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Meaning in Life

D E E T H I C A

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De Ethica was founded in 2013. It published its first issue in 2014, under the guidance of its first Editor-in-Chief, distinguished professor Brenda Almond.

Cover photo courtesy of Tomas Näsström.

From the Editors

We have the pleasure of presenting you with yet another thought-provoking issue of *De Ethica*. This time a special issue on the theme *Meaning in Life* that features four articles that respectively deal with questions related to this important subject. As guest editor Dr. Frans Svensson notices in his introduction to the issue, the subject has been growing in interest over the last couple of years and can now be seen to constitute a topic of central philosophical concern.

The publication of this issue of *De Ethica* marks the end of Marcus Agnafors' work as executive editor. Dr. Agnafors was one of the founders of the journal. Together with Dr. Maren Behrensen, Dr. Heidi Jokinen and Professor Brenda Almond as editor in chief, Marcus started the journal in 2013. The idea for a journal affiliated to the European Society for Research in Ethics, Societas Ethica, was first presented at the society's annual meeting in Sibiu, Romania, in 2012. Marcus together with the newly elected editorial team worked hard to transform the idea into an actual first issue. Now, five years later, *De Ethica* has published ten issues in four volumes and is steadily growing to be an internationally acknowledged scholarly journal in the discipline of ethics.

De Ethica seeks to facilitate intellectual exchange across disciplinary and geographical boundaries and across the gaps between different philosophical and theological traditions, and thus publish scholarly works in philosophical, theological and applied ethics. This makes for a demanding endeavor since the aim calls for the editorial team to identify the most pressing issues in all the fields, and more, to find the angles or perspectives on these issues that allow us to see their common ground.

We would like to take the opportunity to direct our warm appreciations to Marcus and the best wishes for him in his future endeavors. Hopefully we will get the chance to collaborate in other forms in the years to come.

Marcus Agnafors is succeeded by Jenny Ehnberg who is doctor of theological ethics at Uppsala University and is currently working as a researcher at the research unit of the Church of Sweden.

From the Editors

Es freut uns sehr, eine weitere anregende Ausgabe von *De Ethica* vorstellen zu können. Dieses Mal handelt es sich um eine thematische Ausgabe unter dem Titel *Der Sinn des Lebens* mit vier Beiträgen. Wie der Herausgeber dieser Nummer, Dr. Frans Svensson, in seiner Einleitung anmerkt, ist das Interesse am Thema in den letzten Jahren gewachsen, so dass es nun ein zentrales Thema der Philosophie darstellt.

Die Veröffentlichung dieser Ausgabe markiert auch das Ende von Marcus Agnafors' Tätigkeit als verantwortlichem Herausgeber. Dr. Agnafors ist ein Mitgründer der Zeitschrift; zusammen mit Dr. Maren Behrensen, Dr. Heidi Jokinen und Professor Brenda Almond als Chefredakteurin begann er seine Arbeit im Jahr 2013. Das Konzept für die Zeitschrift wurde erstmals auf der Jahrestagung der Societas Ethics 2012 in Sibiu, Rumänien, vorgestellt. Zusammen mit dem neu gewählten Team arbeitete Marcus hart daran, dieses Konzept tatsächlich zu einem ersten Heft zu führen. Jetzt, fünf Jahre später, hat *De Ethica* zehn Ausgaben in vier Bänden publiziert und wächst zu einer international bekannten wissenschaftlichen Publikation heran.

De Ethica strebt danach, intellektuellen Austausch über disziplinäre und geographische Grenzen hinaus zu befördern, die Kluft zwischen philosophischer und theologischer Tradition zu überbrücken, und Forschung in philosophischer, theologischer und angewandter Ethik zu publizieren. Dies stellt eine große Herausforderung für das Redaktionsteam dar, da wir die wichtigsten Themen in diesen Wissenschaftsfeldern und ihre gemeinsamen Grundlagen identifizieren müssen.

