De Ethica (2024) 8.2:44–62
https://doi.org/10.3384/de-ethica.2001-8819.248244

Evil and Meaning in Life*

David Matheson

In this paper I offer an argument for the thesis that evil activity, unlike its less extremely immoral counterparts, cannot endow the agent's life with any measure of meaning. I first review two other important arguments for this thesis that can be drawn from the recent literature. I then articulate my own argument and show how it avoids the problems of these others. According to my argument, meaning-endowing activity cannot be of the worst sort, along any of the basic ways in which we evaluate activity, but evil activity is of the worst sort along one of these ways, namely, the moral one. Because it is grounded in a traditional concept of meaning for which there is much to be said, I note, my argument should hold broad appeal. I also note that my argument is consistent with various contemporary conceptions of evil activity.

1.

It is one thing to allow that mildly or moderately immoral activity can add a measure of meaning to the life of the individual who engages in it. That you are a little short with the kids on occasion is a cause for moral regret, but it hardly seems to rob your otherwise admirable parental effort of all capacity to make your life more meaningful. The Michelin-starred chef's pursuit of culinary excellence may have its moral failings—a lack of due consideration for the feelings of sous-chefs and other staff, for example—but these may be moderate enough for the activity to be a clear case of the meaning-endowing. In the light of intuitions like these, we may feel quite compelled to allow that mildly or moderately immoral activity can add meaning to the agent's life.[1]

* Previous versions of this paper were presented at the First International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life (Hokkaido University) and the Canadian Philosophical Association's annual congress (Université du Québec à Montréal) in 2018; audience members at both venues provided helpful preliminary feedback. I am particularly indebted to Lucas Scripter (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University) and Puqun Li (Kwantlen Polytechnic University), and to referees for this journal, for their very insightful comments on more recent versions of the paper.

[1] Here I count anything anyone performs as an activity. Although simple actions occurring over very brief periods of time (e.g., a quick wave to a friend) are thus activities in my view, so too are the sorts of things that I most frequently talk about in relation to meaning—complex series of such actions, extended over relatively long periods of time, and united by the fact that someone performs them for a common purpose

It is quite another thing, however, to allow that activity so immoral as to warrant our severest moral censure—in a word, evil activity—can endow the agent's life with meaning. We can regard the parenting and the culinary pursuit as meaning-endowing without so regarding the activities for which the Reinhard Heydriches and Ted Bundys of this world are known.[2]

Call the thought that whereas activity of the first sort can be meaning-endowing activity of the second sort cannot "the preclusion thesis." Evil precludes meaning, according to this thesis, in the sense that evil activity cannot endow the agent's life with any measure of meaning.

Various prominent contributors to the recent literature on life's meaning appear to accept the preclusion thesis. Thaddeus Metz appears to accept it, for example, when he tells us that in contrast to less awful forms of behavior, "severely degrading" ones "prevent[…] one from acquiring positive meaning that one might otherwise have had."[3] That John Cottingham accepts the thesis seems clear from his insistence that we cannot admit what a "dedicated Nazi torturer" does into the realm of the meaning-endowing, whatever we might say about less horrific projects.[4]

The preclusion thesis is hardly a commonplace in the literature, however, for there are other prominent contributors who plainly reject it. Thus John Kekes insists, against morality-centered conceptions of meaning, that the projects of "moral monsters" can confer considerable meaning on their lives.[5] And Joel Feinberg is quite willing to countenance both good and thoroughly immoral varieties of the behavioral dispositions whose exercise is all there is to the sort of fulfilment he identifies with meaning. As he puts it, "the discharging of basic 'evil' dispositions remains fulfilment, and properly so called."[6]

Advocates and critics of the preclusion thesis, such as those I have just mentioned, rarely offer arguments for or against it. Rather, they commonly just take the thesis's truth or falsity, as the case may be, to be an intuitively obvious point that any plausible account of meaning should be able to explain, and proceed to work out their own particular accounts of meaning accordingly. The mere fact that prominent contributors to literature disagree on the thesis, however, seems to me to be sufficient to establish its controversial status. And because it is controversial, I think that those who are inclined to accept it need a convincing argument in its favor. My aim in what follows is to offer such an argument.

(e.g., the parenting, the chef's pursuit). We do, after all, perform such complex series as well as the simple actions of which they consist.

[2] The concept of evil I employ in this paper is the one of special interest to most contemporary theorists of evil. It differs from broader concepts of evil because it invokes "beyond-the-pale-condemnation" (Adam Morton, *On Evil* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 4) and "picks out only the most morally despicable actions, characters, events, etc." (Todd Calder, "The Concept of Evil," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Winter 2022 Edition*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Introduction. Online at https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/concept-evil/, accessed February 15, 2024). See also Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 22ff., John Kekes, *The Roots of Evil* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 1ff., and Luke Russell, *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 19ff.

[3] *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 234

[4] *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 24.

[5] "The Meaning of Life," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 24 (2000), pp. 17-34, at p. 30.

[6] "Absurd Self-fulfillment," in *Freedom and Fulfillment: Philosophical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 317.

I begin in the next section by reviewing two of the very few arguments for the preclusion thesis that can be drawn from the recent literature—one that Susan Wolf offers in her discussion of Bernard Williams's critique of impartial morality,[7] and another inspired by Iddo Landau's account of why an evil life cannot on the whole be meaningful.[8] The core problem with Wolf's argument, I point out, is that evil activity seems to be capable of satisfying its requirement on meaning-endowing activity. And although the Landau-inspired argument avoids this problem, it has another of its own: its requirement on meaning-endowing activity seems too strong. In section 4 I go on to lay out my own argument for the preclusion thesis, according to which meaning-endowing activity cannot be of the worst sort along any of the basic ways in which we evaluate activity. I show how my argument avoids the problems of the other two, and I point out that it is particularly well-motivated under a traditional concept of meaning for which there is much to be said. I conclude in section 5 by drawing attention to two further virtues of the argument I have offered: it should appeal to many theorists of meaning—all those whose particular conceptions of meaning yield prima facie plausible positions under the traditional concept I invoke—and it is consistent with a wide range of contemporary conceptions of evil activity.

2.

