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Introduction of 'Distracted from Meaning: A Philosophy of Smartphones'

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Introduction

We are bringing smartphones into the areas of our lives where we engage with our friends, loved ones, and the projects that shape our identities. We are doing this without understanding how smartphones fit into these situations or what effects they might have. We need a better grasp of this relatively new, influential factor in our lives. Here, I take up a central aspect of this challenge; this book is an exploration of smartphone-distraction and its impact on meaningful activities, experiences, and projects.

We tend to be unaware that smartphones distract us from certain kinds of activities that add meaning to our lives.[1] Which kinds of activities? Consider two: smartphones can distract us from certain work we do to shape our self-identities (Chapter 6). In addition, smartphones can distract us from experiences that are not momentary but which we actively cultivate over many minutes or even hours (Chapter 3). We will see that both kinds of activities are related to the cultivation of meaning in life. Yet, when concerns about smartphone-distraction are raised (for example in social-science studies) activities and experiences like these are not considered.
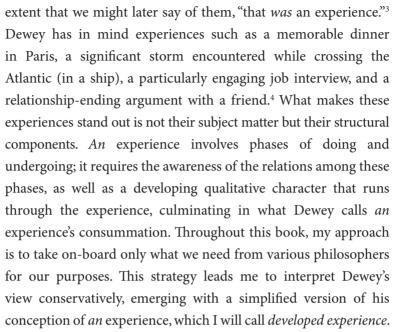
There is another class of meaningful activities regarding which we *are* aware that smartphone-distraction is problematic, but even in these cases clarity is lacking. Consider our engagement with what Albert Borgmann calls focal practices, such as a dinner with friends or family, a hike, attending a football game with friends, or a small musical performance (Chapter 5).[2] Many of us recognize that smartphones may distract us during these kinds of activities. And many of us recognize that these activities are potentially meaningful in some sense. But regarding these cases, as well as the cases mentioned in the previous paragraph, more clarity is needed about what makes these activities meaningful. In addition, we need a better understanding of the operative mechanisms of smartphone-distraction, as well as this distraction's effects on such activities. Take these to be two perplexities already on the table: I want a clearer picture of meaningfulness, and, I want a clearer picture of the ways in which smartphones can interfere with the cultivation of this meaning. Throughout this book, I will be attempting to clarify both perplexities.

In order to clarify the ways in which smartphone-use might interfere with meaningful activities, we need an account of meaning in life. Moreover, this account cannot be too abstract; it must provide the detail that enables us to inspect concrete situations in which a person's smartphone-use may distract her from engaging effectively with an activity that is potentially meaningful.

We will find a portion of the experiential and behavioral detail needed by drawing upon John Dewey's writing on experience (Chapter 3). Dewey offers a rich account of experience through his notion of "*an* experience." Dewey's initial idea is that some experiences stand out for their richness and impact to the

extent that we might later say of them, "that *was* an experience."³ Dewey has in mind experiences such as a memorable dinner in Paris, a significant storm encountered while crossing the Atlantic (in a ship), a particularly engaging job interview, and a relationship-ending argument with a friend.⁴ What makes these experiences stand out is not their subject matter but their structural components. *An* experience involves phases of doing and undergoing; it requires the awareness of the relations among these phases, as well as a developing qualitative character that runs through the experience, culminating in what Dewey calls *an* experience's consummation. Throughout this book, my approach is to take on-board only what we need from various philosophers for our purposes. This strategy leads me to interpret Dewey's view conservatively, emerging with a simplified version of his conception of *an* experience, which I will call *developed experience*.

How is this notion of developed experience useful in our project? Developed experiences are not only active but they are a particularly rich kind of active experience. I will contend that in order for an activity to be meaningful, a person must have some experiences in relation to the activity that are not passive; in fact, even recognitional experiences (which are minimally active) are insufficient. (Recognitional experiences are concerned only with identification. For example, while approaching an intersection on your bike, your experience of the stoplights is typically recognitional; you take note that the light is red, say, but you do not experience the lights in any richer sense.) I offer developed experience, then, as a kind of experience that *can* effectively contribute to meaningfulness. Importantly, once the notion of developed experience is on the table, with its detailed structure, it will not be difficult to identify precisely how certain kinds of

smartphone-use can interfere with the development of experiences as well as the resulting meaningfulness.

Dewey gives us a sense of the *way* in which we experience and engage in meaningful activities. But I will contend that having developed experiences of just any object or event is insufficient for meaningfulness. Consider that one of Dewey's examples of *an* experience pertains to an illness (a bout of the grippe); there is reason to doubt that such *an* experience adds meaning to one's life. To supplement developed experience, I will draw from Albert Borgmann's writing on focal things and focal practices (Chapter 5). As I mentioned above, an example of a focal practice is a family dinner; the material anchor of that practice is the meal, which is what Borgmann calls a focal thing. I will claim that musical performance is a focal practice; the associated focal thing is a musical instrument. Like me, I expect that the reader will find the range of Borgmann's examples surprising and challenging. Here are three examples: the path of a run, such as an ocean road, is a focal thing (the focal practice is running); a fishing rod is a focal thing (the associated focal practice is fly-fishing); the wilderness is a focal thing (hiking is the focal practice).