Wir möchten diese Gelegenheit nutzen, um Marcus unseren herzlichen Dank und die besten Wünsche für seine zukünftigen Vorhaben auszusprechen.

Marcus Agnafors wird abgelöst von Jenny Ehnberg, die einen Doktorgrad in theologischer Ethik von der Universität Uppsala hat und arbeitet derzeit als Forscherin für die Schwedische Kirche.

Introduction

Meaning in Life

Frans Svensson

What, if anything, gives meaning to people's lives? Is there some special value attached to living a meaningful life? Do we have reason to pursue the presence of meaning in our lives; in the lives of near and dear; maybe even in the lives of people more generally? Questions such as these were until recently seldom discussed in professional philosophy journals, anthologies, or monographs. Over the last few years, however, the philosophical literature on life's meaning has been steadily increasing. This is a step in the right direction. Because even though meaning in life is not the only important topic in philosophy, it is certainly one important topic. The papers in this issue of *De Ethica* are all devoted to this currently growing field in philosophy.

One of the most prolific and influential philosophers writing on meaning in life today is Thaddeus Metz. In his contribution to the present issue, 'Neutrality, Partiality, and Meaning in Life', Metz investigates in what respects the value of meaningfulness—which Metz assumes is a value that is distinct both from prudential value and from moral value—is neutral or partial. He argues that while the value of meaningfulness is plausibly neutral in relation to time, it is not so in relation to any other conditions.

In 'Meaning in Life and the Metaphysics of Value', Daan Evers questions whether meaning in life, as many parties to the debate seem to assume, really requires the existence of objective value. Evers considers different arguments that could be brought forward in defense of such a claim, but he finds them all wanting.

My own contribution, 'A Subjectivist Account of Life's Meaning', is an attempt to defend a subjectivist account or theory of what makes a person's life meaningful. According to the account that I favor, your life is meaningful to the extent that your categorical desires are fulfilled or satisfied. I argue that this account avoids the problems facing other accounts (both objective and subjective) that have been proposed in the literature, and also that it does not fall prey to various independent objections that could be raised against it.

In the fourth and final paper, 'What Good is Meaning in Life?', Christopher Woodard offers an challenging critique of a view shared by many philosophers writing on meaning in life, namely that meaningfulness is a distinct kind of final value. Woodard rejects the final value claim with respect to meaning in life, and instead suggests a view according to which meaningfulness is only instrumentally valuable.

Earlier versions of these papers were presented at a workshop on Meaning in Life and Objective Values at Umeå University in November 2016.

Neutrality, Partiality, and Meaning in Life

Thaddeus Metz

Discussion of whether values and norms are neutral or not has mainly appeared in works on the nature of prudential rationality and morality. Little systematic has yet appeared in the up and coming field of the meaning of life. What are the respects in which the value of meaningfulness is neutral or, in contrast, partial, relational, or 'biased'? In this article, I focus strictly on answering this question. First, I aim to identify the salient, and perhaps exhaustive, respects in which issues of neutrality arise in the contexts of life's meaning. In addition to providing a taxonomy of the key points of contention, a second aim is to advance reflection about them by considering the most important arguments that have been marshalled in favour of one side or the other, particularly as they appear in recent neutral positions. I conclude that meaning in life is neutral with respect to time but not any other conditions such as agents and patients, with a third aim being to point out that this makes the value of meaning different from the kinds of non/neutrality encountered in some salient conceptions of prudence and morality.

Introduction

Discussion of whether values and norms are neutral or not has mainly appeared in works on the nature of prudential rationality and morally right action. Little systematic has yet appeared in the up and coming field of the meaning of life. These days, value theorists routinely take the question of what makes a person's life meaningful (which contrasts with the more cosmic question of the point of the human race) to be distinct from considerations of prudence and morality.[1] It is therefore apt to enquire into the respects in which the personal value of meaningfulness, and the sorts of reason it grounds, are

[1] E.g. Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

neutral or are, in contrast, partial, relational, or 'biased'. In this article, I focus on answering this question.