In her discussion of Williams, Wolf expresses sympathy with the claim that "morality cannot reasonably be expected to trump in cases where it conflicts with meaning-providing activities."[9] Even so, she assures us, there is no real danger of such conflict when it comes to evil activity, such as mass murder or child abuse. For there to be a conflict between meaning and morality, she maintains, the activity that constitutes the ground of conflict must be capable of adding some measure of meaning to the life of the agent. And whereas activity like breaking the law in order to save your beloved's life may be capable of this, evil activity is most certainly not.[10]

The reason it is not, Wolf tells us, is that in contrast to the less awful sort, evil activity is by its nature devoid of value: "since it is lacking in value," she writes, "it is not the sort of thing that can give meaning to one's life."[11] Her talk of 'value' indicates the objective value she takes to be essential to meaning.[12] This value is objective in the minimal sense that it does not supervene merely on the interests or attitudes of single agents, but rather on such things as the attitudes of multiple agents, features of agents' environments, relationships between agents'

[7] For Wolf's discussion, see her "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 97 (1997), pp. 299-315 and *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 53-62. For Williams's critique, see his "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For & Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 77-135 and "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-19.
[8] Landau, "Immorality and the Meaning of Life," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 45 (2011), pp. 309-17.
[9] "Meaning and Morality," p. 306.
[10] "Meaning and Morality," pp. 301 & 306 and *Meaning in Life*, p. 60.
[11] "Meaning and Morality," p. 306.
[12] Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy & Policy*, 14 (1997), pp. 207-225, at pp. 209-11 & 224-5; "Meaning and Morality," pp. 304-5; and *Meaning in Life,* pp. 18-33 & 36-48.

attitudes and their environments, and so on. As Wolf puts it, the value she is concerned with lies at least "partly outside of oneself."[13]

The argument Wolf presents for the preclusion thesis thus appeals to a general requirement on meaning-endowing activity and to a claim to the effect that evil activity, unlike its less extremely immoral counterparts, cannot satisfy that requirement. The requirement is that meaning-endowing activity must realize some objective value in the relevant sense. And the claim is that evil activity, unlike the less extreme counterparts, cannot—in other words, that unlike them it is by its very nature devoid of such value.

Radical subjectivists, who see all value as supervening merely on the attitudes of single agents, will obviously not be happy with this argument's requirement on meaning-endowing activity. But even those of us who have no problem with objective value in Wolf's minimal sense should nevertheless be unhappy with this argument, because its claim that evil activity cannot satisfy that requirement turns out to be false.

To see this, consider that objective value in the relevant minimal sense seems to find a home in all of the basic values of activity—a home, that is, in all of the simplest and most general varieties of goodness that can be realized by what we do in life, including not only moral value, but also hedonic, epistemic, and aesthetic value.[14] There is hedonic, or happiness-related value that supervenes on the attitudes of multiple agents, and activity in life can realize it: just consider the value that comes with the sense of fulfilment, or the pleasure-related interest, that members of a niche community all share in the performance of activity that helps define that community. There is epistemic value that supervenes on the attitudes of multiple agents, and activity in life can realize it, as is clear when one considers the apt acquisition of true belief on matters of widespread importance, or the exercise of reliable belief-forming methods everyone wants to see promulgated. There is also aesthetic, or artfulness-related value that supervenes on the attitudes of multiple agents—for example, the value that attaches to commonly praised forms of social tactfulness—and activity in life can obviously realize it as well.

That evil activity can realize objective value in the relevant sense follows from the observation that, although it may not be able to realize any moral value (which is presumably one form of such objective value), it can realize objective varieties of these non-moral forms of basic value. We may grant that things like mass murder and child abuse are entirely lacking in moral value. It nevertheless seems clear that, because they can realize some value that supervenes on the pleasure-related attitudes of their perpetrators and their collaborators, these forms of evil can realize some objective hedonic value, in the relevant minimal sense of 'objective'. Because of the special knowledge they generate or the reliable belief-forming

[13] *Meaning in Life*, p. 43.

[14] Values that are composed of basic values, so understood, such as the value of love, athletic value, culinary value, and academic value, are not basic because they are more complex than the values of which they are composed. Species of basic values are likewise not basic, for they are obviously less general than their genera. It's worth noting that non-basic values can nevertheless be equal to or greater than basic values when it comes to their evaluative weight: there's nothing to prevent us from holding that the value of love—or indeed the value of meaning itself—is much more important in general than any of the basic values of which it is composed. Further, because they permeate both sides of the final-instrumental divide that Christine Korsgaard has helpfully carved out ("Two Distinctions in Goodness," *Philosophical Review*, 92 (1983), pp. 169-95), it would be a mistake simply to identify these basic values with final values.

processes they deploy, they can also realize some objective epistemic value. And because of the artfulness with which they may be so frighteningly effected, they can, for all their lack of moral value, realize some objective aesthetic value.

Wolf's argument falls short, therefore, because its claim that evil activity cannot satisfy its requirement on meaning-endowing activity appears false. Evil activity may be devoid of moral value, hence devoid of one very important from of objective value in her sense. But it does not follow from this, and it is quite implausible to maintain, that evil activity is devoid of any sort of objective value in that sense.

Moreover, although the above criticism grants Wolf's claim that evil activity is entirely lacking in moral value, it should be noted that this claim itself is not obviously true, for it is not obviously true that the worst sort of activity, morally speaking—again, activity so immoral as to warrant our severest moral censure—is necessarily devoid of all moral value. It might well be that from a moral point of view the worst sort of activity is broad enough to encompass morally awful activities that nevertheless instantiate or exemplify very small measures of moral value, just as it might well be that from a moral point of view the best sort of activity is broad enough to encompass outstandingly moral activities that nevertheless exemplify very small measures of moral disvalue. (The worst and the best, in this context, can hardly be understood as entailing, respectively, absolute imperfection and absolute perfection.) In effecting his torture, for example, the torturer's activity may be plainly evil despite the fact it occasionally includes some fleeting concern for his victim, where this concern exemplifies moral value to a miniscule degree. Thus the point that evil activity is capable of satisfying the requirement that Wolf's argument puts on meaning-endowing activity remains, regardless of whether one grants the claim that evil activity is necessarily devoid of moral value. But it may well turn out on reflection that we have good reason to reject that claim also.

3.

