face them alone. The parents can also bond over an appreciation of a responsibility that they each bear. But there is something they cannot do. Neither could possibly appreciate for themselves the way in which, for the other, that responsibility is their

own. This point suggests a slogan for the view that is my offering in this paper: the object of interpersonal togetherness is the meaningfulness of the world itself.

6. Conclusion

Experiencing the world as being meaningful is the heart of living a human life. As social creatures, the nature of even the most basic kind of experience has a social character. It calls for recognition. This is expressed in the communicative, expressive dynamics of the emotions that are the fitting responses to meaningful experience. When those expressions succeed, we are joined with others in a recognition of the fittingness of our emotional responses to the world. That is togetherness. Its value is a function of the social structure of our minds.

Is togetherness deeper than other social goods, or more fundamental to personal relations between people? Friendship, love and intimacy, could each be rivals for the most explanatorily fundamental social good. And yet, try to imagine any of those without the kind of togetherness that I have been discussing. They would not be themselves. Such social goods only make sense as the goods that they are when they constitutively involve togetherness. Togetherness is the leading candidate for being the social good that is the internal goal of personal relationships as such.²¹

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