In particular, one aim is to identify the salient, and perhaps exhaustive, respects in which issues of neutrality arise in the context of life's meaning. In rough catchwords, these concern: time (when good is preferable), agents (who fosters good), patients (whose good to foster), and means (how to foster good).[2]

In addition to providing a taxonomy of the key points of contention, a second aim is to advance reflection about them by considering important arguments that have been marshalled in favour of one side or the other, particularly as they appear in recent neutral positions.[3] I conclude that, at present, there are weighty reasons to believe that a meaningful life is one shot-through with non-neutrality. Although subjectivism is naturally associated with that view, one has strong reason to believe it even if one denies that meaning is merely subjective.

A third aim is to point out respects in which the forms of non/neutrality that I argue are inherent to meaning often differ from those in salient conceptions of prudence and morality. In particular, I argue that reasons of meaning are time-neutral in a way that hedonism about prudential reasons is not, and that it is non-neutral in several ways that consequentialism about moral reasons is not.

I begin by analyzing concepts, making it clear what debate regarding the nature of life's meaning is about and how I employ the neutral/non-neutral and subjective/objective distinctions. Then, I use the bulk of this article to address four major disputes about the neutrality of meaning in life or the lack thereof, concluding, roughly, that meaning in life is neutral only with respect to time, but no other conditions such as agents and patients. I conclude by noting that it would be desirable to consider elsewhere whether an explanation is available of why meaning is neutral with respect to time but not other conditions, pointing out that this structure is the inverse of utilitarianism.

Meaning, Neutrality, Objectivity

In this section I first offer an analysis of the concept of a meaningful life, and then spell out what it would mean for it to be neutral, non-neutral, objective, or subjective. After noting that the objective/neutral and subjective/non-neutral distinctions are naturally paired, I explain what it would mean for meaning to be objective/non-neutral or subjective/neutral. It is only in the following sections that I address arguments for and against neutrality.

By 'meaning in life' and cognate phrases I essentially mean an independent final good that can be exemplified by a human person to a variable degree, as opposed to a

[2] Much of this article presumes, with the friend of neutrality, that at least some substantial meaning comes from promoting certain conditions that are independently good for their own sake. I do not believe that it is exhausted by such.

[3] Aaron Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51:4 (2013), pp. 536-562; Ben Bramble, 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life', *Utilitas* 27:4 (2015), pp. 445-459; Mark Wells, 'Meaning in Consequences', *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5:3 (2015), pp. 169-179.

something conferred on the human race as a whole by something external to it such as God. Here is some prima facie evidence for thinking that meaning is a distinct personal good that is reducible to neither happiness nor morality, and so merits enquiry on its own about its value-theoretic structure.[4]

First off, it appears coherent to think of certain activities or periods that are happy but not meaningful, at least when 'happiness' is construed in a characteristically modern way as something mental. Where happiness is a matter of feeling pleasure, liking one's condition, or getting what one wants, then it appears to be something that can be quite separate from meaning. Consider a doctor getting high on laughing gas, or eating ice cream and watching sit-coms, in front of patients suffering in ways he could prevent.

Note, too, that it is not contradictory to suppose that aspects of a life could be meaningful but unhappy, again construed mentally in some way. A nurse who works to relieve patients of pain, stench, and discharge can be supposed to acquire meaning thereby, but might well neither enjoy it, nor like it, nor want it to continue.

Similar thought experiments apply to the relationship between morality and meaning. Just because an action or inaction is morally right does not make it meaningful, or at least the degree of the latter does not track the degree of the former. For example, it would constitute a serious wrongdoing to kidnap innocent people, forcibly remove their organs, and then sell them on the black market so that one can vacation in the south of France. However, not much meaning would accrue to one's life for *not* engaging in such wrongdoing.