Perhaps a more compelling argument for the preclusion thesis can be modelled on Iddo Landau's account of why an evil life cannot on the whole be meaningful. A meaningful life, he notes, is a life that is sufficiently high in value overall. There may well be other important features of a meaningful life, but this one seems essential to our common understanding of it:

> We take the lives of people to be meaningful only if they have passed a certain threshold of value or worth. Perhaps passing the threshold is not a sufficient condition for having a meaningful life, but it is at least necessary. A common cause for people to view their lives as meaningless is their assessment that their lives are not of sufficient worth. The scientist who thinks that her life is meaningless because she never made it to the very top of her profession, the activist who takes his life to be meaningless after he has lost faith in his ideology, and the bereaved parents who claim that there is no meaning to their lives because they have lost their child believe that their lives are devoid of meaning because something they take to be of great worth is lost. Such people will not return to seeing their lives as meaningful until they find something that they do take to be of sufficient worth.

> […] It] is difficult to think of a life that is considered meaningful that is not also considered of much worth.[15]

> After taking account of all that is worthy and all that is unworthy in a life, we estimate whether the life passed a certain threshold of value. We consider as meaningful or not meaningful a life as a whole.[16]

Based on this, Landau maintains that a "radically" immoral life—an evil life—cannot on the whole be meaningful because it cannot be sufficiently high in value overall.

Landau does not attempt to tell us how much value a life must have overall to pass the relevant threshold and be sufficiently high in value. But whatever that amount, it presumably must be enough to offset the life's overall amount of disvalue, for a life that does not even have that amount of value overall can hardly be said to be a life that is on the whole meaningful in the sense of a life that is characterized by meaning. And it seems that an evil life, unlike a less extremely immoral life, must fall well short of that amount of value overall. Because of its extreme amount of moral disvalue overall, whatever the amount of an evil life's value overall, far from offsetting its disvalue overall, it would seem inevitably to be overwhelmed by the life's disvalue overall.

So understood, Landau's account seems quite plausible, but I must emphasize that the account is not itself an argument for the preclusion thesis. For one thing, the preclusion thesis is about activity within a life, whereas Landau's account is concerned with entire lives. But more importantly, the preclusion thesis is about the *meaning-endowing* capacity of a certain sort of activity, that is, about whether a certain sort of activity is capable of endowing a life with any measure of meaning at all; Landau's account, by contrast, is concerned with whether a certain sort of life is *meaningful*, that is, endowed with so much meaning that it can be said to be characterized by meaning. For these reasons, it is unclear whether an argument for the preclusion thesis that invokes the key ideas of Landau's account will be as plausible as that account itself.

Here, I take it, is roughly how this "Landau-inspired argument" would go: Meaning-endowing activity must be sufficiently high in value overall. In other words, when one considers the total amount of the activity's value (i.e., total amount of value the activity realizes), that value must offset the activity's total amount of disvalue. But whereas it is possible for less extremely immoral activity to have a total amount of value that offsets its total amount of disvalue, it is not possible for evil activity. Because of evil activity's extreme moral disvalue overall, the activity's total amount of disvalue inevitably overwhelms its total amount of value, which entails that evil activity's total amount of value, unlike that of less extremely immoral activity, cannot offset its total amount of value. Hence the preclusion thesis.

The core problem with Wolf's argument, we saw, is that evil activity turns out to be capable of satisfying the argument's requirement on meaning-endowing activity. The Landau-inspired argument I have just formulated plausibly avoids this problem. It is much more plausible, at any rate, that evil activity cannot satisfy its requirement than that evil activity cannot satisfy the requirement of Wolf's argument. But I think the Landau-inspired argument has a serious problem that Wolf's argument does not—a problem that is easily overlooked if

[15] "Immorality and the Meaning of Life," p. 313.
[16] *Ibid.*

we do not keep clear about the distinction between the meaning-endowing and the meaningful, and forget as a result that the argument is supposed to be concerned merely with the meaning-endowing: unlike the requirement of Wolf's argument, the Landau-inspired argument's requirement on meaning-endowing activity seems much too strong. It seems far too much to require of various sorts of meaning-endowing activity that they all have a total amount of value that offsets their total amount of disvalue.

I will note two broad sorts of meaning-endowing activity for which this requirement seems clearly too strong: "small-meaning," as I will call it, which is the sort of activity that endows the agent's life with only a very small amount of meaning, and "one-off-meaning," by which I mean the sort of activity that endows the agent's life with meaning but which the agent does not repeat because she reasonably judges it not to have been worth it the first time around. Very plausibly, there are many examples of both sorts of activity in which the total amount of value fails to offset the total amount of disvalue.

Thus consider the following example of small-meaning. A construction worker exercises some moral leadership by regularly showing a bit more consideration than his co-workers, in front of his co-workers, of a marginalized group. This leadership is just original enough, is just well enough directed at fundamental human interests, and so on, to render it minimally meaning-endowing. Otherwise put, the worker's moral leadership is effected in such a way that it does add some measure of meaning to his life, but the measure added is about as small as any activity can add to anyone's life. The moral leadership is nowhere close to more celebrated instances that add huge amounts of meaning to their agent's lives: in comparison to the amount of meaning that Gandhi added to his life by leading the Salt March, say, the amount of meaning our construction worker adds to his is so miniscule as almost not to be worth mentioning. But the endowment of a very small amount of meaning is an endowment of some meaning just the same.

It seems quite consistent to say that, despite exemplifying a minimal amount of meaning in this way, the construction worker's activity may also exemplify various disvalues, including some moral disvalue, such that the activity's overall amount of value (i.e., the total amount of value the activity exemplifies) fails to offset its overall amount of disvalue. As well as exemplifying the little moral value and meaning it does, for example, the worker's leadership may also exemplify some hedonic disvalue by making him anxious about the hostility he is likely to get from those of his co-workers who will see him as an insufferable moralizer. It may also exemplify some moral disvalue by virtue of the mixed motivations he has for performing it: in addition to the moral parts of his aim in exercising the leadership, there are some mildly immoral ones as well, such as a desire to use his reputation as a moral leader to get one over on a few others. We might even add that the worker's leadership is predicated on a bit of ignorance (e.g., about why morality is important) and displays a bit of tactlessness, such that it exemplifies some measure of epistemic and aesthetic disvalue as well. And there seems to be nothing implausible in the suggestion that, despite the moral value and meaning the worker's leadership exemplifies, in light of all the disvalue it also exemplifies, its overall value fails to offset its overall disvalue.

I suspect that instances of small-meaning like that of the construction worker's leadership are in fact quite common in everyday life. But even if I'm wrong about that, the

mere fact that there are at least some cases like this entails the core problem for the Landau-inspired argument: its requirement on meaning-endowing activity is just too strong.

