

The Bourgeois Predicament

By R. Jay Wallace

University of California, Berkeley

We reasonably aspire to live lives that are worthy of retrospective affirmation. Not complete affirmation, of course. Any realistic survey that agents might conduct of their lives, however admirable they may have been on balance, will uncover countless occasions for regret and remorse. But it is compatible with this that one might nevertheless think that it was worth it on the whole: there were things in one's life that gave it meaning and purpose from one's own point of view, and these are sufficient to redeem the many setbacks and failures it inevitably will contain.

In this paper I want to consider a potential obstacle to this kind of retrospective affirmation. For virtually everyone who is likely to encounter the ideas in this paper, the projects that provide the evaluative content of their life have a distinctive economic and social basis. They involve activities that are possible only for those who enjoy a comparatively privileged position in the global distribution of material resources, and who have access to an array of institutional and social advantages that are denied to most people in the world. For want of better word, we might describe them as characteristically bourgeois projects and activities. The difficulty, then, is this: our ground projects are the basis of our affirmative attitude toward the lives that we lead. But their bourgeois character means that those projects implicate us in social and economic disparities that we cannot possibly endorse (not at any rate if we are reasonable and thoughtful). The result is to undermine the rational basis of the affirmative attitude we take toward our lives, and to frustrate our concern to live in ways that are worthy of that kind of attitude. This is the bourgeois predicament of my title.

My main aim in this paper is to explain the bourgeois predicament, and to show that it is a genuine challenge to our aspiration to lead lives that we can

wholeheartedly endorse. I shall also discuss some possible responses to the predicament, and argue that they are futile.

1. Affirming One's Life.

Let me start by conceding the obvious, which is that for the vast majority of us, there is no practical question of whether we do or will continue to adopt an affirmative attitude toward life. We love life, we are attached to it, we cling to it, as it were, "for dear life". Moreover, these are attitudes of attachment not to life in the abstract—to the mere fact that there are beings in the world who are alive—but to *our own* lives, the fact that we in particular are among the living. That we are attached in this manner to the lives that we lead is presumably the expression of an elementary biological imperative of some kind; it is prior to reasons and justifications, and hence impervious in some degree to normative challenge or support.

Even if our attachment to life does not require justification, however, the question can be raised as to whether it is a reasonable attitude to adopt. We are reflective creatures, after all, and with the capacity for reflection comes the ability to ask critical questions about tendencies that are given to us with our biological nature. We can ask, in particular, whether the lives we are living are worthy of the kind of ferocious attachment that we are unreflectively inclined to go in for. This question has a temporal dimension that it might be helpful to unpack. The attachment to life I have been discussing is in the first instance an attachment to our lives as they are unfolding. We value being alive, in a way that involves a kind of emotional vulnerability, and among the primitive expressions of this emotional attachment is a strong preference to continue living. Indeed, this preference is strong enough that it generally makes it unnecessary to ask the question as to whether we should carry on in life.

When we do put to ourselves this unnecessary but existential question, however, where might we look for materials to answer it? Not, I think, *simply* to the future. There are cases in which people cite future circumstances to explain why

they are interested in hanging in there for a few more weeks or months: they want to see their book through to completion, or to meet the grandchild who was recently born abroad. But these future considerations are anchored in things that are already part of the person's life, such as their family attachments or their ongoing literary pursuits. It is, most basically, our attachments to individuals and activities in the life we are already living that potentially provide a normative basis for our attachment to life.

In a well-known discussion, Bernard Williams referred to these bases of affirmation as our "ground projects".¹ He characterized them as "categorical" desires, observing that they "do not depend on the assumption of the person's existence, since they serve to prevent that assumption's being questioned, or to answer the question if it is raised".² The idea is presumably not that the causal efficacy of ground projects is independent of the person's existence; projects operate through the agency of those to whom they are ascribed, and in that respect they always depend on the continued existence of their subjects. Williams' idea, I believe, is rather that the normative significance of ground projects is independent of the assumption that the person who bears them will continue to exist. The test for whether a given concern meets this condition is whether the concern would give a person reason to continue with their life, if the question were to arise for them. Consider, in this connection, two different fans of the local baseball team. Fan A cares about the team, enjoys watching them play, and reads press accounts of them when he can; but A isn't terribly invested in their fandom, and it wouldn't occur to A to think that the continued opportunity to follow the team is a positive reason for going forward with their life. Fan B, by comparison, is profoundly invested in the role of a fan, with all of the social and psychological consequences that entails. B's involvement with the team is among the things they live for, as we might say, and for B the commitment to fandom would plausibly count as a reason for carrying on with their life if the question were seriously to be entertained by them.

Ground projects, then, may be thought of as attachments to activities or individuals that provide a potential normative basis for our attachment to life itself. They help to constitute the perspective from which we conduct our lives, and are among the conditions that give us a distinctive character and point of view as individuals. But does every attachment that in this way shapes our identity also give us a compelling reason to live? I am doubtful that this is the case. Character comes in many different varieties, and people whose fundamental attachments are to ends that are empty or evil do not thereby acquire a genuine reason to carry on with their lives. Their will to live may find psychological expression in a drive to realize the goals to which they are committed, and those goals might in turn be the sort of thing that it would occur to them to mention, in the perhaps unlikely event that were reflective enough to think seriously about the existential question. But that question is a normative rather than psychological one, and there are objective constraints on what counts as a satisfactory answer to it. To provide the materials for a convincing response to the existential question, an agent's attachments must be attachments to things that it is genuinely worthwhile for humans to engage with, such that engagement of the relevant kind can be acknowledged interpersonally to be something to live for. People can be propelled forward in life by malicious or trivial ambitions—a compulsion to dominate and defeat others, or to accumulate meaningless material trophies—without it being the case that they thereby have good reason for carrying on.

In a different kind of case, agents are carried forward by ambitions that have real normative significance, but that are nevertheless too thin to contribute much on their own to the meaning of the agents' lives. Consider the person who sees little to live for, but who carries on out of a sense of moral duty or because there is someone else who needs them. These considerations, it seems to me, might genuinely ground a preference to remain alive. But they are not the sort of thing that can really fill out a human life, or make it one that is worthy of wholehearted affirmation from the agent's point of view. Agents in this situation might prefer to carry on in life, which

we can think of as a conditional preference to continue living, given that they already exist (and that moral obligation, or the needs of someone else, require this of someone in the agent's position). But if this is all that propels them forward, the agents might at the same time fail to affirm unconditionally the lives that they are leading. Looking backwards, and taking everything into account, they might regret on balance that they ever came into existence in the first place, and wish devoutly that things had been otherwise in this crucial respect. I will stipulate that persons in this situation do not take a fully affirmative attitude toward their own life. There are attachments that are barely sufficient to ground their preference for continuing in existence. But these attachments lack the texture and complexity that ordinarily impart meaning to one's activities, and that therefore provide a basis for being glad that one has lived.

This is a kind of limiting case, however. Ordinarily, the projects that ground a person's forward-looking preference for continued existence are also things that support a retrospective preference to have lived life at all. The attachments that carry us forward through life are the very things that we hope will provide a basis for being happy that we have lived, when we look back from the perspective of the identity and character those projects have helped to constitute. We might say that an aspiration to live a life that is worthy of unconditional affirmation is thus immanent in the structures of personality that undergird our existential attachment to our lives while we are living them.

