

David I. Waddington
Concordia University

Building on Treacherous Ground: Sense-of-Purpose Research and Demarcating Problematic Purposes

Developmental psychologist Damon's (Damon, Menon, & Cotton Bronk, 2003) ongoing research program on youth purpose may have important practical implications for education. However, in the course of the development of this research, two fundamental conceptual questions have not yet been resolved satisfactorily: (a) How should "sense of purpose" be defined? and (b) How can one distinguish between noble and ignoble purposes? A careful examination of Damon et al.'s (2003) approach to these two questions is conducted, and some significant shortcomings in the analysis are pointed out. Specifically, Damon et al.'s definition of purpose is shown to be idiosyncratic, and some defects are pointed out in the criteria offered to differentiate between noble and ignoble purposes. In conclusion, an alternative approach to demarcating purpose is offered that relies on Erikson's (1968) concept of totalized identity.

Le programme de recherche courant du psychologue du développement Damon (Damon, Menon, & Cotton Bronk, 2003) et portant sur les buts des jeunes pourrait avoir des retombées importantes et pratiques en éducation. Toutefois, au cours du développement de cette recherche, deux questions conceptuelles fondamentales restent à être résolues de façon adéquate : (a) Comme définir « sens d'un but »? et (b) Comment distinguer un but digne d'un but indigne? Nous procédons à un examen attentif de l'approche de Damon et al. (2003) face à ces deux questions et en révélons des lacunes significatives dans l'analyse. Plus précisément, nous montrons que la définition de but que proposent Damon et al. est idiosyncrasique et signalons quelques défauts dans les critères offerts pour distinguer les buts dignes des buts indignes. La conclusion propose une approche alternative reposant sur le concept d'identité totalisante d'Erikson (1968).

Introduction

In the last few years, influential developmental psychologist Damon has launched a broad research program to study young people's sense of purpose. The author of popular works like *The Moral Child* (1988) and (1994) *Some Do Care* (Colby & Damon, 1994), he has maintained a longstanding interest in questions about moral education. Damon's current project on sense of purpose has two distinct phases. Phase 1 of the project is meant to examine the "types of commitments young people hold and how they develop" (Stanford Center on Adolescence [SCA], 2002a). This phase includes a comprehensive review of the existing literature on youth purpose, as well as a survey-based study of 444 young people's avowed purposes. Phase 2 of Damon's project is a six-year longitudinal study that is intended to "provide answers to questions of how purpose contributes to a young person's life and what effects various forms of

David Waddington is an assistant professor in the Department of Education. His ongoing research interests include John Dewey's educational thought, the history of progressive education, and philosophical issues about science and technology in education.

meaning and purpose have on a young person's development" (SCA, 2002b). This study is intended to test Damon's hypothesis that having a sense of purpose is beneficial for young people.

Both phases of Damon's research program address important questions about young people's moral development. Yet once one agrees that youth purpose should be studied, certain other fundamental philosophical questions begin to surface. Two questions are particularly important. First, one might ask, "What *is* a sense of purpose?" Second, one could ask, "What if some individuals have problematic purposes?" Damon's research may reinforce the view that having a sense of purpose confers benefits on young people, but there is also a possibility (especially worrisome from the standpoint of moral education) that disquieting purposes could confer perceived benefits to the individuals who hold them. Of course, the possibility of troublesome purposes raises further questions—one is faced with the problem of defining troublesome purposes.

It would be difficult to proceed with a research program on sense of purpose without providing some preliminary answers to these questions. In keeping with this, Damon, Menon, and Cotton Bronk (2003) offer a clear definition of sense of purpose, and they have also made some robust efforts to define problematic purposes. I maintain, however, that there are significant difficulties with Damon et al.'s answers to these questions. First, I argue that their definition of purpose does not fit well with ordinary conceptions of purpose. Second, I suggest that their account of problematic purposes does not always demarcate noble and ignoble purposes effectively. In conclusion, I use the notion of totalism—a concept drawn from Erikson's (1968) psychological theories—to point toward a more productive approach to problematic senses of purpose.