Consider now an example of one-off meaning. A young academic spends many months planning, researching, drafting, presenting, and revising an article that makes a significant contribution to one of the sub-fields of her discipline. In part because she's never before contributed to that sub-field, this activity turns out to be an enormous amount of work for her. But her determination and talent see her through to the happy culmination: publication in an outstanding venue, which brings her the attention of some of the discipline's brightest minds. The academic's activity obviously has a considerable amount of epistemic value, and mainly in virtue of this, we may plausibly note, it exemplifies meaning to a significant extent. Indeed, we may say that the activity adds quite a bit of meaning to the academic's life—much more than the construction worker's moral leadership adds to his, even if not so much as, say, G.E.M. Anscombe's seminal work added to hers.

Nevertheless, the activity has various downsides, a number of which our academic will alone be aware of. There will be some awkwardness and error it exemplifies, and whereas others may not catch this, she may well upon later review. Because of the academic's determination in carrying it out, the activity may have some moral disvalue as well, entailing as it does some morally inappropriate neglect of commitments to friends or family members, which she regrets more and more as time goes on. Most important to note, however, is the great deal of hedonic disvalue the activity exemplifies. Consonantly with it bringing her some sense of satisfaction, and although she hides it well from others, the mental and physical toll the activity takes on her is extremely high. So much so that she vows to herself never to do that particular sort of thing again, and to focus her future academic work on other kinds of project.

Ex hypothesi, our young academic's activity is meaning-endowing. But as she herself is best situated to know, it's also just too taxing for her, and too flawed in other ways, for it to be worth it in her view. The activity thus endows her life with meaning, and no small measure of meaning at that, but by her own reasonable judgment its overall value fails to offset its overall disvalue.

To insist on the requirement of the Landau-inspired argument is to insist that all putative cases of one-off meaning like this are not really coherent—that the academic's activity either doesn't really add meaning to her life or that she must be wrong in her judgment about its worthwhileness, and that the same is to be said of every relevantly similar case. Because this insistence is very implausible, we have another good illustration, drawn from another broad class of meaning-endowing activity, of the overly strong nature of the Landau-inspired argument's requirement.

4.

An alternative argument for the preclusion thesis can be centered around the notion of an activity's being of *the worst sort*, along what I will call *a basic dimension of the evaluation of activity*. Recall the notion of a basic value of activity that featured in our discussion of Wolf's argument: this was the notion of one of the simplest and most general varieties of goodness that can be realized by what we do in life. We can now employ that notion to explicate that of a basic dimension of the evaluation of activity. As I will talk of it here, a basic dimension of such

evaluation consists of the continuum that runs from the fullest extent to which a basic value of activity can be realized through to the fullest extent to which that value's corresponding disvalue can be realized. Thus, the morally basic dimension of the evaluation of activity may be said to consist of the continuum that runs from the morally best, through the moderately moral and the moderately immoral, to the morally worst (i.e., to evil, in the sense with which we are here concerned). The hedonically basic dimension of the evaluation of activity may accordingly be understood as consisting of the continuum that runs from the hedonically best—the most enjoyable or the most pleasure-conducive—through the moderately hedonically good and the moderately hedonically bad, to the hedonically worst. The aesthetically basic dimension of such evaluation may be said to consist of the continuum that runs from the aesthetically best, through what is moderately aesthetically good and bad, to the aesthetically worst. Similarly, the epistemically basic dimension of the evaluation of activity may be said to consist of the continuum that runs from what is most epistemically praiseworthy, through what is moderately epistemically praiseworthy and moderately epistemically reprehensible, to what is most epistemically reprehensible.

To talk of an activity's being of the worst sort, along some such basic dimension of evaluation, is simply to talk of the activity as being at the extreme end of the disvalue side of that dimension—as being of the worst sort, either morally, hedonically, aesthetically, or epistemically speaking. And with this in mind, we are now able succinctly to state the alternative argument for the preclusion thesis that I wish to suggest. The argument's general requirement on meaning-endowing activity is that such activity must not be of the worst sort, along any such basic dimension of the evaluation of activity.[17] And the special claim of the argument is that, unlike its less extremely immoral counterparts, evil activity is by its very nature of the worst sort along one such dimension, namely, the moral one.

Because evil activity clearly cannot satisfy my argument's requirement on meaning-endowing activity, the argument avoids the core problem with Wolf's argument. Given the concept of evil activity with which we are concerned—again, that of activity so immoral as to warrant our severest moral censure—evil does not entail the complete absence of objective value in Wolf's minimal sense, as we have seen. But given that concept, evil does clearly entail being the worst sort along a basic dimension of the evaluation of activity.

What about the problem with the Landau-inspired argument, however? In avoiding the Scylla of Wolf's argument, does my argument run into Charybdis of this one? Does my argument invoke an overly strong requirement on meaning-endowing activity?

At least it doesn't appear to do so the same way that the requirement of the Landau-inspired argument does, for unlike the latter, my argument's requirement is quite consistent with the point that instances of small-meaning and one-off meaning can genuinely fail to be such that their overall value offsets their overall disvalue. My argument's requirement demands only that cases of small-meaning and one-off-meaning not also be cases of the worst sort, along a basic dimension of the evaluation of activity. And as examples like that of the construction worker and the young academic illustrate, there is no reason to suppose that all cases of small-meaning and one-off-meaning are cases of the worst sort in this sense. The worker's modest moral leadership certainly has its downsides, exemplifying disvalue along

[17] Note that according to this requirement, an activity that is of the worst sort along one such dimension cannot be meaning-endowing even if it also realizes considerable value along some other such dimension.

multiple basic dimensions of the evaluation of activity; but that leadership doesn't exemplify disvalue to the *fullest* extent along any of those dimensions. The academic's effort also has its downsides, clearly. But even when it comes to its biggest downside, there's no suggestion that the effort *maximally* exemplifies disvalue along the corresponding basic dimension of evaluation: as troubling or painful as the activity is for the academic, it's not even close to being one of the *most* troubling or painful sorts that she could perform. There is therefore no reason to think that my argument's requirement forces us to accept the kinds of counterintuitive claims about small-meaning and one-off-meaning that the requirement of the Landau-inspired argument would force us to accept.