The projects that most readily contribute to satisfying this aspiration are ones that involve a combination of objective value and subjective engagement.³ They center around relationships and activities that are intrinsically worthwhile, and hence capable of being acknowledged interpersonally as meriting our interest and attention. But if they are to contribute to our capacity to affirm our lives, these projects must also be such as actually to engage us, so that we are invested in them emotionally. Within the pluralist framework that I shall presuppose for purposes of this discussion, it is taken as given that there are a variety of differently valuable

activities and kinds of relationship that persons could build a life around.⁴ We constitute ourselves as individuals in part by choosing to engage with some values rather than others, through activities that have the result of making those values our own. If all goes well, these activities will involve a cumulative deepening of our emotional commitment to the corresponding values, so that we come to care about them and to be identified with them, to some extent. To take an example that lies ready to hand, think of a complex intellectual pursuit such as philosophy, and the way that someone who is initially drawn to this pursuit might eventually become deeply invested in it through continual engagement with its problems and activities. Projects that satisfy these subjective and objective conditions lend meaning to our lives, and provide a normative basis for retrospective affirmation. They are the things that ground an unconditional preference to have lived, taking into account retrospectively everything that has in fact happened in our lives.

Obviously meaning in this sense is a matter of degree. It is possible to live a life that is better or worse along this dimension of assessment, and there is no exact answer to the question as to how much meaning a given life has to contain to be worthy of retrospective affirmation from the agent's point of view. It is equally obvious that meaning in this sense can coexist with the presence in a life of much that is worthy of serious regret and remorse, including missed opportunities, serious lapses of imagination or will, poor decisions, and a lot of low-level moral and non-moral failure. (As Philip Larkin writes: "There is regret. Always, there is regret.") Insofar as agents fundamentally regret these aspects of their life, they will wish on balance that things had been otherwise in the relevant respects. But this attitude is compatible with unconditional affirmation of one's life as one has actually lived it, even taking into account its lamentable elements. To affirm one's life in this unconditional way is not to affirm absolutely everything that it contains, but merely to think (to a first approximation) that the good outweighs the bad. It is to think that the meanings that the life has achieved are substantial enough to make it worthy of affirmation on the whole, despite the presence of its many regrettable aspects. The

aspiration to live a life that is worthy of affirmation is, I believe, an aspiration to live in a way that satisfies this condition. We hope to achieve meanings that are sufficient to warrant an on balance retrospective preference for the life we have actually lived, as against the hypothetical scenario that we should not have lived at all. But even if we realize this aspiration, there may be many things in our life that we also wish on balance that it had not included.

In some cases, of course, the balance will tip in the other direction, so that the lamentable elements dominate the potential bases of affirmation from the standpoint of retrospective assessment. Looking back, the agent might feel that the projects that underlay the ongoing preference for continued life did not have enough texture or value to warrant an unconditional preference to have lived. In a still different scenario, agents may find that their life is filled with meaning, but also that it is filled with occasions that call for serious remorse and regret. Consider, for instance, people who have rich personal relationships and attachments in the private sphere, but whose professional life is dominated by ruthless and destructive ambition. Such persons might find it hard to conclude honestly that an on balance attitude of affirmation is called for in regard to the lives they have led, taking into account not only their personal attachments but also the devastating effects on others of the way in which they have conducted their professional affairs. The only realistic attitude to adopt toward the lives they have lived would then be one of profound ambivalence.

A couple of brief comments about this scenario are called for. In saying that ambivalence might be the only realistic attitude to adopt toward the life the agents have led, I don't mean to suggest that the agents will in fact necessarily be ambivalent when they look back on their life. The same tenacious attachment that propels us forward might also lead us to be glad that we have lived, even in a situation in which there are powerful reasons for regret and remorse. If I am right, however, we want to live lives that are *worthy* of unconditional affirmation, and the point is that this normative condition might not be satisfied in the case of those who have systematic reasons for deep regret about the way they have conducted their

professional affairs. Agents who satisfy this description will fail to have lived in a way that makes their on balance preference to have lived a reasonable one to adopt. Note, in addition, the potential relevance of moral considerations in this scenario to the question of whether agents have lived in a way that warrants retrospective affirmation. I suggested earlier that obligation by itself might not have enough texture and interest to make for a really meaningful life; people who hang in there out of a sense of duty will be acting on important reasons they have to carry on, without their doing so necessarily providing a positive basis for retrospective affirmation. It is compatible with this point, however, that morality might have relevance of a different kind for questions of retrospective affirmation. In particular, systematic moral failure, of the sort that profoundly disrupts one's relationships to the other people one has encountered in life, can leave the agent with a correspondingly profound basis for regret, one that is sufficiently powerful to undermine the possibility of reasonable on balance affirmation.

In the scenario we have been considering, agents are imagined to have grounds both for retrospective affirmation and for retrospective regret, where these in turn are located in different activities or phases or aspects of the agent's life. A different possibility, which will bring us closer to my eventual topic, is that the bases for affirmation and regret in the agents' lives are more tightly connected to each other. I am not thinking here of those cases, mentioned above, in which the putative sources of meaning are projects that are intrinsically evil or empty. In those scenarios, the projects in question will not turn out to provide any genuine ground of affirmation at all, however powerfully committed to them the agents may have been while living. But we can imagine other cases, in which agents pursue inherently valuable ends, but in ways that are fundamentally conditioned by immorality or other factors that provide a basis for regret.

Consider, for instance, distinguished scientists who are actively engaged in systematic and illuminating research into basic questions of genuine importance and interest, but who run their laboratories in a way that is egomaniacal, autocratic, and

exploitative. Basic scientific research of this kind is, I take it, a deeply worthwhile activity, valuable in itself, and not just for the benefits to human health or well-being that it might eventually produce. When research of this kind is successful and engages the interests of its agent, it will be precisely the sort of thing that could be expected to contribute positively to the meaning of the agent's life, and to provide a powerful basis for retrospective affirmation. In the case at hand, however, the agents also have powerful reasons for regret. Furthermore, these reasons are not provided by activities that are independent from the agents' scientific projects, but are rather grounded in those projects themselves. That is, the way the agents have carried out their scientific research involves a pattern of activity that could only occasion remorse if the agents were to face up to it truthfully.

In thinking about the situation of these imagined scientists, we may stipulate that their regrettable comportment does not compromise the scientific value of the activities in their laboratories. The research that is conducted there is imaginative, illuminating, and important, and it represents a real advance in our understanding of the phenomena that it investigates. But at the same time the scientists have conducted their research investigations in a way that exploits and humiliates and undermines the other people who are involved in them (including, we might imagine, the scientist's own family members, whose interests have been ruthlessly subordinated to the scholars' professional ambitions). Furthermore, that the scientists have exploited the people in their lives in this way is instrumental to the scientific results that they have attained. The valuable work that is done in the labs by these individuals would not have been quite so distinguished and cutting edge, we may suppose, if they had been less ruthless and aggressive in the ways they have comported themselves.

In a case with this structure, there are not two discrete bases of affirmation and regret in the agents' life, but one and the same complex pattern of unfolding activity, which is of its nature such as to merit both affirmation and regret. The agents' project is the ongoing course of scientific research in which they have been

engaged. But that project is not something distinct from the way the agents have conducted the research in question; rather it consists in the very activities that contributed over time to the unfolding research, activities that are themselves intrinsically lamentable. Looking back, the agents cannot really wish on balance that they hadn't behaved autocratically and exploitatively in their professional life, without thereby undermining the potential basis for affirmation that their scientific achievements represent. They cannot, in other words, be glad on balance for the life they have led, on account of the role of their scientific activities in that life, while wishing on balance that they hadn't conducted their professional affairs as they did. This combination of attitudes is pragmatically ruled out, because a world in which they acted more respectfully and collegially toward their co-workers and family would not contain the very scientific projects that are the basis for an affirmative attitude toward the lives they have actually led.

This suggestion requires a bit of unpacking. Note, to begin, that there is no literal inconsistency between unconditionally affirming one's life, because of one's scientific projects and achievements, and regretting on balance the deeply exploitative way one comported oneself in carrying out those projects. The intentional objects of these attitudes, at any rate, are distinct enough that there is no intrinsic incoherence in being glad that one has lived, because of one's scientific achievements, while wishing that one had not been such a pitiless autocrat in the lab. The difficulty emerges when we acknowledge that the object of regret is itself a condition for the presence in the agents' life of the very thing that grounds their affirmative attitude toward it. But why exactly is this a difficulty? Can't one be glad on balance that one has lived, on account of the projects that one has pursued, even while one wishes on balance that one of the acknowledged necessary conditions for those projects should not have been satisfied?