In addition to cases of moral behaviour without (much) meaning, there appear to be ones of immorality with some meaning. Suppose, say, the only way to save the life of one's spouse were to steal a scarce medicine from a public hospital. Such behaviour would surely be wrong, at least in some major respects, but would probably make one's life more meaningful. Recall, too, the influential case of Gauguin, reputed to have ditched his wife and children so as to pursue his painting career in Tahiti.

If meaningfulness (and what is meant by related terms such as 'significance' and 'importance') is not identical to happiness and rightness, then what is it? In the field there are a number of ideas that have been suggested.[5] According to some, to ask about the meaningfulness of a person's life is to ask whether it serves some purpose beyond obtaining pleasure for herself. For others, talk of 'meaning' connotes ideas of a positive relationship between the individual and something else that is good for its own sake such as another person, an artwork, or a theory. For still others, when thinking about meaning in a life, one is considering what about it might warrant certain emotional reactions such as great esteem or admiration. Finally, there is the idea that meaningfulness is a function of narrative, say, a matter of composing one's life-story.

It would be philosophically interesting to determine whether just one of these ideas, or some other one, uniquely captures all and only thought about meaning. However, for the sake of this article it will suffice simply to keep this cluster of them in mind, and to note that, for most philosophers, meaning is characteristically realized in

[4] The next few paragraphs borrow from Thaddeus Metz, 'Life, Meaning of', in *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*, edited by Henk ten Have (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), pp. 1-6.

[5] Critically discussed in Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 17-36.

the three contexts of the good (morality, beneficence), the true (enquiry, knowledge), and the beautiful (creativity, the arts).

A subjective account of meaning in life maintains that its constitution depends on the subject (where this subject need not be a spiritual substance). More carefully, subjectivism is the view that lives are meaningful solely in virtue of obtaining what the field calls objects of 'propositional attitudes', mental states such as wants, emotions, and goals that are about states of affairs. Propositional attitudes are characteristically capable of 'that clauses'; for example, one has a desire that something were the case, or one is proud that something is true of one.

The subjectivist maintains that there is no standard independent of people's propositional attitudes to determine which states of affairs are meaningful. Instead, for her, states of affairs are meaningful just insofar as they are objects of propositional attitudes that have been obtained.

For example, what makes it the case that being a chess grandmaster is meaningful or not, for the subjectivist, is entirely determined by the attitude that someone (or some group) has taken (or would take) towards it. If I had wanted to be a chess grandmaster, and if I succeeded in becoming one, then typical subjectivists would claim that meaning would be conferred on my life in virtue of having obtained the object of my desire. If I had wanted to be a chess grandmaster, and if I failed to become one, then standard subjectivists would claim that no meaning would have been conferred on my life.

The objectivist's defining claim is that subjective conditions such as a person getting what he wants or realizing his aims are *not sufficient* for his life to be meaningful. Instead, for the objectivist, certain states of affairs (perhaps in a merely physical world) are meaningful 'in themselves', apart from being the object of propositional attitudes. Some conditions are such that they *ought to be* wanted, chosen, or valued, even if people have not done so.

Returning to the chess grandmaster case, if an objectivist were to deem this project to be meaningful, she would appeal not *merely* to the fact that a person has adopted it, but instead (or at least also) to facts independent of this person's propositional attitudes, such as that taking up chess would: be intrinsically good because it is complex; develop facets of his rational nature; or improve others' quality of life by teaching them or entertaining them. If someone had a talent for chess but did not like it, or were not pursuing it, an objectivist might recommend that he change his mind, that he cultivate an interest in it, so as to bring more meaning to his life.

The neutral/non-neutral distinction is not about the respect in which meaning is or is not a function of propositional attitudes, but is instead, roughly, about the respect in which meaning, particularly its amount, is a function of a certain bearing on an individual, perhaps at a given time. Roughly, neutralists maintain that the amount of meaning to be had is independent of any orientation towards the state of a particular person, whereas non-neutralists maintain the opposite.