Perhaps my argument's requirement is too strong in some other way, however. Consider that, according to this requirement, activity can be of the worst sort along some basic dimension of the evaluation of activity not only because it is of the worst sort morally speaking, but also because it is of the worst sort hedonically or aesthetically or epistemically speaking. If we accept my argument's requirement, then, we are pushed not only to the conclusion that evil activity is incapable of endowing its agent's life with any measure of meaning, but also to analogous conclusions about analogues of evil activity, along non-moral basic dimensions of evaluation. This might suggest another way in which my argument's requirement is too strong: it counterintuitively excludes these analogues of evil activity from the realm of the meaning-endowing.

Thus consider "miserable activity," here understood as the worst sort of activity, hedonically speaking. Utterly backbreaking or soul-sapping employment whose remuneration seems only to serve as "an occasion for fresh labors of the same kind"[18] might serve as a good example. Because such activity is plausibly of the worst sort along a basic dimension of the evaluation of activity, if we accept my argument's requirement on meaning-endowing activity, we are pushed to the conclusion that miserable activity in this stipulative sense, like evil activity, cannot endow the agent's life with any measure of meaning at all.

Similar points apply to what we may call "repulsive activity" and "irrational activity"—respectively, the aesthetically worst sort of activity (for example, the ugliest of musical compositions, or the most tactless of attempts to take down an opponent) and the epistemically worst sort of activity (such as spreading terribly pernicious falsehoods or promulgating woefully unreliable belief-forming habits). Like evil activity, repulsive and irrational activity are also necessarily of the worst sort along some basic dimension of the evaluation of activity. If we accept my argument's requirement on meaning-endowing activity, then, we are further pushed to the conclusion that neither repulsive activity nor irrational activity can endow its agent's life with any measure of meaning whatsoever. Because it counterintuitively rules out these sorts of activity from the realm of the meaning-endowing, one might suggest, my argument's requirement on meaning-endowment is too strong.

But is it really counterintuitive to rule out these sorts of activity from the realm of the meaning-endowing? It is not, I submit. In fact, it is quite intuitive to rule them out, so long as we do not confuse them with other sorts of activity with which we might be tempted on occasion to confuse them. To illustrate, it would be a mistake to confuse *very painful activity* or *very taxing activity* with miserable activity in the sense specified, because there are many instances of the former that are not instances of the latter. (I take the young academic example

[18] Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil: A New Direction* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 265.

to be precisely of this sort.) It would not count against the plausibility of my argument's requirement, therefore, to point out that there are examples of very painful or very taxing activity that seem meaning-endowing. Likewise, it would be a mistake to confuse *complex activity that involves miserable activity as one of its elements* with miserable activity. After all, from the fact that one of the simpler activities of which a complex activity consists is miserable in the relevant sense it doesn't follow the entire complex activity itself is miserable in this sense. From the fact that a soldier's complex activity of helping to liberate oppressed souls involves some activities that are truly miserable in this sense (e.g., sticking it out through the most horrific experience in the trenches) it plainly does not follow that the soldier's entire complex activity was of the worst sort, hedonically speaking.[19] That this entire activity is obviously meaning-endowing, even highly meaning-endowing, is similarly no strike against the plausibility of my argument's requirement on meaning-endowment. It would of course be a strike against the plausibility of that requirement to describe a complex activity that is intuitively miserable overall because of, say, the large amount of miserable activities it includes and the way in which they are related to the non-miserable activities it includes, provided the complex activity is also intuitively meaning-endowing. But no such complex activity seems to be forthcoming: such activity, kept distinctly in mind, seems always *not* to be meaning-endowing. The utterly backbreaking or soul-sapping employment whose remuneration appears merely to enable a continuation of the awful work to which I adverted above would be good an example of a complex activity that is intuitively miserable in the relevant stipulative sense. But far from being intuitively meaning-endowing, such activity is plainly not meaning-endowing, just as the requirement of my argument implies. A revision of the soldier example in which the complex activity consists of nothing but one miserable activity after another, despite the fact that it could have included some less extremely awful activities to the same end, would also be an example of a complex activity that is intuitively miserable because of the overwhelmingly miserable nature of all the activities that make it up. Here too we have a complex activity that is intuitively not meaning-endowing, particularly when we consider it in contrast more realistic examples like the original soldier one (terrible though that one may be in parts). The point that if we accept my argument's requirement then we are pushed to regard hedonic, aesthetic, and epistemic analogues of evil activity as incapable of endowing the agent's life with meaning, accordingly, while correct, does not support the suggestion that this requirement is too strong.

My argument thus seems to avoid the problems of Wolf's and the Landau-inspired argument. Another attractive feature of the argument is that it is very well motivated under a traditional concept of meaning for which there is much to be said. That it is so motivated

[19] A reviewer has noted that if my argument's requirement allows for the possibility (as illustrated in this example) of a complex activity that is not itself miserable overall, and so potentially meaning-endowing, despite the fact that it includes a simpler activity that is miserable, then that requirement should also allow for the possibility of a complex activity that is not itself evil, and so potentially meaning-endowing (because, say, it includes a great many simpler activities that are outstandingly good), despite the fact that it includes a simpler activity that is evil. I agree that my argument's requirement allows for the latter sort of possibility. This sort of possibility is still not one in which evil activity is meaning-endowing, however: the simpler evil activity is not meaning-endowing, and the complex activity is not evil. The complex activity may well be meaning-endowing overall, but that would only be because of all the outstandingly good simpler activities it includes, which surround and swamp the evil one.

suggests that it should hold at least some appeal for all theorists whose particular conceptions of meaning yield prima facie plausible positions on meaning under the traditional concept. And as I will argue below, the number of such theorists appears to be quite large.[20]

The traditional concept I have in mind is essentially that of the best sort of pursuit that a human being can adopt in life (or to which she can devote her life).[21] One important thing to be said for this concept is that under it meaning is a topic of longstanding interest in the history of ethical thought. Far from being some special concern or invention of the modern era, meaning under this concept seems always to have been part of philosophical reflection on living well and rightly. Aristotle's interest in meaning, so understood, is apparent from his insistence that our understanding of the best kind of life should proceed from an understanding τὸ ἄριστον—the "chief good"[22] or "the highest" of "all the good things to be done" in life.[23] An interest in meaning under this concept is also apparent throughout later ancient, medieval, and early modern discussions of the *summum bonum* of life,[24] as well as in later modern reflections on *die Bestimmung des Menschen*[25] and *der Sinn des Lebens*.[26,27] It is implausible to say this of meaning under all of the alternative concepts of it one can discern in the contemporary literature, for they are not all so clearly tied to the history of ethical thought. Under the concept of an individual's driving passion in life,[28] for example, or that of a correct

[20] I embrace the distinction between concepts and conceptions of meaning that can be found in prominent contributions to the recent literature (see, for example, Thaddeus Metz, "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 38 (2001), pp. 137-53, at pp. 138ff. and Antti Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 84 (2012), pp. 345-77, at pp. 352ff). Roughly put, whereas a concept of meaning is a broad way of understanding what it is that various substantive theories of meaning are supposed to be theories of, a conception of meaning is a substantive theory of meaning—an account of what meaning consists of, supervenes on, or specially implies.