There is nothing, I suppose, that renders it psychologically impossible to entertain this combination of attitudes. But the combination is inherently unstable, and this generates pragmatic pressure to surrender one (or both) of the

unconditional attitudes in question. If you affirm your life unconditionally, because of the role in it of a given project, then you are committed to affirming that project itself in the same way. A failure to do this will leave you chronically vulnerable to ambivalence and doubts, of a kind that undermine the unconditional character of your affirmative attitude toward your life. But to be glad on balance that your life contains the project that is the basis for your affirmative attitude, taking everything into account, just is to be glad that the necessary conditions for the project were actually satisfied in the life you have led. There is no room for on-balance regret about those conditions if the project itself is the object of unconditional affirmation.

To return to our autocratic scientists, the point is not that if they had comported themselves more respectfully in their scientific and personal interactions with people, there would not have been some professional basis or other in their lives for an affirmative attitude toward them. For all I have said, it might even be the case that the course of scientific research they would have embarked on under those counterfactual conditions would itself have been a rich source of meaning and affirmation for the agents. But that would have been a different life from the one the agents actually led, containing quite different bases of retrospective affirmation.

One reason for this is that the scientific results that are achieved under the counterfactual circumstances we have described would have been different from the results that our scientists are taken to have achieved in the lives they have actually led. We are supposing that their ruthlessness and tyrannical comportment in their laboratories makes it possible for them to realize remarkable results that would otherwise have been out of reach. Insofar as the value of their achievements is among the bases of an affirmative attitudes toward their lives, we can say that their grounds for affirmation are inexorably tied to their regrettable immorality. The nature of the connection is that of causality, whereby their immoral and ruthless behavior is a necessary causal condition of the valuable results that are achieved in their work and that give them a reason to affirm the lives they have led.

But the relations between the bases of affirmation and of regret in this case go deeper than this account would indicate. What is valuable in the scientists' lives are not just the scholarly results that are brought about through their research, but the research activities themselves, considered as something that structures and defines their lives as they have lived them. Projects in turn are in part constituted by an unfolding sequence of activities on the part of the agents to whom they are ascribed. Under the conditions we are imagining, however, the scientists' systematic immorality and egomania are interwoven fundamentally into their scientific research, with the result that they cannot wish away this aspect of their conduct without thereby wishing away the very thing in their actual life that provides its most significant source of affirmation. Our scientists' actual research projects just are the unfolding activities of people who are talented and driven and ambitious, but also egomaniacal and autocratic and exploitative. Their immorality, in other words, is not just a causal but also a constitutive condition of the ongoing projects that give meaning to their lives. This deepens the noncontingent connections between the bases for affirmation and regret in the case at hand. We may suppose that both the scientific achievements that are realized in the scientists' research, and the research activities through which those achievements are obtained, are things that have genuine value, and that provide a basis for affirming the lives the scientists have led. But the unsavory aspects of those same activities, and that make possible the particular results that they realize, leave the agents with a significant reason for regretting that their life contains them.

This is a different and more troubling source of ambivalence than in the case we encountered earlier, in which agents deeply regret their activities in one sphere of their life, while finding much that is worthy of affirmation in a different and unrelated sphere. In that situation, agents can wish that their lives had been different in the lamentable respects, without that undermining their basis for affirming the life that they have actually led. It is just that the actual bases of affirmation are counterbalanced by the actual grounds for regret, so that a kind of

ambivalence becomes the only reasonable retrospective outlook for the agents to take. In the case of the scientists, by contrast, the bases of affirmation and regret are not in the same way independent from each other. Instead, the thing that the agent has powerful reasons to regret conditions and helps to constitute the very thing in the agent's life that warrants affirmation. For agents in this kind of scenario, the basis of affirmation is itself infected by the grounds for regret, with the result that there is no realistic scenario, accessible to retrospective reflection, in which the sources of meaning are preserved while the deeply regrettable aspects of their life are avoided. I shall stipulate that situations of this sort involve a kind of non-contingent ambivalence, insofar as the actual bases for affirmation and regret are thus bound up with each other.

2. The Bourgeois Predicament.

The case of non-contingent ambivalence considered above involved valuable activities that are conditioned and constituted by regrettable behavior on the agent's part. But a similar structure can emerge in situations where the basis for regret is an impersonal condition that shapes the agent's life, rather than something the agent has done. This brings me to the bourgeois predicament.

It is noteworthy that many of the most significant sources of affirmation in our lives are attachments that of their nature presuppose a certain degree of material well-being. Meaningful work, for instance, is something that is generally available to people only under conditions of comparative affluence, under which they are freed from the banal rigors of bare subsistence. Meaningful work involves active and continuous engagement with problems that are important and challenging, under conditions that involve some measure of variety as well as some opportunities for initiative and self-determination. Those of us fortunate enough to work in good universities typically have jobs that satisfy these conditions in high measure, but of course there are lots of other possibilities as well, in contexts ranging from industry and public service to economic development and the arts. Many other sources of

meaning in peoples' lives similarly presuppose freedom from material necessity; consider in this connection the passionate interests in literature, film, or opera that sustain many people. Even personal relationships exhibit this feature, to some degree. Many of the most valuable forms of interpersonal attachment are built up out of the activities of an essentially leisured class, including shared participation in artistic or athletic pursuits, or simply the kind of conversation and banter that are possible only when one is not constantly struggling to figure out where one's next meal is going to come from.

I am not, to be clear, maintaining that a meaningful life is possible only under conditions of material well-being. Many of the paradigm examples that come to mind when we think about valuable attachments in human life involve bourgeois activities such as the ones I have just mentioned, but it is surely possible for people who are struggling with life's basic necessities to form significant attachments of various kinds. Having said that, however, it is striking that for those of us who enjoy the material advantages of upper middle class life in a developed economy, the attachments that are in fact our most significant sources of meaning have a distinctly bourgeois character. Our rewarding professional and personal projects are those of people who have the kind of educational and cultural opportunities available only under conditions of general affluence. Even if we are not ourselves *especially* wealthy (measured by the income distribution in our society), we profit directly from the amenities that advanced economic activity makes available, if only through the accessible schools and universities and museums that affluent societies support and the other generous public goods they are able to provide. Our relationships and personal attachments, too, are structured around activities that presuppose significant material advantage. Even our family lives are deeply colored by the conditions of relative prosperity under which we live. Our ability to plan and manage our families—to decide for ourselves when to have children and how large our families should be—is conditioned significantly by material well-being and educational attainment. And of course the activities that organize our family

relationships, and give them their value, are themselves largely the activities of a comparatively prosperous class. Think of the vacations, the outings to museums and historical sites, the opportunities for structured play, the music lessons and soccer games and educational challenges, the collective meals and conversations, that modern family life is largely organized around in the strata that most of us actually occupy.

We might summarize these truistic points by saying that the significant sources of affirmation for most of us are distinctively bourgeois attachments. They are projects and relationships that could exist only under conditions of material advantage, and that presuppose both the opportunities and the freedom from material necessity that such advantage makes possible. The next observation I want to make is that the material circumstances that in this way condition our bourgeois attachments are themselves impersonally lamentable. The affluence that supports our educational and social opportunities, and that underwrites our whole way of life, coexists with circumstances of extreme deprivation in many parts of the contemporary world. In some epochs, and to varying degrees in virtually all developed economies, there are striking inequalities of wealth and power within the state, so that the advantages of affluence are not fully accessible to all of its members. This is, on most plausible conceptions, a serious injustice. Even those developed societies that are comparatively egalitarian in their distribution of social advantage make resources available to their citizens that are unheard of in other parts of the contemporary world. There were about 1.4 billion people living on less than \$1.25 per day in 2005, and even the developing countries that have made progress in reducing the level of absolute poverty are far behind the standard of economic attainment that prevails in the more developed parts of the world. Whether these global disparities of material advantage should be considered matters of injustice, strictly speaking, is not a question I wish to enter into here. But they are, it seems to me, indisputably regrettable. Things would be better, the world would be a better place, if material resources could be redistributed in a way that would eliminate

absolute poverty and dramatically improve the life prospects of those in the contemporary world who are currently least advantaged.