To illustrate, consider the context of prudential rationality, in which a neutralist might maintain that one ought to assign equal weight to the interests of one's present and future selves, whereas a non-neutralist might suggest that only the present matters or that it matters qualitatively more when making choices expected to promote her good. In addition, as I discuss below, a non-neutralist might, at a given time in her life, have a

'bias towards the future' in respect of pleasure, in the words of Derek Parfit.[6] That is, she might prefer to be someone who will experience a moderate amount of pleasure in the future than to be someone who already experienced a greater amount of pleasure in the past. In contrast, a neutralist with respect to one's life at a given time would prefer the greater amount of pleasure, giving no less weight to the past as to the future.

With respect to morality, the most important form of neutrality is consequentialism, the view that one morally ought to assign equal weight to everyone's interests regardless of whether they are members of your family or country, or that one has most moral reason to seek to minimize the number of harmful or degrading actions performed in the world regardless of who performs them. Deontology, in contrast, is often understood to maintain that it is permissible to give one's own interests or those of one's family extra weight, or that it is usually morally worse for oneself to perform a harmful or degrading action than it is to fail to prevent someone else from doing so.

To sum up, in these cases relating to prudence and morality, key debates are, roughly phrased, about whether one's present good matters more than one's future, whether one's future pleasure matters more than one's past, whether the interests of those related to one matter more than the interests of others, and whether one's own actions matter more than the actions of others. Although there is indeed some overlap with these issues in debates about meaning in life, these latter debates also, interestingly, feature some new areas of disagreement between non/neutralists.

Before turning to considerations of how non/neutrality figure into thought about what makes a life meaningful, consider how the distinctions drawn in this section bear on each other. Very roughly speaking, subjectivism tends towards non-neutrality, while objectivism tends towards neutrality. More carefully, I as now point out, the most resolutely non-neutral accounts of meaning in the literature have generally been subjective, and the most resolutely neutral accounts of meaning in the literature have been objective. However, there is no necessary, or for all I can tell, probabilistic, connection between these views; orthogonal accounts are plausible.

What we might call 'radically individualist' forms of subjectivism about meaning entail a kind of non-neutrality straightaway. If one believes, as Richard Taylor appeared to hold at one point in his career,[7] that one's life is meaningful only insofar as one's desires are maximally satisfied, then it is only facts about one's self that constitute meaning, with facts about other people's desires or interests not mattering at all at a fundamental level (even if, contingently, one's desires might be about theirs). Consider, too, a communitarian account of meaning, according to which one's life is more meaningful, the more one lives up to norms of which one's society approves.[8] Here, there is still non-neutrality of a sort, since it is facts about the propositional attitudes of one's society, not all human persons, that determine what is meaningful. However, there is a

[6] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 165-166.

[7] Richard Taylor, 'The Meaning of Life', in his *Good and Evil* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, [1970] 2000), pp. 319-334.

[8] Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, 'On Luck, Responsibility, and the Meaning of Life', *Philosophical Papers* 34:3 (2005), pp. 443-458.

form of subjectivism (which I have called 'hypothetical-intersubjective'[9]) by which meaning is constituted by facts about what all human selves would prefer from a certain standpoint and hence promises not to be 'biased', at least not in the ways the other subjectivisms are.

Turning to objectivism, what has been called the 'point of view of the universe' is a form of it that is usually held to entail neutrality.[10] Suppose that facts about meaning are not a function of any human beings' propositional attitudes, and are instead determined either by what an impartial observer surveying the entire physical world would prescribe or by utterly mind-independent, natural facts about the amount of final value in it. Then, many would expect meaning in life to be a matter of performing whichever actions would maximize final values and minimize final disvalues, whomever may be affected and whenever they may obtain (and, perhaps, however they may be caused). This substantially neutral view of life's meaning has been clearly advanced by consequentialists who include Peter Railton,[11] G. E. Moore,[12] Peter Singer,[13] Irving Singer,[14] Quentin Smith,[15] Aaron Smuts,[16] Ben Bramble,[17] and Mark Wells.[18] It is a live position in Anglo-American debate about what constitutes meaning in life, and below I provide reason to reject it.