[21] For a similar discussion of this concept, see my "Meaning in the Pursuit of Pleasure," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 8 (2022), pp. 552-66, at pp. 554ff.

[22] *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 (ca. 330 BCE)), II.2, p. 4.

[23] *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.4, p. 5.

[24] E.g., Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 2nd. ed., translated by Harris Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931 (ca. 50 BCE)); Aquinas, "On Man's Last End," in *The* Summa Theologica *of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. I, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947 (1270)), I-II, q.1, pp. 583-88; and Spinoza, *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order*, translated by Michael Kisner and Matthew J. Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018 (1677)).

[25] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, translated by Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987 (1800)).

[26] Friedrich Schlegel, *Friedrich Schlegel's* Lucinde *and the* Fragments, translated by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971 (1799)) and Moritz Schlick, "On the Meaning of Life," in *Philosophical Papers: Volume II (1925—1936)*, edited by Henk L. Mulder and Barbara F.B. Van de Velde-Schlick, translated by Peter Heath, Wilfrid Sellars, Herbert Feigl and May Brodbeck (D. Reidel: Dordrecht, 1979 (1927)), pp. 112-29.

[27] In their "The Original Meaning of Life" (*Philosophy Now,* 126 (2018), pp. 24-5), Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia offer interesting insights about Schlegel's early use of '*der Sinn des Lebens*', in connection with Sir Thomas Carlyle's now-common English equivalent, 'the meaning of life' (see Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, edited by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 (1834)).

[28] See Irving Singer, *Meaning in Life, Volume One: The Creation of Value* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010 (1992)).

interpretation of a human being's life,[29] meaning can hardly be said to be a topic of longstanding interest in the history of ethical thought.

Under the traditional concept, meaning also seems to be an especially important topic in ethics, at least the extent that ethics is concerned with living the best lives we can. This too speaks in favor of the concept, for we do tend to think of meaning as a topic of such importance. And note the contrast here with such alternative concepts of meaning as that of being worthy of great admiration in life.[30] Under these concepts, meaning seems much too diverse and diffuse a topic to be said to have special importance within ethics.

Yet another thing to be said in favor of the traditional concept is that under it meaning is a topic of cross-ideological interest, that is, a topic that holds considerable interest for individuals across a diverse range of (often conflicting) perspectives on the nature of reality and our place in it. From Abrahamic religious perspectives, to Buddhist ones, to fully naturalistic ones, the question of the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life is clearly of considerable interest. From Buddhist or naturalistic perspectives, however, the question of the reason God created us is clearly not of such interest, even though it is from the Abrahamic perspectives. This suggests that, unlike meaning under the traditional concept, meaning under the concept of the reason God created us[31] is not a topic of cross-ideological interest; under that concept, meaning is plausibly only a topic of considerable interest to individuals occupying theistic perspectives on reality and our place therein.

Under the traditional concept, meaning is also plausibly regarded as a very multiply realizable thing. This is because under the concept meaning is a general activity type that has, plausibly, many fundamentally different realizers (i.e., many fundamentally different particular activity types that realize it).[32] Just as the type *the best sort of defensive tactical maneuver* or *the best kind of dramatic performance* plausibly has many fundamentally different realizers, so meaning under the traditional concept plausibly has many such realizers, including the sort of moral pursuit that Gandhi exemplified in the Salt March, the kinds of hedonic pursuits that top-tier Bordeaux vintners exemplify with their characteristic activities, the sort of aesthetic pursuit that Miles Davis exemplified by his production of *Kind of Blue,* and the sorts of epistemic pursuit that Marie Curie exemplified in her scientific discoveries. I take the multiple realizability of meaning under the traditional concept to speak in favor of the concept because I take many people's interest in meaning to be implicitly tied to such realizability. At least, if they thought that life's meaning couldn't be exemplified by the quite different sorts of things that individuals like Gandhi, the Bordeaux vintners, Davis, and Curie do, I suspect that many people would be much less interested in it.

Moreover, the traditional concept makes good sense of notable ways in which we commonly talk about meaning. For example, we commonly talk about meaning in the

---

[29] Michael Prinzing, "The Meaning of 'Life's Meaning'," *Philosophers' Imprint,* 21 (2021). Online at http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0021.003, accessed on February 20, 2024.

[30] E.g., Metz, "The Concept of a Meaningful Life" and Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time."

[31] See James Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 2.

[32] This remains true even on fairly rigorous accounts of what's required for the realizers to be fundamentally different. On Lawrence Shapiro's account, for example (see his "Multiple Realizations," *The Journal of Philosophy,* 97 (2000), pp. 635-54), to be fundamentally different (or "genuinely distinct," as he puts it) the realizers must differ in "their causally relevant properties" (p. 646)—in the case under consideration, the properties by virtue of they count as the (humanly) best sort of goal-directed activity.

infinitive form, as in "the meaning of life is to… ," and this is only to be expected under the traditional concept, because under that concept meaning is an activity type. We also commonly talk about meaning both with the definite description "the meaning of life" and without, as in "meaning in life" and "a meaningful life," and here, too, the traditional concept affords us a good explanation. The definite description permits us to talk about the type that is meaning itself, whereas the indefinite phrases enable us to talk about the exemplification of that type within one's life, or such exemplification to the extent that one's life can be said to be characterized by the type. To take one further example, we also commonly talk about meaning in the same breath that we talk about purpose. Under the traditional concept, this also makes very good sense, because meaning is an essentially purpose-related phenomenon. Meaning is tied to purpose not only by virtue of the fact that it is a kind of purposeful activity—a kind of pursuit—but also by virtue of the fact that, as the best among the various sorts of pursuits that human beings can adopt, it sets the evaluative standard for them and is thus naturally said to be what all the other sorts of pursuit aim at or aspire towards.[33]

I think it also speaks in favor of the traditional concept that it gives good theoretical traction to our pretheoretic intuitions. For the newcomer to philosophical theorizing about life's meaning, it can be unclear which if any of her intuitive judgments are supposed to be relevant to the assessment of competing conceptions or theories of meaning. Under the traditional concept, however, there is much more clarity about this. Intuitive judgments about whether this or that sort of pursuit can be adopted by human beings, about whether this or that sort of pursuit is better than the other, and so on, will quite clearly be the kinds of intuitions on which we will be expected to draw when assessing competing theories of meaning.