If this is correct, however, it has significant implications for our attitudes toward our own lives. For most of those who make up the audience of this paper, the things that provide a basis for affirming our lives are in the nature of bourgeois attachments. They are projects and relationships that are possible only under conditions of significant material advantage. Yet those conditions are themselves impersonally regrettable. We have good reason to wish that things were otherwise in respect of the distribution of material resources and opportunities, both within developed societies and across the world as a whole. But the satisfaction of this preference would undermine the basis we have for affirming our lives, as we have actually lived them. The result is a situation similar to the one that was diagnosed in the preceding section, in which we have non-contingent grounds for ambivalence about our lives.

To make this more concrete, let's consider realistically the professional activities that we are all actively engaged in, and that provide a significant source of meaning in the lives that we actually lead. These activities revolve around teaching and research in philosophy, conducted in elitist institutions that are selective in the students they admit, and that invest significant resources to support scholarship at a reasonably high level. I shall assume that these are worthwhile activities to be involved in, and that a life of active engagement with philosophical questions in this kind of context is one that is on that account worthy of affirmation from the agent's point of view. At the same time, it is striking that the activities in question are extremely resource-intensive. The universities in which we work are made possible by educational policies that invest far more in the training of the most advantaged members of our societies than is invested in the education of those who are less well off. This is arguably the opposite of the pattern that would prevail under a more just set of educational policies.⁵ The practices that enable high-level research and teaching in the liberal arts appear all the more questionable when we consider the

scale of absolute and relative poverty in the modern world. Surely better use could be made of the resources that sustain our philosophical activities and that gave us the kind of background and training that prepared us to participate in them. Seen in the context of the massive deprivation afflicting so many people across the globe, university research programs in a subject like philosophy are a luxury that it is very difficult to justify; indeed their existence appears to be a kind of absurdity. In light of these considerations, it seems very plausible that we have strong reason to regret the conditions that make possible one of the activities that most significantly contribute to the meaning of our lives, as we actually live them.

To this it will perhaps be objected that there are a lot of worse things we could be doing with our lives than writing and teaching in philosophy. These are hardly the most resource-intensive of the many professional occupations available to people in developed economies, and they seem comparatively harmless in their broader effects. We could be working for arms manufacturers, for instance, or earning obscene sums of money developing structured finance products for some predatory Wall Street investment bank. These observations are true, but beside the point. Presumably many of the lives that are led under conditions of great affluence are not really worthy of affirmation at all, in the sense I have been discussing in this paper, because the activities that they revolve around are themselves immoral or without merit. Indeed, there is probably a dynamic in modern economies that tempts us to devote more time than we should to undertakings that are intrinsically empty and morally questionable. We are encouraged to participate in the rat race, to engage in pointless and environmentally catastrophic levels of consumption, to acquire bigger and flashier gadgets and baubles as a way of distracting ourselves from the inherent boredom of our lives. That is perhaps a kind of bourgeois predicament, but it is not the predicament that is my subject in this paper. My assumption is that affluence, in addition to its many deleterious effects, also makes possible an array of activities that are of undoubted intrinsic value. It is the material substructure that supports the cultural undertakings that we hold in especially high

esteem, including institutions that enable outstanding achievements in science, scholarship, and the arts. It also makes available to many people opportunities to support themselves through work that is interesting and honorable, in lives that are also rich in the personal relationships and other activities they involve. These are the kinds of attachments that for most of us are apt to provide the most convincing basis for an affirmative attitude toward the lives that we actually lead. The predicament that is my concern derives from the fact that the material circumstances that condition and make possible these genuine bases of affirmation are themselves circumstances that we have good reason impersonally to regret.

I said above that in a situation of this kind, agents have noncontingent grounds for ambivalence about how they have lived their lives. The bourgeois predicament in this respect resembles the situation of the ruthless scientists who were discussed in the preceding section. But there is a difference between these situations that deserves brief comment. In the scientists' case, the basis for ambivalence is the fact that their lamentable behavior is partly constitutive of the very project in their life that also grounds their affirmation of their lives. In the present case, by contrast, the nexus that links the bases for affirmation and regret is somewhat different. It is not that the bourgeois activities that give our lives meaning and significance are themselves partly constituted by the lamentable global inequalities that characterize the contemporary world. Those are impersonal conditions that we inhabit, not themselves things that we do or have done, and so it hardly makes sense to describe them as constitutive parts of our projects and activities. The idea, rather, is that these lamentable circumstances are essential causal conditions of the activities in which our valuable projects and attachments consist. Those valuable activities would not be possible in a world in which resources were distributed more equitably and justly, and this constitutes a noncontingent link between the sources of meaning in our lives and the impersonal material conditions that we all have good reason to regret. In virtue of this link, we become implicated in the lamentable impersonal structures that we inhabit, insofar as the sources of

meaning in our lives are activities that would not be possible in the absence of those structures.

But how widespread is this problem, really? I have taken as my focal example a case that involves fairly expensive professional activities. But, it might be argued, this example is not representative of the attachments that give meaning to our lives. There are plenty of valuable projects in bourgeois societies that are not intrinsically resource-intensive at all—think of the person who paints or sings or participates in a soccer league as a hobby, and who is passionately devoted to these pursuits. Furthermore, the personal and family relationships that for many of us are the most important sources of meaning might appear to escape the predicament altogether. Friendship for instance does not by its nature require an elaborate institutional infrastructure; it might therefore seem that our participation in this practice does not implicate us in the lamentable patterns of unequal distribution that are directly presupposed by such activities as scientific scholarship and opera. The same might be said for the relationships between close family members.

It is not my intention to maintain that all of the activities that sustain us in life have an essentially bourgeois character. For my purposes it is enough if many of the familiar attachments that provide a basis for meaning and affirmation in our lives rest on and require the affluent material conditions I have been discussing. That will suffice to get us caught up in the bourgeois predicament. Having said that, however, I would add that the problem seems to me to extend to a much wider range of activities than the objection just canvassed acknowledges. Amateur practices such as painting and music and organized sports, for instance, presuppose the kind of leisure that is typically available only under conditions of general prosperity, where people are not consumed by the mundane task of satisfying their basic material needs. Moreover, they derive at least some of their significance for us from being embedded in social structures that also support much more resource-intensive forms of professional practice. It is important to the amateur singer or painter or football player, for instance, to be engaged in the same activities that are conducted at a high

level by the leading practitioners of these disciplines; this is part of what lends the amateur activities their value and significance. As for relationships, as I noted earlier it is a striking fact that friendships and family attachments in developed societies are largely organized around activities that are possible only for the members of a comparatively affluent middle class. These are the activities that help to constitute the relationships, to a considerable degree, and to that extent the relationships themselves take on a bourgeois character. They are essentially the relationships of people who live under conditions of material privilege, and they therefore presuppose those conditions.

A natural response to this line of thought would be to insist that, in the case of relationships at least, the value that is at issue is not one that is really conditioned by global inequality and material advantage. The focus of friendships and personal relationships is the individual person one is attached to, and that person's value is not, on any reasonable account of the matter, causally or otherwise contingent on the material conditions that happen to obtain in the world. This point is correct, of course, but I don't believe that it undermines the line of argument I have been developing. Friendships and other personal attachments are indeed focused on individual persons, and it is true that each person possesses a kind of value that could aptly be described as unconditional. This is the value that makes the person a bearer of moral claims, and someone who is worthy of being treated with respect and consideration. These essentially moral values, however, are not the values that ground the personal significance of attachments. Friendship provides a basis for affirming my life, and contributes to its meaning, insofar as it is a valuable relationship between two individuals. The question, then, is whether and to what extent the things that make the relationship valuable would be able to persist under radically different material conditions from the ones that the bourgeois actually inhabit. That the persons who stand in such relationships would retain their value under these counterfactual circumstances is not the issue.

