Chapter 1

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WORTH THINKING

1.1 Worth questions

"What did you do this afternoon?" a father asks his daughter over supper.

"We had softball," she replies warily.

"You played softball? What about your homework?"

"Dad, this was a scheduled practice. And the tournament's next week."

"Oh. Well—did you work on your fielding?"

Talking about things to do, we regularly signal our intentions with freighted words like "work" and "play." Here the father's purpose in drawing the work-play distinction is to put work before play. We have all grown up learning uses and counteruses for evaluatively charged action terms of this sort. "Work" and "play" are the ones we have heard and used the most, probably, but there are many others. They shape our practical thinking as a trellis shapes a vine.

Are there fixed principles of work and play meaning? The father invokes work in recognition of what seems to him practically necessary. Play, in contrast, is conceived as gratuitous—meaningful in *that* way. The father disapproves of her playing through the afternoon, but he understands why she wanted to. He would gladly play ball if the circumstances seemed right. Nevertheless, he wants his daughter to choose to work for another sort of reason, and he is unsure whether the claims of softball count enough to offset the work need he perceives; this is an apples-and-oranges problem, and it disturbs him not to have a sufficiently clear measure in hand by which to help his daughter's life stay in the right balance.

Suppose that instead of using the shield of a work reason, the daughter goes on the offensive: "I played softball this afternoon because I felt like

having some fun." This starts a two-level struggle. The daughter means to assert *happiness* as a *personal* prerogative, that is, she wants it acknowledged that individuals rightly seek happiness as the product always in part of a free personal vibrancy, never solely of a conventional justification. But her way of making this assertion effective is to mobilize a *conception* of how time is spent in a *really worthwhile* manner, a conception that can compete with her father's in a generally intelligible discussion. Everyone sees the good of having fun on occasion. Play is part of everyone's flourishing. Her father can argue that getting on with homework would have been a better investment of afternoon effort because it would have increased available time in the future; she can argue that working all the time would burn her out. Behind their rival prescriptions for a worthwhile afternoon would be rival understandings of how one puts one's whole life into good shape.

A dispute like this confronts us with the problem of what makes for a well-shaped action of people together, as a collective. A third party might say, "Stop! Arguments like this are a waste of time." But they feel that their active disagreement is, for their purposes, worthwhile. They exhibit a moral culture.

It is important to recognize both that they *choose* to have this discussion and that they are *able* to have it. For we can imagine the daughter baldly asserting her independence or the father his authority—either way, someone's positional uniqueness defeating or overriding the fellowship of their jointly assumed question about what is worth doing. Or they might find themselves incapable of the discussion, thwarted by incommensurable differences of perspective, nonnegotiable differences of desire, lack of clear and demonstrable standards of adjudication, or lack of a binding adjudication procedure. All the same, people generally need to have such discussions. That is how they conjure into definite form the meaning of their lives. Aloofness in practical evaluation is hard; total aloofness, impossible.

In the present example, two people do go on. The father resumes:

"I don't know why you waste so much of your time with softball, anyway. You should concentrate more on academics if you want to get into a good college."

"I don't want to be a lawyer or a doctor. I want to play softball as a pro!" (So much for the play defense! Now she's taken over her coach's all-business view. Can an activity be accurately typed in conflicting ways?)

"That's crazy. Even if you could do that, it would be a waste. It's not worthy of you." (She hears in this also: "It's not worthy of *us*." The family restraint is irksome. But where *will* she fit in? How does one earn or assume one's proper share in a larger human enterprise?)

"It's what I like to do. It's what I'm really good at."

"I can understand how you feel that way now. But softball isn't a career."

"You're just saying that because it's nothing like *your* career!"

Why might it be thought that playing softball could or couldn't become a career? How would career plans justify the daughter to her father? If the father is sizing up career prospects unfairly, how could his bias be exposed? Could any other sort of share in social reality count as much as having a recognized career?

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Twenty years later, the daughter has long since given up softball and found rich professional reward in the practice of law. A different problem emerges. She is close to an enviable completeness—family, home, friendships, social connections, and recreational pursuits falling into place as nicely as her work—and yet she experiences a sort of hollowness in everything. Her life is impeccably worthwhile and yet insufficient. "Is this all?" she asks herself.

Friends give her advice: "Have you ever tried hang gliding?" "What are you doing for your creative side?" "Your problem is you're not madly in love." Adventuring, creating, and romance form different categories of worth, at least, than the ones in which she is already a success. She can regain the free vibrancy of happiness-seeking by striking out in new directions. But apart from the value of simple variety, do adventurous, creative, and romantic actions promise significant kinds of benefit that no human agent should be content to miss? The very mention of these practical categories seems to possess some force. How should the lawyer weigh their claims? What other such categories exist? How, if at all, are they subject to reasonable assessment? Can they fit together coherently in a moral ideology?

She discusses her life with a religious counselor, who looks at it from a different angle entirely. The central problem, on this view, is that her dominant practical reference points are selfish and worldly. She cannot expect to find true happiness and peace of mind until she disinvests in all the forms of excellence that have appeared in her calculus so far. She should confide herself to a higher power (characterized as ____) that will enable the untying of those motivational knots and a surpassing of those limited horizons. Once the higher power takes over, all her actions will be essentially different; they will be better than "worthy." Jane finds it hard to fathom the practical meaning of this suggestion, but hard also to dismiss it. Is she really in the neighborhood of some sort of frontier of all worth that she could step across?

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The practical uncertainties of everyday worth thinking continually spur us to try to understand its logic better. Some questions that have peeked out in one sketch of a life:

Do we have clear and consistent evaluative conceptions of actions? (The *typing* issue.)

Can we make definite enough comparisons and measurements of worth to make decisions about it? (The *determinacy* issue.)

How do the sense and reality of self depend on worth pursuits? In what sense do I acquire worth? How does my qualification by worth of one sort relate to my qualification by worth of another sort? To what extent does the worth I achieve belong to myself and to what extent to collectives to which I belong? (The *identity* issue.)

What do I owe myself and what do I owe others in the pursuit of worth? (The *ethical* issue, in the more familiar sense.) How is worth negotiated between subjects? How may distorted views of worth be detected and corrected? (Issues of *reasonableness* and *validity*, for normative reflection; descriptively, the *culture* issue.)