These conceptual criticisms of Damon's research program might seem abstract at first glance, but they have significant practical implications. If Damon's research program is successful, the bottom line message will simply be that "sense of purpose yields good outcomes for youth." Furthermore, given Damon's substantial levels of funding from private United States foundations,¹ it is likely that there will be concomitant efforts in schools and youth organizations to promote young people's sense of purpose. Therefore, scholars and practitioners alike will need to have the tools to evaluate the results of this research program, as well as its prescriptions, and this analysis makes a notable contribution in this regard. It matters a great deal *which kinds of sense of purpose* lead to positive youth development, and I demonstrate that there are some vital unresolved questions about this issue in Damon's account.

Damon's Definition of Purpose and the Problem of Self-Interest

In "The Development of Purpose During Adolescence," in *Applied Developmental Science*, Damon, Menon, and Cotton Bronk (2003) offer the following three-part definition of purpose.

1. Purpose is a goal of sorts, but it is more stable and far-reaching than low-level goals such as "to get to the movie on time" or "to find a parking place in town today."

2. Purpose is a part of one's personal search for meaning, but it also has an external component, the desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters larger than the self.
3. Unlike meaning alone (which may or may not be oriented towards a defined end), purpose is always directed at an accomplishment towards which one can make progress. (p. 121)

Clearly there is no difficulty with the first element of Damon et al.'s (2003) definition. Although people can be said to have limited purposes at nearly every moment of the day (e.g., walk the dog, get a coffee), one could make a convincing argument that these are not the purposes in which one is interested when one wants to examine overarching *sense of purpose*. The third part of the definition is also unproblematic: it is difficult to imagine a meaningful purpose toward which one cannot make progress. Of course, people do adopt goals that seem quite difficult to achieve (e.g., solving the problem of poverty or discovering the meaning of human existence) or to evaluate in terms of success (e.g., living a life that is harmonious with God's expectations), but one can at least come to believe that one is making progress with reference to these goals.

The second element of the definition, however, is more difficult to accept. Damon et al. (2003) contend that purpose must have "an external component, the desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters larger than the self" (p. 121). Whereas the first element of the definition simply demarcates extremely limited purposes from the notion of sense of purpose, the second part of the definition suggests that if a purpose is purely self-interested, it is not *really* a purpose. At first glance, this appears to be a rather odd claim.

In order to understand how this claim might be problematic, consider the hypothetical example of Mr. S, a rather avaricious individual. Suppose that Mr. S's primary goal is to make money. This goal will serve him well at work, because the main goal of his employers is to maximize profits. However, making money is also a personal goal for Mr. S, because money will enable him to acquire the things that he wants. Mr. S has a clear, overarching sense of purpose that could be sustained indefinitely: he wants to make money in order to make himself happy.

Although Mr. S appears to have a clear sense of purpose, he does not meet Damon et al.'s (2003) second criterion. The authors claim that purpose includes "the desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters larger than the self" (p. 121). Unfortunately, our hypothetical selfish individual really does not care much about making a difference in the world or about matters larger than himself, except insofar as they help him to make money and thereby increase his capacity for the attainment of happiness. Therefore, according to Damon et al., he lacks a sense of purpose, which is strange, because Mr. S, if asked, could state his purpose succinctly. Generalizing beyond this one example, it becomes clear that no one who pursues happiness in a purely self-interested fashion would fit Damon et al.'s criteria for sense of purpose.²

If this counterexample is reasonable, then Damon et al.'s (2003) definition of *sense of purpose* does not correspond to the prior everyday use of the term. Therefore, it fails to meet the criteria for what the philosopher Scheffler (1960) called a "descriptive" definition.³ However, in response to this, Damon and his co-authors might suggest that they are only interested in a certain normative

subset of senses of purpose, that is, non-self-interested senses of purpose. In other words, they would be offering a kind of definition that Scheffler would have called “stipulative-programmatic,” because it offers a somewhat novel meaning for a term (the stipulative element), while simultaneously advancing a particular moral claim (the programmatic element). The implicit moral claim that Damon is advancing is that it is better to have a sense of purpose that is not purely self-interested.