There are two points to make in this connection. One is that relationships have an essentially historical dimension. They are constituted in part by interactions between two individuals at particular times and places, involving shared activities of one kind or another. If this is right, however, then there is a sense in which my actual friendship with you would not have existed in a world in which the conditions were absent that made our joint activities as friends possible. I could have entered into a friendship with you under those conditions, but it would by hypothesis have been a different personal relationship. Second, what is valuable about the relationship, as something that contributes a basis for affirming my life, is in part a function of the value of the activities that constitute the relationship in the first place. So if those activities would not have been possible in a world that lacks the lamentable inequalities we have been discussing, then the actual basis my relationships provide for affirming the life I have led would be lacking in that world. It is consistent with these points to acknowledge, however, that once a valuable personal relationship is in place, it may evolve going forward in ways that change its nature, so that its constitutive activities come to take on a different character. This is a point that I shall return to below.

The thesis at issue, it should be stressed, is not that the affluent burgers who are my subject would not have lived meaningful lives if they hadn't been borne to the conditions of comparative material advantage that they in fact inhabit. There are in fact two counterfactual scenarios in which the basis for regret about my actual life might not have been present. I might have lived in a world in which material advantages and life opportunities were much more equitably distributed across the entire global population. Or I might have lived in a world that is distributionally much like the actual world, but occupied a position in that world of deprivation rather than privilege. Under both scenarios, it seems plausible to assume that I might have lived a life that is worthy of retrospective affirmation. If I had grown up in poverty, for instance, I could still have had friendships and family bonds with the kind of richness and texture that provide a basis for affirmation. The same of course

goes for a fundamentally egalitarian world, which might even have presented opportunities for me to engage in valuable intellectual pursuits of some kind or other—philosophical reflection, after all, is not an activity that strictly requires an institutional context of the sort that elite modern research universities provide.

But these are not the attachments that provide a basis for affirming my life, as I am actually leading it now; the philosophical activities I might have engaged under the counterfactual circumstances just described are not at all the same as the professionalized teaching and research that my life is now devoted to, undertakings that can take place only within an elaborate and costly institutional framework. The bourgeois predicament stems from the role of lamentable material circumstances in making possible the attachments that, as a matter of fact, fill out our lives and render them worthy of retrospective affirmation. The very things that give us reason to be glad that we have lived are conditioned by circumstances that we can only wish had been otherwise. That there might have been different bases for affirmation in our lives if those material circumstances had been different is not to the point.

A different response to my argument would maintain that I have misdiagnosed the source of ambivalence in the cases I have been concerned to analyze. My suggestion is that the predicament stems from the fact that the bourgeois projects that give many of us reason to affirm the lives we lead also implicate us in impersonal economic structures that we have powerful reasons to regret. But perhaps the basis for regretting the bourgeois life lies not in the impersonal conditions of inequality we are borne into, but in the personal choices we have made about how to conduct ourselves under those conditions. Specifically, it lies in our failure to fulfill our moral obligation to contribute what we can to alleviating the suffering and misery of people who live under much less privileged conditions than we do. The bourgeois life, in other words, is also a life that is morally objectionable, and the moral objection to the way that life is led is what really provides the agent with a basis for retrospective regret about it.

The moralistic interpretation of the bourgeois predicament should be rejected, however. In saying this, I do not of course mean to deny that we have moral obligations of mutual aid to assist people who are in dire straits when we are in a position to do so at little cost to ourselves. These are important moral responsibilities, and people who fail to live up to them thereby acquire a significant basis for regret about the way they have conducted their lives. But it is not essential to the bourgeois predicament, as I understand it, that those who are subject to it should have displayed this kind of moral failure. The predicament derives its force from the nature of the bourgeois attachments that make our lives worthy of affirmation, not from the assumption that we are necessarily immoral in the way we have pursued those attachments.

This assertion requires some qualification. It is a famously vexed question what exactly the moral duty of mutual aid requires of those who are in a comparatively privileged position in the global distribution of world resources. A plausible assumption, I believe, is that any reasonable account of this obligation should have the consequence that agents who comply with it are still able to have meaningful lives, including the kinds of bourgeois attachments that for many of us are in fact our primary sources of affirmation. If this assumption is correct, then it will be possible to pursue bourgeois projects in ways that are not necessarily morally objectionable, even if many of us in fact fail to do all that we should to alleviate the plight of those much less fortunate than ourselves. My point is that there would still be grounds for retrospective ambivalence under these conditions, in virtue of the fact that the bourgeois projects that make our lives worthy of affirmation are premised on material conditions that there is strong impersonal reason to regret. There presumably are moral failures of benevolence and mutual aid that most of us are guilty of, to one degree or another, and that give us some reason for regret about our lives when we look back on them. But these failures are only contingently connected to the real sources of meaning in our lives, whereas the bourgeois predicament that is

my concern involves a basis for regret that is non-contingently linked to the things we actually live for.

Some philosophers will presumably find this assumption about the obligation of mutual assistance too complacent. It could be argued, for instance, that there is in fact a moral complaint that could be lodged against any project or activity that involves bourgeois patterns of consumption, so long as there exist acute human needs somewhere in the world population that those resources could have been used to address. A position of this kind would have the consequence that there is after all a moral objection to any life that is organized around basically bourgeois attachments, as I assume the lives of most of us to be. For the record, I do not find this interpretation of the duty of mutual aid to be especially plausible (and I shall come back to it in the following section, offering a partial diagnosis of its appeal). Even if I am wrong about this, however, the result would not be to undermine the argument of this paper. It would turn out, on this interpretation of our responsibilities, that those of us with bourgeois projects will necessarily have comported ourselves in ways that give us moral grounds for remorse. But it would remain the case that we *also* have reason to regret the impersonal conditions that make those projects possible in the first place. The presence of impersonal grounds for regret of this kind just is the bourgeois predicament, as I have described it; the predicament would therefore persist, even on the most rigorous interpretation of the moral requirement of mutual assistance.

Of course, if an interpretation of that kind is correct, it would have been possible for those of us who are subject to the predicament to have avoided it, by conducting our lives from the start in strict compliance with moral demands. But that in turn would have precluded the projects that give meaning to our lives, as we have actually led them, and that provide us with concrete grounds for affirming those lives. Under these assumptions, we would have personal grounds for remorse about the sources of meaning in our lives, as well as impersonal reasons for

regretting their conditions. This complicates somewhat the bourgeois predicament, but it does not fundamentally alter its basic structure.

3. Responses.

The argument of this paper rests on a fairly simple truth about the nature of value. The world is complex and interconnected, and many of the things that we have reason to value are linked to other things that we have reason to deplore or to condemn. A much-discussed example of the general phenomenon is the so-called problem of dirty hands, involving cases of political action whose outcomes we can only welcome and celebrate, even though they were made possible by means that are undeniably lamentable (the ruthlessness of politicians working for a good cause, say, or their willingness to trample on the legitimate claims of individuals in order to get the job done). Much of the debate about these cases approaches them from the point of view of agency, asking whether it can ever be permissible or required for people acting in a political capacity to violate some of the most fundamental moral requirements, such as those that prohibit torture or the targeted killing of the innocent. However we answer these questions, there is a different set of issues that come into focus when we reflect on them from the perspective of a third party. In particular, we then encounter structures of retrospective attitude that parallel those that have been my concern in the present paper, such as an inability to experience fundamental regret about moral atrocities when they were necessary to achieve supremely valuable ends (such as the prevention of destruction or oppression on a massive scale). A still different set of examples involves large-scale historical processes of various kinds. Bernard Williams was wont to remark on the ironic fact the achievement of liberal values involved and probably required social processes that had a decidedly non-liberal character, involving terror, oppression, and severe injustice. Someone who celebrates those values will therefore find it challenging to regret unconditionally the lamentable conditions that enabled them. Or we might

think of artistic and cultural triumphs that were made possible by the existence of various forms of slavery in ancient Greece.