My main claim about meaning will be that *engaging with focal things and practices by means of developed experiences can generate meaning in one's life.* I do not expect the reader to take my word for it. One interesting question to ask is: Are these philosophers' views really about meaning in life? I will support my claim that they are about meaning in life by connecting developed experiences and focal things/practices to the philosopher Susan's Wolf's "Fitting Fulfillment" theory of meaning in life (Chapter 4). You might wonder why I cannot work with only Susan Wolf's theory in this book. Her theory is too abstract for our primary purpose of uncovering

the specific ways in which smartphone-distraction interferes with meaningful activities. Overcoming this shortcoming—involving Dewey and Borgmann—bears unexpected fruit.

Here is the briefest preview of Wolf's account of meaningfulness. She argues that an activity generates meaning in one's life if it satisfies both a subjective and an objective condition. For something to be meaningful, it must be subjectively fulfilling and it must be objectively valuable (this second component is what "fitting" refers to in Fitting Fulfillment). For example, playing musical instruments with others will generate meaning in one's life, (a) if one finds it fulfilling *and* (b) if this activity is valuable (or as she occasionally says, worthwhile). (Active and positive involvement in the activity are additional, required elements.) Anyone who reads such a brief description of Wolf's view will wonder what she means by subjective fulfillment and objective value. Wolf has much to say about this, which we will consider in Chapter 4. But even so, her view is abstract; for our purposes, as I have said, it must be fleshed out.

Regarding the connections to Wolf, first, I will contend that one cannot be subjectively fulfilled if one's relevant experiences are passive or merely recognitional. One *can* be subjectively fulfilled through developed experiences. Another way to approach this connection between developed experience and Wolf's subjective condition is to say that the notion of developed experience serves to flesh out the subjective condition. Importantly, the detail added to Wolf's subjective condition through developed experiences enables us to identify precisely where and how certain smartphone-use can interfere with subjective fulfillment.

In 5.7, I make the connection between focal things/practices and Wolf's *objective* condition. Wolf acknowledges that her notion of objective value is indefinite. I contend that the core of what is
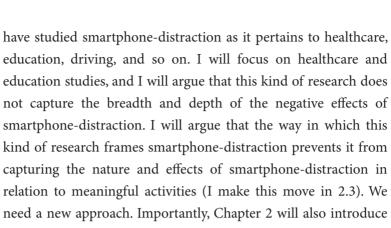
needed to satisfy the objective condition is that an activity must be worthwhile in a way that is independent of oneself. We will see that the substance of the argument is better served by the term "non-subjective" than it is by "objective" (Wolf occasionally employs the former term herself). This is not only to find common ground between Wolf and Borgmann, this is to flesh out Wolf's sense of worthwhileness. Even though Wolf and Borgmann operate in quite different philosophical traditions, we attain initial leverage in bringing them together through their consideration of many of the same activities—running, creating art, writing, playing music, gardening, carpentry, and so on.

Chapter 6 turns on an existential-phenomenological view of self-identity. By the time we get to this chapter, we will be able to say that a central way in which one creates one's self-identity is by engaging with focal things and practices by means of developed experiences. The shaping of one's self-identity in this way adds a certain commitment and profundity to the meaning one creates through the engagement with certain focal things and practices. If, for instance, one engages *as a drummer* in the focal practice of musical performance, this identity-work has the effect of staking one's claim on the meaning generated through this focal practice; this focal practice becomes more consequential for one than one's engagement with certain other focal practices. In light of this, it has struck me as alarming to notice that the smartphone-use *of others* can interfere with such identity-work in certain social contexts. (Incidentally, trying to understand the nature and impact of this particular kind of smartphone-distraction lit the fuse of this writing project.)

Before we get to the issues about meaning that begin in Chapter 3, in Chapter 2 I consider certain well-researched kinds of smartphone-distraction. For more than a decade, social scientists

have studied smartphone-distraction as it pertains to healthcare, education, driving, and so on. I will focus on healthcare and education studies, and I will argue that this kind of research does not capture the breadth and depth of the negative effects of smartphone-distraction. I will argue that the way in which this kind of research frames smartphone-distraction prevents it from capturing the nature and effects of smartphone-distraction in relation to meaningful activities (I make this move in 2.3). We need a new approach. Importantly, Chapter 2 will also introduce some core phenomenological observations about smartphone-use which will aid us in the work we do in the remainder of the book.

Although I will continue to refer only to smartphones, much of what I say applies as well to other pieces of what I will call *intimate technologies* (2.6), such as (in addition to smartphones) smartwatches, smartglasses, and other wearables. While I am obviously critical of certain smartphone-use, in the end I will not take the position that we should turn back the clock and stop using our smartphones. My hope is that this book can contribute to a more thoughtful integration of smartphones into our lives. My intention is for my observations and arguments to be helpful in clarifying and motivating changes that we can make within our smartphone habits, as well as changes in smartphone and app design. At the end of the book (Chapter 7), I will be able to use a set of sharpened concepts to point toward a path for tackling the practical challenge of incorporating smartphones into our engagement with focal practices. Although it may come as a surprise, in the end I will suggest that certain smartphone-use may even *support* our engagement in focal practices (though I have just spoiled the surprise).