A stipulative-programmatic definition, according to Scheffler (1960), must be evaluated on the basis of two criteria: (a) whether the stipulation is useful and (b) whether the moral claim being made is justified. The second question is fairly easy to address; it is reasonable to suggest that senses of purpose that contribute to “matters larger than the self” are to be preferred to purely hedonistic senses of purpose. The first question is somewhat more difficult to deal with, however. On the one hand, if one wants to discover the benefits of sense of purpose, it may be better to conduct research on individuals who have a beneficent sense of purpose as opposed to the narcissistic, self-centered version of purpose manifested by Mr. S. On the other hand, using a more descriptive definition confers significant advantages. In order to see how this might be the case, consider an example of a non-descriptive definition: suppose that one decided to investigate the benefits of swimming, but stipulated that swimming on one’s back did not count as swimming. An investigation like this would seem likely to miss some significant aspects of swimming. Of course, Damon et al.’s (2003) exemption for self-interested purposes is less significant than the swimming exemption, but the same basic point may hold true.

Yet although Damon et al.’s (2003) stipulative-programmatic definition raises some questions, it is not difficult to see why they construct a definition of purpose that excludes certain hedonistic purposes. Yet as becomes apparent, this normative exclusion may raise some questions about the rest of their research. If one eliminates a given range of purposes because they are normatively problematic, one surely must submit all other senses of purpose to a similar normative examination. It will become clear that this question of demarcation may pose a serious problem for Damon.

Other Troublesome Purposes

Damon et al.’s (2003) decision effectively to eliminate the purely self-interested individuals from further scrutiny does not cause all problematic purposes to vanish from the research pool. One is still left with people who have a strong sense of purpose and think that their purposes are beneficent, but whose purposes may nevertheless be rather disquieting. For example, consider the following motivational remarks (Wolin, 1993) addressed to an audience of university students.

It is up to you to remain the ones who always urge on and who are always ready, the ones who never yield and who always grow.
Your will to know seeks to experience what is essential, simple, and great. You crave to be exposed to that which besets you most directly and to that which imposes upon you the most wide-ranging obligations....
Do not pervert the knowledge you have struggled for into a vain, selfish possession ... You can no longer be those who merely attend lectures. You are

obligated to know and act together in the creation of the future university. (p. 46)

The author of this speech wants his students to discover a strong sense of purpose. Instead of pursuing narcissistic intellectual pursuits, he asks them to cooperate in building the "future university." One could easily imagine a similar speech being given by a contemporary administrator at a university function. Some of the final lines of the above-quoted speech, however, allow it to be placed securely in its historical context:

The Fuhrer alone is the present and future German reality ... Heil Hitler!
Martin Heidegger, Rector. (p. 47)

Heidegger, who is considered by some experts (Rorty, 1979; Zimmerman, 1990) to have been one of the foremost philosophers of the 20th century, allowed himself to become involved with what is now thought to be the paradigmatic example of a problematic purpose.

The point of this example is twofold. First, it clearly demonstrates the fact that a strong, non-self-interested, other-directed sense of purpose is compatible with a problematic specific purpose. Second, it highlights the point that intelligent individuals are capable of being mistaken about what constitutes a beneficial purpose. Although these two points may seem rather obvious, they nevertheless point up one of the main problems with sense of purpose, namely, that it is possible to be misguided in one's sense of purpose, and that this misguided purpose can cause significant damage to society.