The deep ambivalence that seems natural when contemplating these kinds of developments and practices is also deeply reasonable; indeed it is the only realistic response that is available to us once we acknowledge the profound interpenetration of value and disvalue in the world as we find it. The bourgeois predicament that I have been at pains to lay out can be thought of as a special case of this more general phenomenon. But there is something distinctively disturbing about the predicament I have described, which can be traced to its personal character. The predicament arises for agents when they contemplate the way they have lived, reflecting on the projects and relationships that give their lives meaning and the conditions for the realization of those projects. The object of potential affirmation in this case is the agent's own existence, and this is not something that the agent can afford to take a complacent or resigned attitude toward. As I mentioned above, we cling to our lives, assuming toward them a default stance of unconditional affirmation, and it matters to us profoundly whether we have lived in ways that warrant this affirmative stance. The prospect that we might be implicated in lamentable impersonal structures, in ways that undermine the normative basis of unconditional affirmation, is for this reason a peculiarly unnerving one to contemplate. At issue is the existential question of our relation to ourselves and the lives we have led, and the possibility that our best efforts will leave us only with grounds for retrospective ambivalence and estrangement.

The bourgeois predicament is thus a matter of existential significance for the agents affected by it. It mobilizes anxieties about our deepest aspirations for our lives, forcing us to face up to the distressing fact that those aspirations might not be capable of realization in the world as it is. It is tempting to suppose that there must be some way of escaping from the predicament, as I have laid it out. I shall consider three possible responses to it, arguing that none of them can possibly succeed; this

should serve to give us a deeper appreciation for the severity of the problem that we confront.

Redemption. The bourgeois predicament stems from our implication, through the activities that give meaning to our lives, in social structures that are impersonally lamentable or unjust. If this is the problem, however, the solution might seem to lie in selecting the right activities to engage in. Suppose we devote ourselves with single-minded focus to the project of alleviating or ameliorating the impersonal conditions of inequality and deprivation that prevail in the contemporary world. We might thereby reasonably hope to achieve some measure of redemption, escaping our implication in lamentable social structures by the concentrated effort to redress them.

In the previous section I touched on the vexed question of the interpretation of our moral duties of assistance or mutual aid toward those who are much worse off than we are. There are strong pressures within moral thought that move us toward the conclusion that these duties are much more demanding than many of us ordinarily take them to be. Claims that are grounded in circumstances of severe deprivation and suffering are extremely compelling, and it is hard to see what might be set against them within moral thought to justify the conclusion that is permissible for us to allow those claims to go unmet when it is in our power to address them. Of course we each have lives of our own to lead, lives that are given texture and content by the projects and relationships that fill them out. But if we take seriously the idea that everyone's interests count equally in moral reflection, it can seem self-indulgent or worse to suppose that our projects and relationships protect us against claims of others that are grounded in basic human necessities.

This is a difficult issue for moral theory, one that I do not propose to go into here. What I want to do, instead, is to call attention to a distinct consideration that can motivate the conclusion that we should devote ourselves personally to projects of emergency assistance and social justice. This consideration has its source in the

bourgeois predicament I have been discussing in the present paper. Thus, suppose it is morally permissible, once we have made some substantial personal contribution to assisting the impoverished and the suffering, to go about our own lives, engaging in activities that advance our individual projects and relationships. Insofar as those projects provide our basis for affirming our lives, we are likely to find that we remain entangled in the bourgeois predicament. Our reasons for regretting the impersonal conditions that enable our projects are pragmatically at odds with the grounds we have for affirming the lives that we have actually led. Under these circumstances, the aspiration to live a life that is worthy of unconditional affirmation can generate pressure to redefine the projects that give meaning to our lives. In particular, we can feel that it is imperative that we dedicate ourselves personally to alleviating the impersonally regrettable conditions that characterize the world in which we live. This imperative, however, does not have its source in a sense of moral inadequacy, but in our personal hopes about our own lives. Its origin is a conception not of what we owe specifically to others, but of our relation to ourselves, involving our aspiration to find a way of living that is worthy of unconditional affirmation.

G. A. Cohen confronted political philosophy (and political philosophers) with the excellent question, "If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?"⁶ His argument is that anyone who is seriously committed to equality as a political and moral value cannot ultimately justify a life of comparative affluence and privilege. He meant, I believe, that there is no moral or political justification for the effective betrayal of one's ideals through the personal conduct of one's own life. But his argument derives at least some of its force from its implicit reliance on the existential dialectic I have been sketching. There is a sense of anxiety, which Cohen effectively taps into, that one's own life is inevitably compromised or undermined somehow if it is conducted in ways that presuppose the conditions of impersonal inequality that one officially deplures. In this situation, the only way out seems to be to turn one's political ideals into personal aspirations, dedicating oneself to the personal project of improving the conditions of those much worse off than oneself. This is the strategy

of redemption, and as Cohen himself acknowledges, it has more in common with certain religious patterns of thought than with the requirements of conventional morality.

But the strategy is hopeless. In saying this, I do not of course mean to imply that the personal efforts we might make as individuals are necessarily pointless or ineffective. We cannot on our own solve the problems of injustice, poverty, and deprivation on the global scale. But we can make some small contribution toward addressing them, a contribution that makes a real difference to the lives of those affected by our efforts. Furthermore, dedicating ourselves to projects of this kind is unquestionably a valuable thing to do, and it can be one way of giving meaning to our own lives. Considered as a response to the bourgeois predicament, however, the strategy necessarily fails. Those who seek to escape from their implication in impersonally lamentable conditions by dedicating themselves to improving those conditions rely on the very thing that they are trying to escape. It is only those who stand in a privileged position in the distribution of resources who have the luxury of giving meaning to their lives through the project of helping to address the plight of the least advantaged members of our social world. The attempt to achieve personal redemption thus reenacts the very dialectic it is trying to overcome.

To this it may be replied that the strategy of redemption is not best understood as an attempt to escape from the bourgeois predicament altogether. It is, rather, an effort to compensate for its effects, placing something at the center of one's own life that can be set over against one's inevitable implication in larger social structures that are impersonally regrettable. But this reply concedes the only point I am trying to make in my discussion, which is that the predicament cannot be evaded through the strategy of reshaping one's personal projects in the light of it. Furthermore, it may be wondered whether the reply succeeds even on its own terms. If redemption is achieved by having something in one's life that can be set over against one's implication in the impersonally lamentable, why should this require of us that we dedicate ourselves specifically to alleviating the lamentable conditions

themselves? It has been an assumption throughout my discussion that the ordinary agents who are caught up in the predicament *already* have something in their lives that can be set over against the impersonally lamentable structures that affect them. They have, in particular, commitments to projects and to individuals that are worthy of pursuit, and that provide them with a basis for affirming the lives they have led. The idea that we achieve some special redemption by reshaping our projects in the image of the predicament rests on the assumption that doing so represents an avenue of escape. But that assumption is, for reasons I have advanced, simply implausible.

A different way to understand the strategy of redemption is in terms of the idea of implication. The challenge, it will be recalled, is presented by the fact that the projects that give our lives meaning are conditioned by social structures that we have on balance reason to regret. This links us essentially to those structures, in a way that undermines the goal of a life that is worthy of unconditional affirmation. Those who dedicate themselves to combating the lamentable conditions to they are in this way linked, however, might hope thereby to lessen their implication in the lamentable conditions that they inhabit. It isn't that they are trying to find something to set over against their implication in deplorable social conditions. Rather, they are setting *themselves* against those conditions, showing in the most dramatic way available that they do not approve of them. Nor is this oppositional stance of merely expressive significance. As I noted above, we should concede that those who fight global inequality and deprivation often bring about some genuine progress through their efforts, insofar as they result in improvements in the material conditions of at least some of those who are worst off in the world. The aspiration is to put some distance between oneself and the lamentable social conditions, so that the sources of meaning in one's life are not any longer bound up with them.