Can self-gratification be combined coherently with worth justification? Can my own true desire be to impress others ideally? Can the measured pursuit of satisfaction be reconciled with the free pursuit of gladness and joy? (*Happiness* issues.)

Is it possible to make sense of a radically different approach to personal success, one that proposes a transcendence of ordinary worldly personal existence? (Issues posed typically by *religious* claims.)

1.2 Worth thinking as a moral system

I hypothesize that the prevalence of worth terms like "work" and "play" in our everyday practical discussions manifests the operation of a deeply entrenched, widely ramified, and humanly definitive system of evaluative conceptions. I aim to confirm this hypothesis by displaying a wide and dense array of worth conceptions and an order in their deployment and implications. The system of worth thinking is properly called moral, because it administers our lives with normative force and its implications for any of us matter to all of us. It is inconspicuous in formalized ethics, in spite of its importance in practice, because it is pluralistic and flexible rather than universalistic and ideally compulsory in its application. Also, it is hard for many of us to appreciate insofar as the relentless discussion of justice

issues in a liberal, egalitarian society fosters a homogenized conception of goodness and simplistic disjunctions between other-regarding and self-regarding aims. Explicit worth thinking gets shoved aside in the ongoing moral emergency of a justice debate. But it returns whenever we let it, for its theme is the morally *best* state of affairs for each of us.

When we wish to address the social question of how we are faring together, and how each of us is capable of helping or hindering the others in faring well, we hold the focus of formalized public discussion on *value*, the transferable commodity-form of goodness; or on *well-being*, the goodness of a subject's life in the respect in which it may be affected by others' actions; or on *virtue*, an agent's general capacity to act in accordance with agreed moral requirements. In everyday reflective and persuasive discussions, however, our leading interest is most often in an agent's distinctive self-formation and self-expression in making choices that are not only right but the best, the strongest, seen in the context of what everyone else is doing, and accordingly our focus is on *worth*. Thus, whether a war's good results can outweigh its bad results or under what conditions citizens are obliged to participate in war (whether or not they in any sense want to) are familiar ethicists' questions, and important questions for the managers of a war effort; but whether it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country, or in what respects battle is like sport (and whether redeemingly or grotesquely), are questions for worth thinking, vitally important for the participants and hence for the leaders of a war. Worth thinking cultivates fully sufficient, freely adoptable reasons for action as distinct from ideally necessary constraints on action.

More often used and more influential than "right" and "wrong" are our numerous worth-terms for types of practical possibility (sport, for example, or work), types of event (game, career), types of act (helping, dominating), experienced qualities of activity (fun, tedious), and ascribed qualities of activity (noble, sleazy). We use this vocabulary to articulate satisfaction and dissatisfaction with our lives and, indeed, to make our lives knowable at the most elementary level. Our discourse in such terms is cosmogonic in the sense that it generates and sustains a practical human world, a stable order (actually a cluster of orders) in which to navigate and evaluate.[1] The reach of this discourse is, therefore, as wide as the whole human world. No issue of practical evaluation will not be touched by it. The evaluation of artworks, for example, will be affected by evaluation of the personal quality of the play, work, and experiencing of artists; the evaluation of public policy will be affected by evaluation of the leadership of those who propose and direct it; the evaluation of a business will be affected by evaluation of the impressiveness of the owners' ownership, the managers' managing, the producers' producing, and so forth.

Underlying the observable ubiquity and force of worth talk is a principle that I will put forward as a thesis of moral psychology: *worth is what we ordinarily think we mainly want*, what our right hands are reaching for, so to speak. As reasoning, communicative agents in a world, and collectively as a culture, we are worth chasers. By means of worth concepts we represent to ourselves what we mainly want to do, what we would like others to mainly want to do and to accomplish, and what will set the best practical example for others or ourselves. Practical deliberation is complex and often agonizing, because we want to maximize worth not only in objective terms, considering types and degrees of value, but also in terms of agent identity, considering how a realization of worth might enhance an individual or collective portfolio, establishing *how* it is good that *these* agents cooperate in a world. What value and identity actually mean in practice is, in major part, a function of worth seeking; thus the psychological hypothesis implies that worth conceptions can give us access to important aspects of value and identity (and agency, interest, happiness, and cosmology) that would otherwise remain hidden.

A corollary of this psychological claim is that it is false that we mainly seek either happiness, in the sense of having enjoyable experiences, or virtue, in the sense of satisfying the community's generic moral requirements on action. Stringent demands of justice and compassion do make a moral agent consider very seriously whether other subjects are enjoying life; the results of action must not fail the happiness test. Nor are failings in virtue to be condoned. An agent's principal project is not to be happy or virtuous, however, but rather to be *someone*—someone lacking whom the world of human agency would be poorer. And agents are deeply committed to assessing other agents in this light. It is even characteristic of us to get carried away with our worth preoccupations to the point of caring more about player statistics than about the beauty of playing a game, or caring more about the reputations of scientific researchers than the truth of scientific discoveries.

My claim also pulls against the romantic ideal of a self whose independent essence is the supreme reference of aspiration and the supreme test of the relevance of a moral demand. No one can articulate what being true to him- or herself amounts to without abiding by some, at least, of the terms of an interpersonal worth discourse. The wildest romantic protagonists are, after all, worth discussing and perhaps emulating. If one could march to a drummer *purely* one's own, in *no* way intending to impress other agents—if that were psychologically possible—one would become radically alienated from human life. (This point takes nothing away from the various sorts of personal independence and self-optimizing that *are* impressive.) In the perspective of worth thinking, there is not a split between individual and com-

munal value any more than there is between happiness and virtue. Worth terms express an already-negotiated (yet still negotiating) adjustment among the different sites and potentialities of goodness in life.

Our typical difficulty in seeing how worth differences could be resolved (as in the daughter-father story) has a positive significance bearing on the relationship between the worth-seeking individual and the larger worth conversation. Worth prospects are exciting and alluring because they are open to unforeseen personal attunements. In this respect they accommodate me, as a free and complex seeker of identity and happiness; they accommodate you and the others, as my uncoercible partners in life; and they accommodate our collective sense of freedom and growth, as makers of a culture. Moreover, worth ideals relate us to fundamental principles of life that are not directly observed and so are bound to be expressed dubiously and controversially on the surface of practical affairs. (What he thinks of as his work, his answer to necessity, she thinks of as his hobby.)