This problem has not escaped the attention of theorists of youth development. In *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, a book that Damon et al. draw on, Erikson (1968) discusses the problem of youth who are having difficulties developing a sense of purpose. At one point in his analysis, Erikson uses a remark by Biff, a character in Miller's (1949/1996) *Death of a Salesman*, to illustrate young people's identity problems. In the play, Biff says to his mother, "I just can't take hold, Mom. I can't take hold of some kind of a life" (p. 44). Erikson acknowledges that this failure to "get a life" is a common situation for young people. However, he also points out that this period of casting about may make young people especially vulnerable to what Erikson calls *totalism*. Erikson remarks, "When the human being, because of accidental or developmental shifts, loses an essential wholeness, he restructures himself and the world by taking recourse to what we may call *totalism*" (p. 81). Totalism, explains Erikson, "evokes a Gestalt in which an absolute boundary is emphasized: given a certain arbitrary delineation, nothing that belongs inside must be left outside, nothing that must be outside can be tolerated inside" (p. 81). The more intense flavors of totalism among the young are familiar to us in the reasonably recent examples of the suicide bomber, the Red Guard, and the Hitler Youth. Erikson acknowledges this when he notes that totalism is "of great significance in the emergence of new collective identities in our time" (p. 89).

Erikson (1968) contrasts the pathological category of the totalized identity with the notion of wholeness, of a whole identity. He suggests that wholeness is characterized by a "sound, organic, progressive mutuality between diversified functions and parts within an entirety, the boundaries of which are open and fluid" (p. 80). This definition does not clarify matters quite as much as one

would hope, but defining wholeness is a challenging task because there are many possible configurations of healthy, whole identities. People who have achieved wholeness have achieved some kind of integrated sense of identity in their lives, but this integration is a loose one that changes as the person encounters new circumstances. In keeping with the flexible organicism that characterizes the whole identity, people who have attained wholeness generally avoid drawing the kinds of sweeping, stark in/out distinctions that are the hallmark of the totalized identity.

The problem of totalism could be significant for Damon's research. How is it possible to differentiate between young people who have found a beneficial sense of purpose that is compatible with wholeness and those who have adopted some kind of totalist ideology? After all, even if a totalist ideology has significant psychological benefits (e.g., the Red Guard feels happy due to her purposeful life), it is still not a good idea to encourage this type of purpose in youth. Not surprisingly, Damon et al. (2003) and their collaborators are interested in making similar normative distinctions. They comment, "To determine whether a young person is on track in developing a positive moral identity, we first must make clear the distinctions between noble purposes ... and ignoble purposes" (p. 126).

Their efforts in this regard can be found in two distinct articles. The first, SCA (2003) "Exploring the Nature and Development of Purpose in Youth," is a "consensus document" produced by a team of several academics (including Damon) at a conference that was organized by Damon's research group (SCA, 2003). The second, "The Development of Purpose during Adolescence," is mentioned above. As I explain, Damon's approach to the problem of purpose demarcation suffers from some significant shortcomings.

Analyzing Damon's Approaches to Demarcation

"Exploring the Nature and Development of Purpose in Youth," the consensus paper (SCA, 2003), begins the discussion of noble and ignoble purpose with a confident pronouncement: "Distinguishing noble and ignoble purposes is possible." The authors then list several methods through which this distinction can be made.

1. Noble and ignoble purposes can be defined by what is adaptive and functional according to empirical investigation.
2. Consensus within communities or subcultures can determine which purposes are noble or ignoble.
3. We can know which purposes are noble or ignoble by appealing to our own reason.
4. Distinctions between purposes are possible through appeals to higher sources of authority.

Each of these claims is quite bold and must be analyzed in turn.