I concede that the strategy of redemption has something to be said for it on this way of understanding it. Implication is a multifaceted phenomenon, and one of its dimensions involves a person's attitudes. Complacency or even approval of a social condition puts one in a different relation to it from active opposition, and those

who adopt the latter stance may succeed in distancing themselves from the conditions they are fighting to change, at least in one respect. But if implication in the lamentable is in this way ameliorated through the strategy of redemption, there is another respect in which it is actually exacerbated. Dedicating one's life to the project of combating inequality and deprivation has the perverse effect that one comes to define oneself primarily in terms of the lamentable conditions that one sets oneself against. It is not just that those conditions are causally necessary for the realization of the projects that give meaning to one's life, as in the generalized version of the bourgeois predicament. More specifically, the content of one's projects makes direct and essential reference to the lamentable conditions that are at issue.

This difference might be given expression in modal terms. With an ordinary valuable project, such as philosophical research and teaching, I have taken it to be the case that lamentable inequalities are causally necessary for the activities in which the projects consist. We would not in fact be able to engage in those activities in a world in which mass deprivation on the global scale was eliminated. But these conditions are not conceptually necessary for the projects in question. We can imagine a world in which we and others give ourselves over to the kind of philosophical teaching and research we are actually engaged in, but in which the relevant global inequalities do not exist; it might e.g. be a world in which everyone who is alive has access to the level of resources and opportunities that our philosophical projects require. By contrast, the person whose defining project is that of combating global inequality and deprivation could not retain that source of meaning in a counterfactual situation in which those conditions had been altogether eliminated. The conditions are, for such a person, not merely causally necessary for the realization of the things that make their life worthy of affirmation, but constitutively or conceptually necessary. This is what I meant in suggesting that devoting oneself to projects of this kind has the perverse effect of deepening one's implication in the lamentable structures that one opposes.

This observation, to be clear, is not meant in the spirit of criticism, moral or otherwise, of those who respond to injustice and poverty and suffering by dedicating themselves to the project of trying to alleviate those conditions. Those activities are immensely valuable, and we should admire people who are willing to give themselves selflessly to such ends. Nor am I suggesting that this kind of heightened implication in the lamentable is in general a reason not to pursue activities that have this particular effect. Someone with the appropriate talents and interests might be very well-advised to pursue a career in international famine relief or as a social worker or a researcher combating AIDS. The fact that such professional activities presuppose the regrettable conditions that they aim to eliminate or improve does not in any way tell against pursuing them.

My point is restricted to activities of this kind when they are conceived in the spirit of the strategy of redemption. Considered as responses to the bourgeois predicament, there is a tragic dimension to the choice of such oppositional pursuits: the very attempt to achieve distance from deplorable social structures, along one dimension of connection, ends up deepening one's implication in them in a different dimension. One is reminded of those soldiers who display extraordinary heroism and cunning on the battlefield, in the cause of a fundamentally just war, and who later define themselves primarily in terms of their military achievements. The value that their life comes to be organized around is one that couldn't exist in the absence of the very injustices they were fighting against, insofar as that value consists precisely in effective and heroic opposition to the injustices. The person in this position has a genuine basis for retrospective affirmation of the life they have actually led. But that basis connects them, not just causally but also constitutively, to conditions that are worthy of rejection and regret (indeed, to the very conditions that they so heroically opposed in their military youth). Insofar as implication in the lamentable is a threat or a problem, it would be better to move on with one's life, and find other sources of meaning in it that are not in the same way conceptually linked to the injustices one fought so hard to defeat.

Withdrawal. There is a different way that we might attempt to reshape our projects in response to the bourgeois predicament. Rather than dedicating ourselves to goal of alleviating the regrettable conditions we are implicated in, we might attempt to escape the predicament through a strategy of withdrawal and retreat. We could, for instance, opt out of participating in contemporary consumer society, taking up a life of modest Thoreauvian self-sufficiency. The goal of these efforts would be to organize our lives around simple projects that do not rest on the structures of social inequality that generate the bourgeois predicament in the first place.

But this strategy, too, seems hopeless. For one thing, it is unrealistic to think that completely opting out is a genuine option for those of us who occupy positions of comparative privilege in the contemporary world. We are social creatures, and our activities are essentially conditioned by the complex webs of convention, law, and practice that constitute the social realm. We might purchase a small plot of land somewhere, erect a small wooden house on it, and proceed to scratch out an existence of contemplative subsistence in that setting. A life with these characteristics would perhaps involve a lower level of consumption than we would otherwise be engaged in. But it would be a fantasy to suppose that it would be a life that is completely decoupled from the objectionable patterns that prevail in the larger social world. I am reminded in this connection of the city in which I live, Berkeley, California, which is constantly and quixotically attempting to extricate itself from the many aspects of contemporary American political and economic life that its citizens find objectionable. Our city council will declare its opposition to unpalatable aspects of US foreign policy, for instance, or erect signs at the city borders stating that Berkeley is a “nuclear-free zone”. There is an expressive function that gestures of this kind can play, and in some circumstances that function is politically important. But considered as attempts to extricate the city from involvement in the policies and practices it deplors, the strategy is manifestly futile. The myth of liberation through retreat is a recurrent one in our culture, associated

today with the assorted hippies and survivalists who occupy depopulated corners of the American countryside, but it doesn't provide a realistic template for avoiding the predicament I have been describing.

Against this, it could be pointed out that withdrawal is a matter of degrees. Perhaps it is a mere fantasy to suppose that we might completely decouple ourselves from the broader social structures to which we object. But we can still make some progress along the path of withdrawal. We could give away (to a worthy cause) most of our possessions, and devote ourselves going forward to cultivating our garden, literally and figuratively, at a considerably reduced level of consumption and expense. There are real questions that many of would confront about how exactly we would sustain ourselves if we were to opt out in this partial way. Assuming those questions could be answered, however, the result might be to put us at some distance from the lamentable structures that originally generated the bourgeois predicament. Furthermore, there would still be room, within such a reduced life, for continued engagement in some of the activities that earlier gave our lives their meaning—for the activities of friendship, for instance, and for philosophical reflection and conversation.

At this point, however, two different problems arise. First, the strategy of partial withdrawal shares with the strategy of redemption the feature that it reenacts the dialectic that it was meant to escape. It is a kind of luxury to have the option of giving oneself over to the simple life, something that itself presupposes that one occupies a position of comparative advantage in the global distribution of resources. By choosing this option, one therefore exemplifies the bourgeois predicament rather than escaping from it. The basic point here is that projects of modest consumption have a different character, depending on whether they are undertaken by someone who lacks expensive alternatives, or instead by an agent who is attempting to scale back from a position of comparative affluence. As a response to the bourgeois predicament, the strategy of withdrawal is one that is engaged in by the privileged; it

is a way of giving meaning to one's life that thus presupposes the lamentable conditions it is designed to retreat from.

The second and more basic problem stems from the partial character of the withdrawal that is at issue. So long as it is not a realistic option for the bourgeois to decouple themselves completely from the larger patterns of objectionable consumption and distribution, the strategy of withdrawal will not really represent an avenue of escape from the predicament they face. They can dedicate themselves to the goal of reducing their level of expensive activity, with the result that their lives over time are increasingly filled with comparatively modest projects and pursuits. But even those activities will presuppose a position of comparative privilege in the global distributional order, so long as they are undertaken within the political and social context of a developed economy. Withdrawal is an intelligible response to the bourgeois predicament, psychologically, but it is not a genuine solution.