But although there are permanent grounds of ambiguity, there could be no generally intelligible talk of worth if worth thinking did not possess a considerable degree of objective determinacy. Having drawn us in with its open prospects and intriguing problems, worth thinking must enable us to have a somewhat productive practical discussion. We cannot realize freedom, or encounter each other as other, or explore the foundational structures of our existence, except on certain terms. If we wanted to interpret fun, for instance, as an entirely subjective factor, unaccountable, we would take away the point of much of our fun talk—as in "That was a fun horror movie!" followed by "How can you say that?" So the discourses of worth require objectivity for the sake of both communicability (objectivity as stable information) and communion (objectivity as intersubjectivity). The encouraging implication for a philosophical discourse that would track the discourses of worth is that it can hope to accomplish something intellectually even as it remains convivially open.

Recognizing worth thinking as a moral system is rather like recognizing the earth as a physical system. "System" in this context means only that the phenomena cohere according to principles, not that the phenomena can be deduced from principles. Geological laws are a great help in interpreting what we find on the earth's surface, but knowing them does not remove the necessity of observing the oceans and the continents, the mountains and the basins, and particular mountain features. We can hope to take a well-routed trip through the world of worth thinking, offering looks at a number of major meaning-investments that have been made or that we seem generally to be prepared to make. No world trip is *the* world trip, and yet a good set of observations within a heuristically powerful set of principles can give us essential insights into a world's nature.

1.3 Worthwhileness and worthiness

We most often figure worth in an economic way, implying something spent and something purchased. In whatever is *worthwhile*, there is a satisfactory ratio between what an agent gives and what he or she gets. What an agent has to give is something that can be treated as a practical resource, like time or effort. Asking what is worthwhile for us, we think of ourselves as investing our resources in the things we choose to do. Our quality of life will go up or down as a result. We *acquire* the results of practical self-investment. But whereas the payoff from investing capital resources is that one becomes better or worse *off*, extrinsically advantaged, the payoff from self-investment is that one's personal existence becomes qualitatively better or worse in some measurable way. (Does "having a better life" turn into "being a better person" at any point?)

A daughter argues with her father about softball because her limited time must be spent on one thing or another. But the argument itself might not be worthwhile. One tries to judge the trade-off between the power of argument to improve the participant's lives and its direct negative effect or opportunity cost.

Now consider the decidedly noneconomic character of *worthiness*. To say that an agent or action or thing is worthy is to lift her, him, it, or them out of trade-off calculations and into a realm of goodness that we affirm unconditionally.[2] A worthy deed, for instance, is worth doing no matter what the cost. (This is more clearly affirmable when cost is measured in baser terms; but what about an Antarctic explorer who, in dying gallantly, leaves young orphans?) Regarding persons as worthy, we regard them as having an irrevocable share in what we conceive to be human *reality*, whatever else we feel or know about them. They are among the necessary causes of the personal world that has been made and is yet in the making. Regarding them as worthy, it is impossible not to attend to *who* they are. (Storytelling responds to the mandate of "who"-discernment.) Our starting assumption is that each agent *is* worthy as an indispensable referent of the basic moral thesis that agent diversity is unconditionally and concretely good—and this because each person *can* manifest himself or herself in such a way as to amplify the goodness of human and individual identity. (You already know that you can't have the best world without me, but you know it better if I do something estimable.)

Worthiness is not attached to anyone's while—or rather, worthiness belongs to a person's *whole* while in a completely gathered, conceivably immortal or eternal identity, a strong "who," "*who I really am*," rather than in the temporally dispersed mode that allows living time to be divided into portions, like a day wasted or a year well spent. A worthwhileness

judgment assumes an agent, the owner of disposable potentiality, already set up and defined; then a more specific, additional identity—perhaps a professional identity achieved by a certain schooling and practice, like that of a baseball star, or perhaps only the casual identity of a Sunday fisherman who might catch something—can be checked against the ambitions and limitations that belong to the more fundamental identity. But judgments of worthiness pertain directly to fundamental identity. To be a good sport, for example, is a worthy way of being a baseball player, and is conceived as a more fundamental personal goodness shining through a sports identity. An unworthy action ("That was a cheap shot") darkens our vision of affirmable identity or weakens our grip on it.

Worthiness and worthwhileness can run together in such a way that they are hard to disentangle. For example, tool use is typically very worthwhile because it enables us to get more done, and at the same time, and much for that reason, it is a most worthy activity, manifesting a defining human power. We have a fundamentally distinctive position in the world because of our elaborated tool use. We would not have the dignity of the human position without the technical advantage of tools. Yet we don't identify the dignity with the advantage; indeed, it would seem deeply wrong in many situations to expect human beings to prove their worth by setting to work with tools.

More blurring of the worthiness-worthwhileness distinction occurs in the debates between the formalist and consequentialist schools of ethics, as each approach stretches to account for the moral considerations that the other deems central. Contractarians come to speak of elementally worthwhile "primary goods" and utilitarians concern themselves with the worthiness form of "virtues."[3] Attending to the worthiness-worthwhileness relation helps to clarify the structure and sense of these debates.

Ideals of worthiness attempt to express the ultimate standards by which we ask what is to be desired. We should not be able to ask meaningfully whether nobility, for instance, is to be desired; if it isn't, the possibility of asking whether anything is really to be desired seems to collapse. Kant's instructive way of getting at this point was to identify his single principle of worthiness (a principle of ruling one's life by strictly impartial policies) with the *form* of ethical judgment.[4] This form directly characterizes the root cause of moral action—where the agent is coming from, as we say. One does not choose to perform a noble deed because it contains a high score of goodness compared to other sorts of deeds; rather, one embraces and lives *from* nobility as a format related to or constituting an acceptable self-identity.[5]

The *matter* of ethical judgment, the practical object of choice—that is, the envisioned action, including its definitive consequences—is subordinate

yet (as Kant recognized) essential in its own way. One cannot realize nobil-ity of character without choosing concrete actions that express nobility. Conveniently, many actions carry prima facie worthwhileness characteriza-tions relating them to standards of worthiness; for instance, charity work counts as worthwhile in a way that is congenial with the worthiness stan-dard of nobility.