The first claim, "Noble purposes can be defined by what is adaptive and functional according to empirical investigation" (SCA, 2003) has some significant difficulties associated with it. It is not difficult to think of examples in which ignoble senses of purpose have been beneficial. Boxill (1980), in "How Injustice Pays," offers some illuminating commentary on this point. Boxill acknowledges that it is difficult to be unjust toward one's friends and family

due, among other factors, to resultant feelings of shame and guilt. However, he also suggests that injustice may be quite rewarding when it is applied to outsiders. It is easier psychologically to exploit these distant individuals. Boxill elaborates on this point: "Because it is far easier to be self-deceived about distant, than about domestic, injustice, unjust people persuade themselves, with minimal psychic cost, that brutality and dishonesty are proper and prudent" (p. 369). American slave traders and British 19th-century industrialists often enjoyed happy lives of peace and prosperity while pursuing unjust purposes against psychologically distant peoples. The current era is not exempt from this phenomenon; tobacco companies have executed elaborate disinformation campaigns that endeavor to disguise the fact that their products are harmful. One tobacco industry memo (Brown & Williamson, 1969), commenting on the industry's public relations efforts, remarked succinctly, "Doubt is our product" (p. 1).

The second pronouncement of the consensus paper (SCA, 2003), "Consensus within communities or subcultures can determine which purposes are noble or ignoble," is rendered doubtful by numerous counterexamples. Clearly communities have the power to deem particular purposes to be noble and ignoble, but this does not mean that the purposes are *actually* noble. In Germany in the 1930s, the community made a democratic decision that rebuilding the nation according to Nazi principles was a noble purpose. This purpose, though deemed noble by the community at the time, is now thought to have been mistaken.

The consensus paper's third method enjoins us to "know which purposes are noble and ignoble by appealing to our own reason." Damon and the other authors of the consensus paper (SCA, 2003) draw on Aristotle to make this point. They comment, "In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote that human beings have the potential ability to recognize virtuous goals and to act in accordance with them." However, reason may not be quite as reliable as Aristotle's remark suggests.

In his famous work *On Liberty*, Mill (1859/1975) discussed humankind's propensity to make errors in judgment. After noting that each age has "held many opinions which subsequent ages have deemed not only false but absurd" (p. 19), he discusses the specific case of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Aurelius, maintained Mill, was one of the greatest intellectuals of his time: an intensely contemplative, thoughtful man. Clearly he was capable of carefully thinking through a course of action. However, as Mill points out, he nevertheless deliberately chose to persecute the early Christians. The key premise of the emperor's argument for persecution was that a particular kind of religious belief served as the linchpin of social stability. This premise was not arrived at randomly: it was based on what Marcus Aurelius thought he knew about his empire. Due to his belief in this particular premise, Marcus Aurelius saw persecuting the Christians as a distasteful but necessary part of his noble duty to preserve Roman society.

Mill's (1859/1975) point, at least as it pertains to the matter at hand, is that it is always possible for us to be wrong about what constitutes a noble or ignoble purpose. This does not mean that reason should be discarded—on the contrary, it is probably the most promising of the four methods that the consen-

sus paper puts forward for distinguishing between noble and ignoble purposes. Mill is simply emphasizing that establishing the premises of an argument can be less straightforward than we think, and that it is always appropriate to allow for the possibility that our analyses of the nobility of certain purposes could be wrong.

The final method that the authors of the consensus paper (2003) suggest, namely, appealing “to higher sources of authority” (by which they mean religion), also has some difficulties associated with it. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that holy texts are true, infallible guides. Even if this proposition is assumed to be the case, one still faces the problem of obvious internal tensions in the documents. In addition to these internal tensions, the major religions offer various incompatible versions of history and prescriptions about how life is to be lived. Put simply, the major religions cannot all be right. The authors of the consensus document (SCA, 2003) are doubtless aware of some of these difficulties and caution that this approach should not be “taken alone.”

The authors of the consensus paper (SCA, 2003) acknowledge that their four proposed methods have weaknesses: they note, “It is likely that using one or more of these approaches at a time may be the most reliable way to distinguish purposes.” In the case of the first, second, and fourth methods, however, the respective weaknesses of the each approach warrant a healthy measure of caution. However, the third method—reason—does appear to offer some hope of making an intelligent judgment about noble and ignoble purpose.