Because there is so much to be said in favor of the traditional concept of meaning, an argument for the preclusion thesis proves only the weightier if it is well-motivated under that concept. And my argument for the preclusion thesis is indeed so motivated, for it is very compelling that the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt in life can't be the worst sort of activity they can perform, in one of the most basic ways in which an activity can be evaluated. Under the traditional concept of meaning, in other words, it's difficult to see how my argument's distinctive requirement on meaning-endowing activity could fail to be a requirement on such activity.

That my argument's requirement is well-motivated under the traditional concept is, I suspect, a function of a more general truth about the relationship between superlative types and the basic dimensions of evaluation they implicate. Plausibly, it is necessarily true that for any type for which superlative evaluation makes sense, and whose evaluation involves basic dimensions of evaluation (i.e., continua that run from the fullest extent to which a basic value of that type can be realized through to the fullest extent to which the value's corresponding disvalue can be realized), the best sort of that type is not of the worst sort, along any of the basic dimensions of evaluation. Thus, for example, where the aesthetic is assumed to be one of

[33] Compare Timothy Williamson's suggestion that knowledge is the aim of all other truth-oriented cognitive states (e.g., mere belief) because, as the best of such states, knowledge sets the evaluative standard for them (*Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2000), p. 47). On Williamson's suggestion, knowledge is what it's all about when it comes to truth-oriented cognition. Similarly, under the traditional concept of meaning, meaning is what it's all about when it comes to the sorts of pursuits human beings can adopt.

the basic dimensions of athletic evaluation, the best sort of athletic performance cannot be of the worst sort, aesthetically speaking—one of the most artless or least graceful of athletic performances, for example. Similarly, the best sort of athlete cannot be of the worst sort, aesthetically speaking—one of those athletes most disposed to artless athletic performances, or one of those least disposed to graceful athletic performances. Where the hedonic is a basic dimension of culinary evaluation, the best sort of chef's knife cannot of the worst sort, hedonically speaking—one of the most uncomfortable or unpleasant of such knives to hold, say—just as the best sort of dish-preparation cannot be the most painful to effect and the best sort of dish cannot be the most unpleasant to taste. The best performing passenger car cannot be among the least fuel efficient, or the most dangerous of such vehicles, not at any rate where fuel efficiency and safety are among the basic dimensions of passenger-car evaluation. And so on. The point that my argument's requirement on meaning-endowing activity is well-motivated under the traditional concept of meaning seems simply to fall into place as yet another example of the more general necessary truth here.

5.

I said above that I take there to be many particular conceptions of life's meaning that yield prima facie plausible positions on meaning under the traditional concept I have described. In saying this I am not suggesting that the theorists who have articulated and defended these conceptions have done so with that traditional concept in mind. Indeed, on the contemporary scene I wouldn't be surprised if most theorists of meaning have either proffered their conceptions under alternative concepts or under no particular concept of meaning at all. I only mean to suggest that, whatever concept of meaning they may or may not have had in mind, many theorists of meaning have articulated and defended conceptions of it that in fact yield positions that are at least prima facie plausible (often more so) under the traditional concept.

Consider, for example, Wolf's fitting-fulfillment conception, according to which meaning involves activity that is not just subjectively fulfilling for the agent, but fittingly so because it is of some objective value in the relevant minimal sense we discussed in section 2: "meaning in life arises," as she puts it, "when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it."[34] This suggests a position on meaning that is surely at least prima facie plausible under the traditional concept (whatever our reasons might be for ultimately embracing or rejecting the position under that concept): the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt in life is the sort in which the agent has an intense interest or engagement that is matched by objective value of some sort or other. Or consider Metz's fundamentality conception of meaning. On this conception, the meaning of life is essentially a matter of contouring one's reason (very broadly conceived) in a positive way toward what he calls "fundamental conditions of human existence," which are in a causal or explanatory sense responsible for many other conditions of human existence.[35] Here too a position on meaning is suggested that is obviously at least prima facie plausible under the traditional concept: the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt is one that involves such

[34] Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, p. 26.
[35] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 222-3.

rational contouring; alternatively put, the meaning of life is to direct your rational capacities toward the promotion of the most important features of human existence.

Many other contemporary conceptions follow suit in this respect. Robert Nozick's limit-transcendence conception of meaning,[36] according to which meaning pushes us closer to the Unlimited by making us transcend our current limits, suggests the position that the best sort of pursuit a human being adopt is one that involves becoming more like the Unlimited in this way. This too is prima facie plausible under the traditional concept. With its Aristotelian emphasis on flourishing in life, Cottingham's conception of meaning also suggests a position that is prima facie plausible under the concept: the meaning of life is to do what renders you at once a more psychologically "integrated" and yet rationally "open" agent.[37] Richard Taylor's creativity conception of meaning similarly suggests a prima facie plausible position under the traditional concept: the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt in life, that position implies, is one in which the person aims to effect something of lasting value through the exercise of her creative capacities.[38] Narrative- or compositional-structure conceptions of meaning,[39] which take it to involve the display in life of the sorts of structural features that characterize good literary or musical compositions, suggest positions that are similarly plausible under the traditional concept. Indeed, even certain subjectivist conceptions, such as existentialist accounts that locate meaning in the pursuit of one's interests under the liberating conviction that this is better than the pursuit of any divinely sanctioned interests, hold considerable prima facie plausibility under the traditional concept. With so many conceptions of meaning of this sort, then, the number of theorists for whom my argument should hold some appeal would seem to be quite large.