Denial. A final set of responses to the problem I have described involves denial. By this I do not mean philosophical denial: the attempt, through argument, to refute the claims I have made about the nature and sources of the bourgeois predicament. I mean, rather, the refusal to face up to the predicament and the problems it involves. A response of this kind would not even purport to be a solution to it. But it is a common response, perhaps even the most prevalent amongst those who are affected by the predicament, and it deserves at least brief comment.

One form that denial can take is rationalization. The bourgeois predicament takes as its starting point the assumption that the attachments that give many of us the most important reason to affirm our lives themselves presuppose conditions that are impersonally regrettable. In rationalization, we reject this important assumption, without being able to advance convincing reasons for doing so. We might, for instance, deny that our expensive projects really do presuppose a distribution of resources that leaves most of the world's population with greatly reduced capabilities and prospects. Everyone could have the same opportunities that we

enjoy, the argument might go, if only they would apply themselves; so it isn't really true that our ability to affirm our lives rests on the availability to us of resources that aren't available to many others. A different, and perhaps less manifestly implausible line of rationalization would concede that vast inequality is indeed a condition of our bourgeois projects, but deny that this is a matter that is really worthy of regret.

There is a virtual cottage industry of ideology production devoted to defending the conclusion that the epic inequalities that prevail within and between many contemporary societies do not involve any form of systematic injustice or preventable oppression.⁷ This conclusion, if correct, would go some way toward exonerating us from the charge that the actual sources of meaning in our lives depend on impersonal conditions that are genuinely lamentable. My hypothesis is that the fact that it plays this functional role helps to explain the attraction to people of a position that is hard to take very seriously on the merits.

In *What We Owe to Each Other*, T. M. Scanlon cites the reactions of Americans to the profound transformations of their society in the 1960s and 1970s in support of his claim that it matters to us greatly whether we are able to justify ourselves to others. Americans experienced a sense of shock at the suggestion that their institutions were not uniquely fair and principled, and this led many of them to react by "vehemently denying that the charges of injustice at home and criminality abroad had any foundation."⁸ This reaction, I would add, has only hardened in the decades to follow, becoming in recent years a virtually reflexive tendency on the part of some Americans to dismiss any suggestion that our institutions and practices might be in need of serious reform. I agree with Scanlon that this tendency to rationalization is a perverse reflection of the importance we attach to being able to justify ourselves to others. But its visceral character indicates to me that our relations to ourselves are also in play. Our sense of meaning and self-worth are threatened by the suggestion that the social institutions in which our activities are structured might be fundamentally unjust or lamentable; we react by rejecting such suggestions, even

when they are extremely plausible, with a fervor that would otherwise be difficult to make sense of.

A different and possibly still more common strategy of denial is simply to refuse to face the existential question that gives rise to the bourgeois predicament in the first place. This method of avoidance, as we might call it, is one that is all too easy to put into practice. The predicament arises within a distinctive kind of retrospective reflection that it is possible for us to engage in. We step back, and ask whether we are happy that we have lived, taking into account everything that has happened in our lives; we also ask whether there are impersonal conditions of our meaningful activities that we have compelling reason to regret, on balance. These are strikingly abstract questions, however, which do not correspond to any genuine deliberative issue that we might be called on to resolve as we go through life. It is not as if we will at some point be confronted with a choice in the matter as to whether to have lived the lives we have actually led. At the time when we pose to ourselves the retrospective question, both our lives and the conditions of their meaning confront us as a matter of facticity, which it is no longer within our power to affect one way or another. Nor are we apt to be called to account for the conduct of our life as a whole, the way we are often called on to answer for specific things we have done within the lives we have led. The questions that generate the bourgeois predicament are thus decoupled from the specific contexts of deliberation and accountability that we confront as we move forward through life, and this practically invites us to deploy the method of avoidance. We simply refuse to engage in the distinctive form of reflection that would lead us to the uncomfortable conclusion that the sources of meaning in our lives have conditions that are impersonally regrettable.

Humans are adept at avoiding unpleasant truths. We compartmentalize, we erect elaborate mental barriers, and we find ways to distract ourselves from confronting things about ourselves that are difficult to come to terms with. These tendencies probably have some survival value for members of our species; certainly they make it easier than it would otherwise be to deal with the practical issues that

need to be resolved as we move forward in life. But the method of avoidance does not provide a solution to the bourgeois predicament. The bases of meaning in our lives implicate impersonal conditions that we have powerful reasons to regret, with the result that even the best life we might lead will not be worthy of unconditional affirmation. This is a genuine predicament for those who live under conditions of affluence and comparative advantage, even if most of us manage to find ways to avoid facing up to it as we go about our lives.

4. Conclusion.

The thesis I have defended in this paper is a pessimistic one. We aspire to live lives that are worthy of unconditional affirmation, but this aspiration cannot be satisfied under the conditions that most of us inhabit. In particular, the bourgeois attachments that give most of powerful reasons for affirming the lives we have lived also implicate us in impersonal structures of inequality and suffering that are worthy of unconditional rejection. We may cling to our lives, and be glad to have lived them as a matter of psychological fact. But this isn't an attitude that can stand up to rational scrutiny. At the level of reasoned assessment, we are left at the end of the day with grounds for deep ambivalence when we look back on how we have lived.

Though this is a pessimistic conclusion, however, it is not the most pessimistic conclusion that might be reached about the questions I have been addressing. There are philosophers, for instance, who believe that the world is essentially inimical to the realization of our existential aspirations. These nihilistic thinkers hold that the elemental conditions of human life are such as to preclude the possibility of a life that is worthy of affirmation, on account e.g. of the nature of desire and its relation to suffering. That is not the position I have defended in this paper. The bourgeois predicament, as its name indicates, arises only under certain historical and cultural conditions, and then only for those who occupy a certain role within the contingent social structures that those conditions make available. Since the relevant conditions are ones that apply to virtually everyone who participates in

contemporary philosophical discourse, the predicament is apt to be of interest to all of us; but it is not strictly universal, nor is it grounded in features that are endemic to human agency. As a result, it is possible to hold out coherent hope for the eventual achievement of political and economic conditions in which the predicament would not arise. These would be conditions under which people could lead lives that are worthy of unconditional affirmation, such that the sources of meaning in them do not presuppose impersonal structures that warrant rejection.

The day is of course still very far off when we can expect these conditions to be realized. In the meantime, the predicament will continue to enmesh all of us whose attachments have a distinctively bourgeois character. This conclusion should not be interpreted as a counsel of complacency or despair, however. Our aspiration to live lives that are worthy of unconditional affirmation may not be realizable under contemporary circumstances. But that doesn't mean that we should just throw in the towel. In particular, it remains important that there should be something in our lives that can be set over against the lamentable conditions that we inhabit, something that gives us a positive basis for affirming our lives when we look back on them. Some forms of nihilism take even this aspiration to be incapable of realization, holding that nothing we might do is of genuine value, and so that we could never have any grounds at all for affirming our lives. That, too, is different from the position I have defended. I take there to be real differences of value between the different attachments that people organize their lives around; some of these attachments are empty and pointless and banal, while others are complex and interesting, with a character that enriches the lives of those who are devoted to them. The bourgeois predicament means that the aspiration to live a life that is worthy of unconditional affirmation cannot be realized. But there is still something that it is reasonable and important for us to strive for, which is to engage in activities that are of genuine value. To live a life that we can look back on with ambivalence is itself a kind of achievement.

¹ Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality, as reprinted in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1982): 1-19.

² Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality", 11.

³ See Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴ For a statement of this kind of pluralism, see Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1988).

⁵ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁶ G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁷ The proponent of these positions needn't deny that there is much suffering and misery in the world that is unfortunate, and that is also capable of being alleviated by human efforts. But it is arguable that the expense required to address these problems is not so great that it would preclude the affluent from continued engagement in their costly projects and pursuits. To the extent this is the case, the lamentable suffering and misery at issue are not strictly conditions for those bourgeois projects.

⁸ T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 163.