In addition to the demarcative criteria suggested in the consensus paper, Damon et al. (2003) offer some other possible criteria in “The Development of Purpose during Adolescence.” Here they suggest that noble purposes are characterized by three criteria.

1. The use of moral means in pursuit of moral ends.
2. A sense of perspective about one’s own limited capacity to know and do the right thing.
3. A dedication to the common good. (p. 126)

The first injunction, “The use of moral means in pursuit of moral ends,” might appear straightforward on the surface. Still, even this example raises questions about what constitutes a moral means. For example, suppose that an individual’s sense of purpose involves defending her country from determined attackers. In this case, it might be necessary for her to kill some of the attackers, regrettable as this might be. To this person, this would be a necessary, moral means in pursuit of a moral end. The attackers, however, might well disagree, arguing that the defenders’ cause was in fact ignoble and that her decision to kill was an immoral means to an immoral end.

The second criterion, “A sense of perspective about one’s own limited capacity to know and do the right thing,” does not appear to function as Damon et al. (2003) would wish. If a person believes that he or she has unlimited power to judge and act correctly, this is a sign that this person is a fanatic. Still, it is possible for someone to maintain a noble purpose fanatically. Consider the case of an individual who thinks he or she has been chosen by God to help the poor. His or her devotion to the Bible and daily consultations with God dispel all doubts—he or she is certain that all his or her poor-helping

actions must be correct. Sainly people like this are probably rare, but it is not difficult to envision their existence.

Conversely, it is also possible for people who espouse ignoble purposes to have at least some sense of perspective. Imagine a tobacco executive who is bothered by doubts about the job he does each day. He knows that the “right” action, at least as far as the company is concerned, is to sell as many cigarettes as possible. This is his mission, his corporate purpose, and he carries it out each day. He does, however, worry that he may be acting unethically.

The third injunction, “A dedication to the common good,” also requires close scrutiny. It certainly has some legitimacy; if a person were dedicated to a deliberate form of badness, it would be fair to say that that person had an ignoble purpose. By contrast, those who dedicate themselves to the common good are often worthy of admiration and approbation and often have noble purposes in mind. Still, people who are dedicated to the common good can also espouse what Erikson (1968) would call totalized purposes. The young Red Guards of Maoist China may have been sincere in their desire to advance the common good, but this did not prevent them from adopting a problematic purpose.

As far as the task of demarcating ignoble purposes is concerned, none of the criteria that Damon et al. (2003) propose are infallible, as they themselves acknowledge. Certain criteria (use of one’s own reason, use of moral means in pursuit of moral ends) may be somewhat useful in sorting out which purposes are noble. Other criteria (adaptiveness/functionality, community consensus, higher authority, dedication to the common good) are much more problematic. Damon et al. consistently suggest that employing several of these criteria would be maximally effective, and they are probably right about this. Still, the fact remains that it is often difficult to determine what constitutes a noble or an ignoble sense of purpose.

The next question to ask is what this result signifies. One might be tempted to conclude from all of the difficulties associated with the various criteria mentioned above that trying to demarcate noble and ignoble purposes is a futile effort. This conclusion is too sweeping and radical. Many imperfect detection methods (e.g., medical tests) are currently in daily use, and despite their imperfections, these tests are sometimes important tools. Damon and his research team might still want to use some of their more reliable conceptual tools if they decide to attempt to screen out people who have ignoble purposes. Yet as I argue, there are some significant problems with all of these tools, and this highlights a weakness in Damon’s research program. If it is not possible to distinguish between noble and ignoble purposes in the research pool, then an unknown quantity of the apparent benefits of sense of purpose may in fact result from purposes that are problematic. This uncertainty points toward the need for a more effective demarcative criterion, which I discuss in the following section.