A final point to made in favor of my argument is that it is consistent with a very wide range of contemporary conceptions of evil activity as well. The only significant claim the argument entails about evil activity is one that seems simply to fall out of the general concept under which most of these conceptions are offered, namely, the claim that evil activity is necessarily of the worst sort, along the morally basic dimension of the evaluation of activity. Because there is no obvious reason to think that this claim cannot be explained either in terms of the sheer amount of moral disvalue that evil activity must also realize, or in terms of the special kinds of moral disvalue it must also realize, my argument fits with accounts according to which evil activity is qualitatively distinct from less extreme forms of immorality[40] as well as with those according to which it is merely quantitatively distinct from them.[41] Because the claim is silent about the intentions of evildoers, the argument fits with accounts that take evil

[36] See his "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 571-650.
[37] Cottingham, *Meaning of Life,* p. 29.
[38] See Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," in *Values in Conflict: Life, Liberty, and the Rule of Law,* edited by Burton M. Leiser (New York: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 3-26 and Taylor, "Time and Life's Meaning," *The Review of Metaphysics,* 40 (1987), pp. 675-86.
[39] E.g., Wai-Hung Wong, "Meaningfulness and Identities," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice,* 11 (2008), pp. 123-48 and Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 98-100.
[40] E.g., Todd Calder, "Is Evil Just Very Wrong?" *Philosophical Studies,* 163 (2013), pp. 177-96.
[41] E.g., Luke Russell, "Is Evil Action Qualitatively Distinct from Ordinary Wrongdoing?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy,* 85 (2007), pp. 659-77.

activity to be directed at a specific sort of goal[42] and accounts that don't.[43] Indeed, because there is no obvious inconsistency between the claim that evil activity is necessarily of the worst sort, morally speaking, and the most well-known of contemporary empirical hypotheses about evil activity, my argument can be happily conjoined with them too. There is no obvious inconsistency, for example, between the claim that evil activity is necessarily of that worst sort and Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" hypothesis, according to which we may find nothing particularly interesting about the perpetrators of evil activity beyond the fact that they are perpetrators.[44] There is likewise no obvious ill-fit between that claim and Adam Morton's "barriers" hypothesis, according to which evil activity is typically the result of the circumvention or erosion of common behavioral barriers, rather than the possession of uncommon behavioral inclinations.[45]

David Matheson, Department of Philosophy, Carleton University, Canada
david.matheson@carleton.ca

Bibliography

Aquinas. "On Man's Last End," in *The* Summa Theologica *of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1270), vol. I, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947 (1270).

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin, 2006 (1963).

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics,* translated by Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 (ca. 330 BCE).

Calder, Todd. "Is Evil Just Very Wrong?" *Philosophical Studies,* 163 (2013), pp. 177-96.

—. "The Concept of Evil," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Winter 2022 Edition*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Introduction. Online at https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/concept-evil/, accessed February 15, 2024.

Card, Claudia. *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus*, edited by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 (1834).

Cicero. *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 2nd. ed., translated by Harris Rackham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931 (ca. 50 BCE).

Cottingham, John. *On the Meaning of Life*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Fackenheim, Emil. "Judaism and the Meaning of Life." *Commentary,* 39 *(*1965*),* pp. 49-55.

Feinberg, Joel. "Absurd Self-fulfillment," in *Freedom and Fulfillment: Philosophical Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 297-330.

[42] E.g., Hillel Steiner, "Calibrating Evil," *The Monist,* 85 (2002), pp. 183-93.

[43] E.g., Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm.*

[44] *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) (New York: Penguin, 2006).

[45] Morton, *On Evil*, Ch. 2.

Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *The Vocation of Man*, translated by Peter Preuss. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987 (1800).

Kauppinen, Antti. "Meaningfulness and Time." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* 84 (2012), pp. 345-77.

Kekes, John. "The Meaning of Life." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy,* 24 (2000), pp. 17-34.

—. *The Roots of Evil.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Korsgaard, Christine. "Two Distinctions in Goodness." *Philosophical Review*, 92 (1983), pp. 169-95.

Landau, Iddo. (2011). Immorality and the Meaning of Life. *Journal of Value Inquiry,* 45 (2011), pp. 309-17.

Leach, Stephen and James Tartaglia. "The Original Meaning of Life" *Philosophy Now,* 126 (2018), pp. 24-5.

Matheson, David. "Meaning in the Pursuit of Pleasure." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association,* 8 (2022), pp. 552-66.

Metz, Thaddeus. "The Concept of a Meaningful Life." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 38 (2001), pp. 137-53.

—. *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Morton, Adam. *On Evil.* London: Routledge, 2004.

Nozick, Robert. "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," in *Philosophical Explanations.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 572-650.

Prinzing, Michael. "The Meaning of 'Life's Meaning'." *Philosophers' Imprint,* 21 (2021). Online at http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0021.003, accessed February 20, 2024.

Russell, Luke. "Is Evil Action Qualitatively Distinct from Ordinary Wrongdoing?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy,* 85 (2007), pp. 659-77.

—. *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Schlegel, Friedrich. *Friedrich Schlegel's* Lucinde *and the* Fragments, translated by Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971 (1799).

Schlick, Moritz. "On the Meaning of Life," in *Philosophical Papers: Volume II (1925 – 1936),* edited by Henk L. Mulder and Barbara F.B. Van de Velde-Schlick, translated by Peter Heath, Wilfrid Sellars, Herbert Feigl and May Brodbeck. D. Reidel: Dordrecht, 1979 (1927), pp. 112-29.

Shapiro, Lawrence A. "Multiple Realizations." *The Journal of Philosophy,* 97 (2000), pp. 635-54.

Singer, Irving. *Meaning in Life, Volume One: The Creation of Value.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010 (1992).

Spinoza. *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order,* translated by Michael Kisner and Matthew J. Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018 (1677).

Steiner, Hillel. "Calibrating Evil." *The Monist,* 85 (2002), pp. 183-93.

Tartaglia, James. *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life.* London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Taylor, Richard. *Good and Evil: A New Direction.* New York: Macmillan, 1970.

—. "The Meaning of Life," in *Values in Conflict: Life, Liberty, and the Rule of Law,* edited by Burton Leiser. New York: Macmillan, 1981, pp. 3-26.

—. "Time and Life's Meaning." *The Review of Metaphysics,* 40 (1987), pp. 675-86.

Williams, Bernard. "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For & Against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 77-135.

—. "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973 – 1980.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 1-19.

Williamson, Timothy. *Knowledge and Its Limits.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Wolf, Susan. "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life." *Social Philosophy & Policy,* 14 (1997), pp. 207-225.

—. "Meaning and Morality." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* 97 (1997), pp. 299-315.

—. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Wong, Wai-Hung. "Meaningfulness and Identities." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice,* 11 (2008), pp. 123-48.