Corresponding to these counters of practical worth are pieces of iden-tity with which we install ourselves relatively firmly in the world. By doing something worthwhile, one becomes a more definitely knowable self, an agentic commodity—as a baseball player who bats .300 *is* a good hitter—while the worthy self, as such, is more open to interpretation (Is he really a good sport? Has he been given a fair chance?). The self of worthwhileness is a desirable self, without much question, yet more negotiably so. I'd be very proud to be a .300 hitter against major league pitching, but I am not ashamed not to be this. I may be ashamed if I am *nothing* like this in *any* context, but with respect to any specified worthwhile action I am morally freer than I am with respect to standards of worthiness.

We need schemes of worthwhileness to possess more comfortable, dis-cussable, and manipulable identities. We need ideals of worthiness to address the more threateningly and excitingly open questions about how to live. We need schemes of worthwhileness to implement ideals of worthiness practically, in measures of time; we need ideals of worthiness to prevent schemes of worthwhileness from becoming arbitrary or petty, losing touch with meanings that hold for all time. We need a map of worthwhileness to find our way in a world; we need an understanding of worthiness to assume and sponsor a world.

These two kinds of worth standard both support and destabilize each other. Worthiness ideals cannot be left shapelessly abstract; we want defin-ing phrases and paradigm stories, as (in the case of nobility) a soldier assist-ing a fallen foe or a wife forgiving her unfaithful husband, so that we know to some extent how to respond to the most deeply open practical questions. Yet we dare not maintain so precise and accessible an understanding of nobility that anyone can come along and acquire merit by going through certain motions. Motivation, essentially invisible, counts for too much. An achievement too little open to question, too little dependent on the good will of the judges, and too little indicative of the agent's freedom would reduce to the winning of a certain game or the doing of a certain job, that is, to a species of worthwhileness at best. Thus, we must be a little evasive in defining the worthy. But we cannot guard against the mercenary threat so zealously that we no longer know how to praise worthiness, for without visible standards our moral community would dissolve.

Worthwhileness would cease to be meaningful if we came to see its negotiable counters as holding no more than revocable exchange value, like paper money. To keep intrinsic worth in worthwhileness, we give a certain reverence to games, jobs, and other conventionally worthwhile acts and experiences. We treat major forms of worthwhileness as unique, never interchangeable, so that it is never the case that by utilitarian calculation I can determine that I might *just as well* play a game as do a job. We think that moral identity is shaped and revealed by one's choices among such options. Whereas the need for tangibleness gives the mercenary a chance to undermine worthiness, the risk we run in respecting the forms of worthwhileness is that a false priest can easily load too much portent into a game or a job, trying to get it accepted as a full realization of unconditionally affirmable life. Balanced worth thinking requires us to restrain our reverence for the worthwhile, just as it asks us to ward off too definite a measurement of the worthy. Given the right interplay of these inhibitions, worthiness and worthwhileness make contact in the positive relationships of implementation (as worthwhile activities like charity work are needed to implement worthy qualities like nobility) and redemption (as worthy qualities like nobility make activities like charity work really meaningful). It follows that my own full practical reality is found neither in my mysterious "deep self" alone, nor in my "shallower" selves of worthwhile endeavor, but in the implementing and redeeming interplay between these two dimensions.[6]

The identity-constituting circuit of worth runs through our *world*, is cosmological as well as anthropological, in ways that are only faintly indicated by virtue ethics. Certainly the subject of virtue must be *in* a world—possessing courage, for example, implies exposure to threats of some sort—and the actual practices of our world put the virtues in strong demand. But a courageous agent, purely as such, does not partake of the substance *of* the world in the way that a "leader" does. An industrious agent, as such, is not concretely estimable in the way that a "real worker" is. A cheerful or inventive agent, as such, may be a good choice to play with, but is not yet understood as actually participating in the articulation of a particular domain of happy possibility in the way that a "real player" is. To approve of someone who "loves appropriately" is not to pick him or her out as a "real lover."[7] Action-centered categories like "leader," "worker," "player," "lover," and so forth reflect how we are embedded in projects of world-building in accordance with the most momentous opportunities that our humanity affords us.

An ethics of human rights or dignity is likely to stress a universal right of individuals not to be unnecessarily hindered from pursuing self-fulfillment. The virtue of such a theory is precisely *not* to prescribe any worth

identities.[8] It leaves room for freedom and difference. So long as moral discussion revolves strictly around unconditional obligations and occasions of compulsion, this approach is hard to refute, for moral obligations must be freely and authentically assumed by moral subjects. The protection of human rights is also an attractive public policy inasmuch as it conduces to a more vibrant society, as Mill argued in *On Liberty*. But in its abstractness this ethic does not take up important tasks of moral discernment.

1.4 Worth domains

An agent's worth identity is built up out of citizenships and records kept in different worth countries, each a major domain of practical possibility. (When we speak of a "domain" we take the point of view of the agent who can see the implications of controlling practical principles and act by them, with somewhat predictable effects; we can also take the point of view of an interpreter of the text of practice and speak of worth "genres.") I do often want to offer an overall worth-characterization of a person, as in "Pat's a noble woman," but to explain or verify such a judgment I need a point of reference in a certain context, like Pat's leadership in community service. Having come to know Pat in this way, I am indeed confident that she will conduct herself nobly in any context, but the expectation spreads out unevenly. I suppose that in play, for instance, she would be a good sport; but what would be a case of creating nobly? Nobility can mean something in creation, no doubt, but it's not immediately clear what. At any rate, I have no reason (so far) to think of Pat as playful or creative; if I find that she excels in either of these ways, I have important new worth information about her.

Philosophers studying a generically conceived action-as-such are like physicists studying light-as-such. They know that types of action can exist, but not why the type differences would matter, just as physicists know about wavelength variation in light but not why color, as such, would matter. To a vision psychologist, however, color is a chief object of interest, because colors make a great difference for color perceivers. Species of action likewise make a great difference for practical evaluators, and so an account of worth must be, like vision psychology, prismatic.