A Different Kind of Demarcation

The efforts of Damon and his collaborators, as well as the analysis offered in this article, have demonstrated that differentiating between noble and ignoble purposes is not an easy task. In part these complications stem from the difficulty of applying the proposed criteria. Yet Damon et al.’s (2003) proposed criteria

do not really address the most troublesome aspect of the demarcation problem, namely, that many people with extremely worrisome purposes *believe that their purposes are noble*. This problem is what philosophers (Horsburgh, 1954; Santas, 1964) have referred to as one of the key Socratic paradoxes. The paradox states that people believe that their actions are right and noble, otherwise they would not do them. It is precisely the wholehearted sincerity of some people with problematic purposes that makes it difficult to classify these purposes.

There may, however, be a way to get around the problem posed by the Socratic paradox. One could set aside the problem of demarcating ignoble purpose and instead focus on inquiring about something rather different: totalized purpose. As is pointed out above, totalism is Erikson's (1968) term for the phenomenon of fanatical identity. The totalized person believes that whatever purpose she espouses is absolutely correct. For this individual, matters are black and white; he or she has bound up his or her identity with a purpose about which he or she has no doubts.

The hallmark of the totalized identity is a lack of doubt; therefore, any attempt to demarcate totalism should focus on whether people have doubts about their purposes. Recall one of Damon et al.'s (2003) criteria for noble purpose: "A sense of perspective about one's own limited capacity to know and do the right thing." In my analysis above, I found that there were some problems with this criterion when it came to detecting ignoble purpose. However, despite these shortcomings, this criterion may be extremely effective at a different task: detecting totalism. The phenomenon of totalism, as Erikson (1968) described it, has sharp ideological edges—right and wrong are both clearly defined, and there is no room for doubt and uncertainty. It is not possible to be a "successful" suicide bomber or Nazi or Red Guard and simultaneously to entertain significant doubts about one's capacity to know and do the right thing. The moment that one starts having these doubts is the moment that one ceases to be an effective Red Guard; in other words, it is the moment that one ceases to be totalized.

Of course, this takes for granted that attempting to demarcate totalism is worthwhile. Although it might appear that totalism is obviously undesirable, some borderline cases muddy the waters to some degree. For example, consider the above-mentioned example of the woman who believes that God has sent her on a mission to help the poor. This woman has a totalized sense of purpose—she has no doubt about her capacity to know and do the right thing—but she is nevertheless capable of helpful action. In fact, when it comes to helping the poor, she might be said to be especially effective due to her indefatigable zeal for a difficult task. How, then, can it be said that this person has a sense of purpose that is normatively undesirable?

One response to this objection is to speculate that generally speaking, people with totalized purposes do more harm than good; the reward offered by the fanatical do-gooder is outweighed by the risk of the Red Guard. Why not, then, keep the zealous do-gooder as normative and screen out the Red Guard? Unfortunately, because people with totalized purposes generally see themselves as doing good (e.g., the Red Guard sees herself as performing the difficult but necessary task of clearing out ideological dead wood so that a glorious new era can begin), it may be difficult to figure out who the *real* good

actors are. Yet even if it were possible to make this distinction, overzealous people with apparently good purposes should still occasion concern. In the course of their breathless pursuit of goodness, they may fail to notice that they are actually causing significant harm. The endeavors of the Christian missionaries in the new world offer some notable examples in this regard.

Another possible objection to the criterion of totalism is that it discriminates against people who are sincerely religious. This objection carries some weight: fanatically religious people would indeed be deemed to have an undesirable sense of purpose according to this criterion. However, it is entirely possible to be deeply religious without being a fanatic. A certain degree of doubt about one's ability to know and do the right thing is completely compatible with many religious creeds. Doubt is sometimes discouraged with respect to certain critical points (e.g., God's existence), but it is often reasonable for individuals to have doubts about what God thinks they should do in life.