However, there are kinds of objectivism that are compatible with some non-neutrality. This sort of conception would be analogous to a natural rights account of moral duties. By this conception of right action, moral facts are not a function of any human beings' propositional attitudes and yet there is not equal moral reason for everyone to promote final value in any manner and at any location. Similarly, one objective but non-neutral approach to meaning is the view that facts about it are not a function of any human beings' propositional attitudes but that meaning does not obtain regardless of, roughly, whose good is advanced and when. Prominent examples include the accounts of life's meaning proffered by Robert Nozick,[19] Susan Wolf,[20] and myself.[21]

[9] In Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 168, 178. See, e.g., Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), esp. pp. 164-166.

[10] For some reason to doubt this claim, see Iddo Landau, 'The Meaning of Life *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89:4 (2011), pp. 727-734.

[11] Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13:2 (1984), pp. 134-171.

[12] Quoted in Metz, *The Meaning of Life*, edited by Hugh Moorhead (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1988), pp. 128-129.

[13] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[14] Irving Singer, *Meaning of Life, Volume 1: The Creation of Value* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[15] Quentin Smith, *Ethical and Religious Thought in Analytic Philosophy of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[16] Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life'.

[17] Bramble, 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life'.

[18] Wells, 'Meaning in Consequences'.

[19] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 594-613.

[20] Susan Wolf, 'The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity', in *The Contours of Agency, Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, edited by Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), pp. 227-244, and *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*.

For the three of us, meaning is *relational*, such that, e.g., helping children one has reared confers *pro tanto* more meaning than helping to the same degree those one has not, but it is not utterly *relative* to the propositional attitudes of subjects.

In the rest of this article, I try to avoid presuming that objectivism is true, and instead bracket the issue of whether and how meaning might be constituted by the objects of propositional attitudes. I instead critically explore respects in which meaning is neutral or not, considerations for which subjectivists and objectivists both probably need to account. I conclude that, although the kinds of agent-neutrality and patient-neutrality salient in various forms of consequentialism are implausible at this stage of debate about meaning in life, another sort of neutrality, in respect of a life's time, appears to be correct of meaning.

Time

When is meaning preferably realized in one's life? More specifically, is there a bias towards the future in respect of meaning in life, as there appears to be regarding pleasure? I argue that the answer to this question is complicated by the fact that there are two dimensions by which to evaluate the meaning in a life. In a part-life respect, which I explain below, meaning is time-neutral, but in a whole-life respect it is not. In both respects, however, I argue that the value-theoretic temporal structure of meaning differs from that of pleasure.

Recall above Parfit's point, roughly that one would typically prefer that pleasure be realized in one's future as opposed to have been experienced in one's past. More carefully, consider Parfit's thought experiment, in which you have just woken up from a surgery and are suffering from a temporary bout of amnesia. Before you are able to remember who you are, you are told that you could be one of two people. You could be either (A) someone who experienced a great amount of pleasure yesterday, or (B) someone who will experience a small amount of pleasure tomorrow. A large majority of readers would prefer to be (B), even though the amount of pleasure would be less.[22] From this thought experiment, and from one about pain,[23] Parfit infers that we have a 'bias towards the future' in the sense that, from the standpoint of any given time, we want our future to be as good as possible.

Thomas Hurka was perhaps the first to note that Parfit's generalization is too quick. We have a bias towards the future in respect of pleasure (and pain), but not, it

[21] Thaddeus Metz, 'The Good, the True and the Beautiful: Toward a Unified Account of Great Meaning in Life', *Religious Studies* 47:4 (2011), pp. 389-409, and *Meaning in Life*, pp. 219-234.