Which domains of worth exist, then? And why those? This two-part question could send us astray in any of several ways. We might overoptimistically suppose that worth types can be deduced from the conditions of the possibility of practice in the same rigorous way that syllogistic forms are deduced from the conditions for inference. Or we could give the quest for necessity a naturalistic turn, treating the worth types as neurologically

fixed, much as colors are largely determined by the physical structure of our visual nervous system. Or we could claim phenomenological necessity for those forms of practical meaning that we think we can render adequately evident in intuitive research. Or we could construe the subject as completely historical, as though the worth countries we recognize are finite threads in an endless rope of happenstance, as accidental as Yugoslavia.

The color analogy is helpful at this juncture. Blue, yellow, green, and red cannot be deduced from a general principle or placed with intuitive necessity in their actual positions in the visual scheme. Yet colors are not unaccountable. One can reflect on the prospect of color vision for beings like ourselves and see that there *would* be a calm color, something like blue, and an exuberant one, something like yellow, given that we are so much affected by emotions across that range. There would be a deeply encouraging color signifying the presence of our most precious material needs, like green (the oasis). Clearly we need an alarm-color, like red (blood). The something-like-blue demanded by this sort of argument captures the most important part of the meaning of actual blue, a meaning constructed by our talk and practice out of materials furnished by color vision. So the actual colors (in a culturally specified set of colors) do correspond to the basic structure of our relation with the world. They must, because they bear practical meaning.

One limitation of the light analogy is that a person can be totally color-blind and still see things, thanks to differences of brightness, whereas blindness to worth types, if not an outright impossibility, would constitute a grave human impairment. Imagine two individuals wondering together what to do without any cognizance of worth domains. One says, "Let's throw a ball back and forth." The other says, "No, let's sweep the sidewalk." We understand the nouns and verbs of this exchange, but in a more important way it is utterly enigmatic. We cannot sense the meaning of the practical alternatives unless we bring in the valuations and beliefs associated with the domains of work and play.

The light analogy suggests another point: we can see by considering the very idea of color that there must be a limited number of colors that count as primary. If there were a multitude of primary colors, too few of them could hold a proportionally large enough share of all color-meaning to seem as important as we want and need them to be. Similarly, there must be a limited number of main practical issues that we feel to be most important. They should reflect the recognizably largest human patterns of mattering. Among these, there should be a work realm somehow mapping human survival requirements and a play realm corresponding to our spontaneity. So much of the meaning of our lives is a function of our relationships that we should find ourselves also in the domains of "action" in the eminent sense

(helping, fighting, leading) and of love. These four we will explore in sub-sequent chapters. That they are of the highest significance is attested by the rich literatures associated with them. They are not the only major worth types worth exploring, but they make a very full introductory menu.[9]

Each worth color holds a spectrum of its own shades, offering its own hierarchy and logic of discrimination. In each domain it is possible to become fully absorbed in the loftier question of the essential worthiness of the activity and to grapple with the nuts-and-bolts questions of worthwhile choice of action. Whenever we stop and think evaluatively about what sort of action to engage in, we stand at the brink of one or more of the worth domains; whenever we act intelligently, we move with vision and scruple into one or more of those worlds.

Holding all the worth domains together in a most obvious way is a single master question, the force of which we are always able to feel: What is worth doing? We pose this question to express our central concern for the whole reality and value of our active existence, and we continually pursue it using cross-domain conceptions like competence, dignity, satisfaction, and happiness. The regulative ideal of our concern, practical worth, per-tains to the real person across worth domains, although it is specified dif-ferently in different domains and is not definitely graspable in itself.

The worth domains also *bind each other* into a unity. Each has impli-cations for all the others; each, in expressing hopes for ultimate worthi-ness and in receiving the implications of the other forms of worth, becomes a holographic representation of the whole of action. Each can become the main theme of a popular psychology (where its distinguishing features will be rubbed off, promoting confusion). Each can generate an evaluative perspective on everything, an ethos and an ethic. Unlike pure colors, worth forms can saturate each other or disguise themselves as each other. Their distinctness is assured only by the stability of our most effec-tive strategies for evaluating practice—a stability that we can confirm by developing useful, well-differentiated accounts for key terms in their home contexts.

Play is action in the character of free assumption of possibilities that present themselves. One can put on a work-self or a love-self in the same spontaneous, profoundly optional way in which one playfully puts on a play-self. We would misunderstand work and love if we stressed only their contrasts with play.

Work centrally represents our liability to be caught by a practical demand, our having to measure up. Productivity is a preeminent norm of work but can become an issue even in play and love.

Action in the eminent sense means directing the community of subjects. But all human activities are in some way undertaken by a community and

in some way affect it. Every activity needs leadership and diplomacy. A sports team needs a captain; lovers need a pact.

Loving is self-giving movement toward another reality seen in the character of an ultimate good. But any activity is perfected in love, as in devoted work or passionate play. A central issue in all our practice is how much we give ourselves to it.

I place these worth domains in a certain order to reflect some larger structures in worth. Play and work are appropriate to discuss first, because they present arresting examples of activity on the lower end of worth, the preworth/worth frontier (in sheer fun and brute labor), where the minimum conditions of worth are at issue (chapters 2 and 3). They also get us off to a fast start in bringing out the systematic character of worth thinking, because many of their principles have already been relatively well articulated in everyday discourse. Action and love, on the other hand, are more centrally concerned with the embedding and reorienting of world and life in human relationships. The moral exigency of relationship issues is supreme.[10] In that sense, we come in these domains to the high end of the worth manifold (chapters 4 and 5). Indeed, love in its self-abnegating aspect bids to leave worth reckoning behind altogether, and so love makes a good transition to consideration of practices the real point of which is to step outside of worth, like intoxication and worship (chapter 6).

1.5 Transworth and religion

We humans want even more than the human: we wish for infinite reality and value to be poured somehow into human vessels, so that we may have a life like that of "the gods . . . in the highest degree blessed and happy" (Aristotle).[11] This lust for worth opens us to the possibility of what I will call transworth. It can lead to a subordination of worth standards to considerations of another sort, or it can lead to a blurring or unraveling of our worth concepts as we try to apply them outside their proper human sphere—to Nature or Being or God, for example. In any case, the system of worth thinking cannot be made safe against transworth simply by counseling sobriety. Basic principles of measurement and justification open the door to it.