If none of the above-mentioned objections to the criterion of totalism is telling, the next question is how this criterion is relevant to Damon et al.'s (2003) work. Once again, recall that one of the first conclusions established in this article is that Damon and his research team have a normative approach to sense of purpose, as exemplified through their decision to eliminate hedonistic purposes from study by using a stipulative-programmatic definition of purpose. If it is worthwhile to exclude hedonistic purposes from the research pool on a normative basis, then surely it must also be worthwhile to exclude people who have senses of purpose that are totalized.

However, even if this argument is incorrect, and Damon and his collaborators do not need to screen the research pool, the criterion of totalism could still be useful. Damon is undoubtedly interested in using normative criteria to think about youth purpose, and totalism may well be a more satisfactory, more reliable normative criterion for demarcating purpose than nobility. Beyond the arena of research, the notion of totalism can make a difference in terms of how we think about sense of purpose every day. We want our youth to have senses of purpose that strengthen both themselves and the society in which they live. In keeping with this, we also want to educate young people about the dangers of extremism and its attendant possibilities of totalized identity. Erikson's (1968) original distinction is just as helpful and relevant today as it was when he originally made it 40 years ago.

Notably, one could mount a final objection to the criterion of totalism on the basis that it sidesteps the important issue of noble and ignoble purpose. This point is correct in the strict sense, but it can be argued that this sidestepping is productive. Instead of an intractable debate involving multiple disputed criteria about which purposes should count as noble, we now ask a simpler question: is this person's purpose totalized or not? Asking questions about totalized purpose does not obviate the debate about noble/ignoble purpose, but it may nonetheless be a more useful way to think about sense of purpose.

Conclusion

Damon et al. (2003) are right to suggest that sense of purpose is an important element in the life of the healthy young person. However, as they acknowledge, once we begin to investigate the benefits of sense of purpose, we have to deal with the problem of purpose demarcation. In other words, it is not enough

to ask whether young people have a sense of purpose and to ascertain what the effects of this sense are. Rather, we must also ask about the *quality* of this sense of purpose, and I argue that this latter question is not satisfactorily resolved in Damon's research program.

One of the other core messages of this analysis is that purpose demarcation is a difficult, complicated task. This does not mean, however, that it is not worth doing. It is important from a research standpoint, and it is certainly important from a moral education standpoint. If we are to help young people achieve healthy senses of purpose, we need to think carefully about what those senses of purpose might look like. Young people's senses of purpose may well confer significant benefits, but if these benefits come at the cost of the promotion of totalized identities, then they are not worthwhile. The world may need more thoughtful, purposeful young people, but it certainly does not need any more purposeful zealots.

Notes

1. Two private foundations that have a distinct religious orientation support Damon's project. The Youth Purpose Project receives support from the Thrive Foundation for Youth (2008), which seeks among other goals to "support [youth] with structures of meaning oriented towards goodness, grace, and God." In addition, Damon's Center on Adolescence has received a \$2.2-million grant from the John Templeton Foundation (2008), which is an organization dedicated to reconciling science and religion.
2. Notably, some non-hedonistic counterexamples of clear purpose do not fit Damon's model. For example, suppose that one is on a personal quest for meaning. It is not clear that this search has to involve a desire "to contribute to matters larger than the self" (as Damon stipulates)—one could simply wander the world exploring life's possibilities to see what they have to offer. Another possibility: one could be on a personal journey to transcend both self and world. Again, one is arguably purposeful in this latter instance, but one is not contributing to matters larger than the self.
3. In *The Language of Education*, Scheffler (1960) discusses three types of general definitions: descriptive, stipulative, and programmatic. Descriptive definitions match up with prior everyday use. Stipulative definitions deem that a term should be defined in a particular way regardless of prior use. For example, for the purposes of an experiment on seabirds, *large birds* might be deemed a category consisting only of ospreys, albatrosses, and pelicans, although in everyday language other birds (e.g., ostriches) are considered large. Programmatic definitions advance an implicit moral claim. For example, when teaching is defined as a profession, this definition often includes claims that teachers should be treated in a particular way.

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