[22] It has been suggested to me that someone might prefer to be (A) since she could then obtain pleasure in the future from the *memories* of the pleasure she had experienced in the past. However, that point does not tell against the claim of bias towards the future, since the ultimate rationale here for preferring to be A is the prospect of future benefit.

[23] If you could be either (A) someone who experienced a great amount of pain yesterday, or (B) someone who will experience a small amount of pain tomorrow, most would prefer to be (A), even though (A)'s pain is larger.

seems, in the case of goods that Hurka calls 'perfections', respects in which our valuable nature *qua* rational is realized.

> Imagine that, awaking in hospital with temporary amnesia, you are told that you are either a scientist who made a major discovery last year or a different scientist who will make a minor discovery next year. You will surely hope that you are the first scientist. You will want your life to contain the greatest scientific achievement possible, regardless of its temporal location….This is captured in a fully time-neutral theory.[24]

Although below I suggest that the clause about temporal location is phrased too strongly, Hurka's central point seems correct and, upon reflection, to apply to more than merely perfections, which plausibly form a subset of meaningful conditions.[25] For example, would you rather be someone who saved another person's life in the past, or someone who will help an old lady cross the street in the future? Presumably readers would prefer the former. Similarly, assuming that some meaning in life is a function of others' appreciation of what one has done, suppose that you could be either someone who had been widely recognized for having produced a masterpiece in the past, or someone who will be mildly recognized for having produced a mediocre poem in the future. Although I accept that there is some self-realization in both cases, the good of recognition is distinct from that and is part of the explanation of why one would rather be the former.

In general, I submit that we lack a bias towards the future, i.e., are neutral, with respect to goods for which it makes sense to feel great esteem, where meaningful conditions are plausibly identified as those (more or less – see the previous section of this article). Beneficent actions, scientific discoveries, aesthetic works (i.e., the good, the true, the beautiful) and recognition for these achievements are all plausible candidates for being estimable, or at least meaningful, and are ones that we would be glad to have had in the past, or, more carefully, to prefer to have had in the past, supposing they were substantial, than to be forthcoming in the future, supposing they were not.

There is a qualification to make, here, but it does not affect the overall point. The wrinkle is that Parfit's thought experiment as applied to meaning abstracts from 'whole-life' considerations, i.e., the respect in which meaning probably is constituted in part by the pattern of a life in its entirety, or at least for long stretches. Parfit's question invites one to focus on how a certain episode or project might confer meaning on one's life, and discourages one from considering whether a certain distribution of them over time might confer a distinct sort of meaning. However, a number of those working in the field have contended that a life's pattern makes a difference to its overall meaningfulness.[26] All things being equal, for example, many think that a life with an upward trajectory of meaningful episodes and that ends on a high note is more meaningful *as a whole* than one without such a pattern, holding constant the degree of meaning inherent to the episodes considered as an aggregate.

[24] Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 61.
[25] As I have argued in *Meaning in Life,* pp. 71-73.
[26] Most thoroughly in Antti Kauppinen, 'Meaningfulness and Time', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82:2 (2012), pp. 345-377.

If this sort of whole-life dimension of meaning obtains, then it is wrong to suppose that there is *only* time neutrality regarding when meaning is preferable in a life. It is too strong, or at least is misleading, to say, as Hurka does above, that one wants one's life 'to contain the greatest scientific achievement possible, regardless of its temporal location'. That seems true when comparing achievements considered in themselves. However, it is probably false when considering a life as a whole, in which case one would prefer that one's career progresses to the point of making the greatest scientific achievement possible at the end, rather than peter out afterwards.

In sum, when it comes to the question of when meaning is preferable in a life, there is some neutrality and some non-neutrality. When considering meaningful projects in themselves, there is neutrality, in the sense that one would prefer to have had a very meaningful project in the past than to have a not so meaningful one in the future. There is no bias towards the future in the sense of wanting the future to be as meaningful as possible, if it would mean a much less meaningful past. However, when considering the overall distribution of meaningful projects, there does appear to be such a bias; at least many of us would prefer that meaning increase over the course of our lives.