Within the system of worth thinking, worthiness judgments are effectively beyond challenge insofar as they express the constitutive rules of the system. The point of having a worthiness concept like dignity lies in being always able to ask whether an act or activity—say, playing softball—is dignified or degrading, and in *not* being able to ask (relevantly) whether dignity is worthwhile or whether a paradigmatic instance of degradation, like

rape or torture, is bad. But we do not revere worthiness standards only because they furnish the formal conditions of the possibility of evaluation. Even more importantly, we realize that the jurisdiction in these matters is not our own but is actually and potentially shared with our fellow subjects, and that the shared subjectivity that ideally determines worthiness is a more thoroughly mediated, normatively purer subjectivity than that of worthwhileness judgments. To illustrate: playing softball is standardly granted by Americans to be a fun thing to do. If you report to an American that you have spent a couple of hours playing softball, then, other things being equal, you can expect some sort of affirming response. Even in a pro-softball society, however, subjects differ greatly in their appreciation for the sport. You may not expect that the second person you speak to will grant your having played softball the same degree of worthwhileness that your first respondent granted. In contrast, you may and should expect that any fellow subject will revere human dignity and abhor degradation unconditionally. (The fact that we do have different shades of aversion to rape or torture is not allowed practical meaning.) Our worthiness judgments are required to match, because we construe standards of worthiness as definitive of affirmable human life in general, not just of a particular hue in the human spectrum. They are understood to represent all of us most perfectly. Worthiness judgments are the dimension in worth thinking where we meet the moral authority of public subjectivity most directly.

Granting all that in principle—and ignoring, for now, all the problems that arise in producing and applying worthiness judgments with general acceptance—a question remains about how a moral community can know that their assumptions about human potentiality and well-being are sound. One can admit that measurement would not be possible without a certain yardstick already in use and still ask for a measurement of the yardstick. Measurement involves a relation between an intentionally fixed value and a phenomenon; but any concrete standard of measure itself is a phenomenon and can become the object of a differently articulated interest. The yardstick paradox is that any yardstick awaits measurement by a different yardstick. If drug-related problems make us uncertain of our medical assumptions, for example, we can ask to what extent "health" as medically administered corresponds to real wellness. We can ask if our laws really promote justice. Whether we can answer such a question, at a given juncture, depends on whether we can bring a new measuring conception into focus.

Usually, the regress of measurement demands is cut off when practical interest disappears. I may need to know that a foot of length corresponds to a human foot, but the human foot's length needs no explanation, as it is evidently and inescapably *my* foot. I may, however, become mystified by the size

of my foot, and more broadly by the scale of organismal structures in physical nature, and want a measure that relates these phenomena intelligibly to the rest of what occurs on our planet. No obtainable measure can close such questioning once and for all. Resolution comes only in a shift *to a different question*, such as in moving from one measurement issue to another or in moving from a measurement question to a justification question.

The quest for justification is similarly open. How could a moral community know that their relations are perfectly regulated and adequately responsible? A community's awareness is always liable to be changed, as new expressions of personal freedom require renegotiation of forms of togetherness, hidden injustices come to light, or new subjects present themselves. A new way of measuring the intelligence of sentient beings or their capacity for suffering may produce a whole new class of fellow subjects in relationship with whom justification must be sought.

That measurement and justification are pursued on different lines has already become evident in the central bifurcation of worth thinking, according to which worthwhileness judgments are keyed to measurement and worthiness judgments aim for deeper justification. Measurement responds to a requirement for fixing and reconciling the contents of consciousness; justification responds to a requirement for intersubjective concurrence. The measurement issue is shaped by what we happen to be able to think of; the issue of intersubjective concurrence is shaped by the fellow subjects who happen to be around.

Although justification questions always take precedence normatively, either sort of question can be decisive in the configuration of worth thinking. For example: (1) The thesis that a baseball player with a .300 batting average is a good hitter is supportable by measurement up to a point—we can show that a team is likely to win more games for every player who gets hits that often—but if you think "So what?," if you need to be shown that a .300 average really merits respect, you must check with the people who care about baseball performance, for it is their concurring in appreciation of the .300 hitter and your concurring with them that resolves that question. (2) A system for distributing material goods equally to all subjects is demonstrably just when no more mutually agreeable alternative is conceivable, and yet it still may be unclear whether the whole system of consumption is happy or miserable, "worth it" or not, until Buddhist measurements of psychic reality and satisfaction are applied.

Both measurement and justification issues are implicated in the appearance of the putatively transworthy. If we were not aware of the yardstick paradox, we could not recognize the possible meaningfulness of an unfamiliar way of measuring—a claim that the humble are exalted, for instance, or that nonaction is effective action. If we were not ordinarily in search of

justified relationship with our fellow human subjects, we would not be liable to be caught up in relationship with an extraordinary Other (like God or the Enlightened Mind) with whom concurrence is sought very differently. Our understanding of the possible meanings of "spiritual" life—a life in direct relation with the ultimate conditions of valid living—is built on our constant contact with these mysteries of measurement and relationship.[12]

Suppose now that an emissary of some transworthy realm comes to the earthly ruler, worth thinking, sees the authority of worthiness standards within worth thinking, and says: "Worthiness! Give yourself up! You know that precisely to the extent that you seek to be unconditionally imperative, you cannot stand to be taken for any kind of specified worthwhileness. In pursuit of a final adjudication of value, all pretentions of merit must be abandoned. The ultimate evaluation of human life cannot be in human hands, anyway; it can be given and articulated only in a larger-than-human perspective. And humans can appropriate such an evaluation only in inmost inwardness, not in the marketplace of interhuman concurrence. This possibility can now become actual, we know, due to _____ [an exemplary event]. In comparison with the now-revealed transworthy [such as enlightenment, or divine love, or an all-darkening horror], one can see that what has passed for worthiness in ordinary talk is but splendid worthlessness."

Notice that this religious argument can trade on an analogy between the position of the transworthy vis-à-vis worth thinking and the position of worthiness vis-à-vis worthwhileness. Worthiness ideals must be as open and deep as possible while still performing their function of guiding conduct. The transworthy trumps them with infinite openness and depth. But because the transworthy also wants to guide conduct and to take practical form in transplaying, transworking, and so forth, worthiness can answer its challenge in this way: "I have already distanced myself from myopic worldly calculations. Endorsing restraint and sacrifice, I rise unmistakably out of the world to a position from which worldly choices can be made with critical discernment. Yet my connection with the world is not broken. Praise and blame on my terms always have palpable reference and practical relevance. Action in worth domains is reliably affirmable. My way sustains personal identity, as it allows each individual to have an intelligible career. Transworth, however, can scarcely be related to human beings at all, for on its so-called path personalities are erased and actions become unpredictable, unrecognizable, and unaccountable. The world is thus betrayed, not redeemed. It is as though, adapting the words of Kant, 'the light dove of worthiness, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, imagined that its flight would be still easier in empty space,' that is, away from human worth."[13]

The position of worthiness in this exchange has strengths and weaknesses like those of worthwhileness in the internal debate of worth thinking. It is strong in representing the necessity for determination and implementation. It is weak in its clinging to particular forms—a grand vision of humanity and the world, perhaps, but still a particular vision—insofar as this determinacy compromises its mission of addressing the greatest questions about life *in their openness*.

The merely abstract possibility of transworth is evaluatively vacuous, and worthiness has little to fear from it. Even if miracles break out all over, pointing up the questionableness of our yardsticks, they may suggest no criteria of judging other than those already given with worthiness standards, and practical evaluators may shrug them off. The claim of a transworthy *reality*, however, pushing measurement and justification into new forms, can crack the pretended sovereignty of worthiness. Beyond a provocative message, religious movements characteristically present an array of actual better-than-worthy actions performed by their members—actions of radical generosity or fervor, for example, that instantly redefine the boundaries of excellence in human life.

Supposing that the superior demands of transworth can be sustained—supposing, in other words, that this religious sort of life is livable—worthiness ought not to capitulate wholly. It can repeat to the transworthy what it has always been hearing from worthwhileness: "For human beings inhabiting a world, in time, there must be a measuring out and an implementation of the good life. You can strike the pose of unworldly grandeur and purity; you can complain of the distortions of goodness entailed in the very notion of ethics (such as legalism); but if there is to be any sort of coherent practical response to your claim, you must enter into a partnership with moral judgment, and a crucial part of the scaling of your claim to life in the world will be handled by judgments of worthiness and worthwhileness. When we offer on your behalf a 'noble discourse' on 'true satisfaction' and 'true merit,' you will prefer to think of a transcendence of the categories of satisfaction and merit, while we will prefer to think of the coming-to-earth of your goodness and its insertion into human life. We will implement you by providing the attention-commanding language and practical devices of worth; you will redeem us with your cogent handling of the unsurpassable measurement and justification issues that you have forced on our attention."

The practical transworth-worth relationship is a key to the distinctive character of religious morality no less important than religion's special epistemological or cosmological claims. Among the forms this relationship can assume, a striking difference appears between the "salvationist" religion that promises liberation from worth thinking—an exalted reward of love or

bliss that completely supersedes our worldly or ego-bound forms of success—and the "worldly" religion that aims to secure the foundations and perfect the guidance of worth thinking. Not that salvationist religion dispenses with worth thinking or that worldly religion uncritically accepts it; it is fairer to say that the one approach inclines more to paradox and tension, while the other is more constructive and harmonizing. This complexity in the transworth-worth relationship is mirrored, in turn, in worthiness-worthwhileness relations: in one worth ethos, *of course* people who want to be noble do charitable work (are they crass?), while in a more disjunctive ethos no one would *ever* perform an act under the description "charitable work" thinking it relevant to true nobility (are they whimsical?).

The explorations of the following chapters will include some probing of transworthy horizons that belong to each worth domain. Although we will turn up a number of clues for a theory of religious morality or, more broadly, of religious meaning, we will not attempt to construct one; our main interest here is in recognizing how worth thinking is exposed to religious challenge and how it can in some ways incite and support religious appeals.

1.6 The ideal of practical lucidity

The drive to get clear on what is worth doing and to be really interested in what is really practically interesting is central in any morally sensitive life. It animates communities as well as individuals, as one can hear in the discourse of leaders and would-be leaders. Listen, for example, to what candidates in a national election say about courses of action that are worthy of the nation or worthwhile for it. Notice how much of the substance of leadership, in general, is the propagation of a vision of what is worth doing for the community that is to be led. We are brought up short when we see that the boldest articulation of what is communally worth doing is found in fascist discourse. (It was the vigorous adducing of this kind of meaning that made Hitler's speeches so effective.) To oppose fascism, one swings toward the liberal position of refusing to impose on others in any avoidable way and the libertarian position of refusing to be imposed on oneself. But then what can draw us from these morally alienated positions back into a collective and comprehensive deliberation on the best practices?

A first answer has already been indicated. We *do not* leave each other alone. Each human life is interwoven with an indefinite number of others through the sort of communication we more or less constantly engage in—declaring intentions to each other on a huge platform of assumed common meaning. To think that the assumed common meanings are only instru-

mental and "value-neutral," that we are entirely at liberty in relation to them, is unrealistic. Given that we are deep in each other's games, we are better off if we are conscious of what is going on and able to ask explicitly how our lives should be coordinated.

A still more important answer is that we really do want and need what only relationship with others can give. First, our worth ideals need *content*; I cannot gain much understanding of what constitutes success in living if I lack concrete reference points like Muhammad or Mother Teresa or the good person who lives next door.[14] Second, as to the necessary goal of *maximizing* worth, I cannot fail to be interested in every actual or possible incarnation of worth by every other person. Once I admit that my own life is richer because certain real, estimable individuals have lived, I must admit also that my happiness is ultimately affected by the worth status of every agent. Third, as to *validity*, I cannot think of myself or anyone else succeeding if I cannot think that someone else thinks (or should think) the same. I can experience pleasure quite privately—and the sweetest fruits of pleasure may indeed tempt me off onto "disgraceful" paths—but I cannot know or enjoy worth by myself.

Thus, we are all already busy perceiving and trying to justify worth attainments. But why should we ever think that we *can* know what we are about well enough to resolve a given set of practical uncertainties? This question is easier to answer for the familiar sort of "ethics problems" that are created by clashing interests and policies. In those cases the lack of a resolution is a roadblock to coexistence, and any way of treating them that did not yield a resolution would seem pointless. But worth thinking typically operates in a more open practical space where agent freedom is freer, not trapped in a conflict of rival freedoms. Worth advice is friendly; its prospect is mutual gain, seen opportunistically. Should we therefore regard worth thinking as more personal, more inspirational, less reasonable?

Yes and no. I have already pointed out that as a system of evaluation and means of regulating relationships, worth thinking requires considerable objective determinacy. At the very minimum, we must be able to discuss worth judgments with each other just because we must be able to discuss anything with each other. The need is more urgent with matters we care more about. But in those matters we also have a greater need to maintain defenses and escape routes. Our jealousy for our freedom is somewhat at odds with our interest in understanding the structure of practice clearly. We want to be persuaded rather than compelled to our actions. Thus, whatever the results of our inquiry, it will remain true of worth conceptions *normatively* that one has more discretion in their interpretation and use than one can have with the rules that come into play in "ethics problems." The discretion granted is not, however, complete liberty. How could anyone in

good conscience refrain from looking to see as much goodness as can be seen on paths that lie ahead? Not to look, not to map, not to infer rules, not to pursue implications on the largest scale would be to abandon one's role in a system of mutual guidance and to forswear the human excellence of knowing. The goal of our exercise need not be to gain the power of imposing a particular set of worth judgments on anyone, even oneself; but it may be to gain the richest possible awareness in order to *teach* someone, even oneself, about the shapes of human fulfillment.[15]

1.7 Human-kind bias as a problem for worth thinking

Any discourse that purports to define the meaning of human life is bound to be haunted by *human-kind bias*. For many people, this kind of bias is not an everyday practical concern. We do readily understand questions about personal bias, since each of us is involved in daily collisions of perspective with other individuals to whom we must adjust. Generally obvious, too, is our daily experience of failure and perishing, of being overmatched by an indifferent cosmos, humanity's limits chafing us in such a way that we are moved to wonder what our humanoid delusions may be. But the possibility of distorted judgment rooted in human-kind differences like sex, race, age, class, and culture is peculiarly invisible to those of us who do not consciously suffer the more debilitating effects of one or another kind of discrimination. Although it is obvious that human-kind differences exist and that they involve differences in judging that matter a great deal, one's *own* way of judging, as far as this difference is concerned, still seems unimpeachable insofar as one believes and feels oneself to be in a natural, nonnegotiable, and nonproblematic place in a human-kinds system. Thus, a woman might say, "That's a man for you," yet feel no obligation to take masculine valuations seriously; an older man might say, "Youth is wasted on the young," but feel no obligation to rouse youthfulness in his own heart; an ethnic group might make it a point of honor to discount another ethnic group's perspective. A well-known problem with the object of human-kinds talk is stereotyping; the correlated problem with the subject is a kind of complacency *in* type. To pretend to solve this problem by adding extra critical cycles to one's own method of reflection would be ludicrous. The best hope, of course, is to place one's thinking in a large conversation with diverse participants.

An account of worth that did not represent human life fairly would fail a rather important test. But consider the biased affiliation of worth with privileged classes. One could predict that any class that sees itself as superior would reserve for itself the activities to which the greatest worth

accrues; they would want to manipulate a worth scheme to prop up their social rank or give it meaningful content. This reading of the situation assumes a quasi-objective worth scheme in which the most powerful get to do what any human being would naturally wish to do. But socially accepted worth schemes might always have been tilted or warped already in favor of the special opportunities of the most powerful. The masculine glorification of fighting, for example, has produced not only certain values attaching to war but war itself as a sex-marked institution, which is the presupposition of war's glory. War as a moral thing (a practice in the sense developed by MacIntyre) is a posit of worth thinking that we cannot very well account for if we do not know about a specifically male quest for advantage.[16]

Worth as such, the very ideal, may be sex- and gender-biased. In most human cultures, articulable worth *in general* is affiliated more with males than with females.[17] Men earn prestige or honor in prescribed ways and by definite increments. Thanks to this intelligible structure for achieving identity, males can compete, can have justifiable causes of quarrel, can know when a quarrel is over, and can become famous or contemptible. Women, on the other hand, tend to be valued in a less measured way. They tend to be regarded as outside worth or as infinitely worthy. A person in the female-subject position is less concerned with discrete achievements and more with the overall quality of life. Paradoxically, the male subject stands in horror of being female (since in that position the meaningfulness of male success evaporates) and yet is vitally concerned to have a secure relationship with the female.

If we are to deal with worth thinking as a live moral scheme, we should watch out for moral distortions in worth thinking that would be attributable to the pressing of one class of humans for advantage over others. The categories, examples, principles, and conclusions that appear in a philosophy of worth should likewise be under suspicion. But suspicion should not preclude appreciation of contributions to our worth understanding made from limited perspectives. Think of the help some ancient Athenian gentlemen have given us with our political ideals—ideals of personal freedom and collegial action that ultimately lend themselves better to enriching many lives than to restricting them.

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Our worth domain studies of play, work, love, and action will follow a common plan.

Each domain is most naturally entered by determining first what is essential to its type of action, and making this determination in each case

opens up a distinctive anthropological and cosmological perspective. For the general theme of a species of worthy action is the active relationship of a certain kind of being with a certain world-formation.

The second major phase of each domain study consists of tracing out the structure of a domain's distinctive system of practical intelligibility—how that mode of action makes itself appreciable—by discovering the order implied by its most frequently used evaluative concepts.

In a third phase, we shall scout the frontiers of each domain to consider the difficulties that are inherent in attempts to apply the ideals of a mode of action beyond the frame of reference in which they normally make sense; we shall also consider how to make sense of amazing proposals of transworth that are flung, as it were, across these frontiers, using clues from worth thinking as we are able.