In both respects, meaningfulness interestingly differs from happiness *qua* pleasant experiences and a hedonist account of prudence based on that construal. For one, there is arguably no neutrality when it comes to pleasure; we invariably would prefer that pleasure come in the future, no matter how small it will be, than that it already occurred, no matter how large it was. For another, *the reason* we want pleasure invariably to come in the future does not appear to be a function of whole-life considerations. It is not the pattern of a life that moves us to want the future to be as pleasant as possible, as it is in the case of meaning; for what motivates us in Parfit's thought experiment is, recall, nothing about life as a whole. Instead, it appears that there is something about the nature of a positive *experience* that makes it such that, in respect of its final value, it is something always to want to undergo as opposed to something to want to have undergone.

Agents

The previous section was about when meaning in life is preferably exhibited from the standpoint of an agent at a given time. The present section is, in contrast, about the respect in which meaning in life is a function of an agent having caused certain outcomes. Suppose that meaning is, at least to some degree, constituted in some way by advancing finally good states of affairs such as making other people's lives go better. Can one obtain meaning in a life merely by having brought about (perhaps in some particular way) something good for its own sake, or must one have both brought it about and thereby added to the overall amount of final value in the universe that would not have obtained were it not for one's having so acted?

Some consequentialists contend that the latter is true, that in order to have had a meaningful life, one must have made the world a better place *than it would have been without one*. Such a view is neutral in the sense that it is not sufficient merely to *be one who has done some good*. Beyond that, for some consequentialists, one must have added some net sum of good to the world that would not have been realized otherwise.

G. E. Moore is clearly a consequentialist of this sort. In a response to a written query about his views on life's meaning, he once said,

> I have been very much puzzled as to the meaning of the question 'What is the meaning or purpose of life?'...But at last it occurred to me that perhaps the vague words of this question are often used to mean no more than 'What is the use of a man's life?'....A man's life is of some use, if and only if the *intrinsic* value of the Universe as a whole (including past, present, and future) is greater, owing to the existence of his actions and experiences, than it would have been if, other things being equal, those actions and experiences had never existed.[27]

To have a useful, and hence meaningful, life by Moore's view, one must have contributed to the production of a certain state of affairs that abstracts in a neutral fashion from one's position, namely, to the aggregate of what is good for its own sake wherever it exists in the world. Ben Bramble has recently advanced a similar view.[28]

Quentin Smith is still another theorist who holds this account of the conditions for a meaningful life, but he interestingly believes that they are never fulfilled and that everyone's life is therefore meaningless.[29] For Smith, in order for our lives to matter, we must be in a position to add some amount of final value to the universe, but we are never in such a position since the amount of final value of the world is already infinite. The key premises for this view are that every bit of space-time (or at least the stars in the physical universe) have some positive final value, that these values can be added up, and that space is infinite. If the physical world at present contains an infinite degree of value, nothing we do can make a meaningful difference, for infinity plus any amount of value must be infinity.

To question Smith, as well as Moore and Bramble, I do not address the metaphysical issue of whether space is infinite or the axiological one of whether there already exists an infinite amount of final value. Instead I focus on the claim that having meaning in one's life requires one having made the universe better, *qua* higher sum of final value over all spaces and times, than it would have been without one having lived. Even granting that there is already an infinity of final value, meaning would be possible if it did not require adding a certain amount of value to the world, but instead obtained upon being *the source* of a desirable outcome.

Consider that one does not merely want one's child to be reared with love, but wants to be the one who rears one's child with love. This desire remains even knowing *that others would have reared one's children with love in one's absence*, so that one's actions would not be increasing the final value of the state of the universe relative to what it would have had without them. Even if a step-father would have appeared on the scene and produced the same effects on my children, it is intuitive to think that some meaning accrues to my life for an agent-relative consideration, namely, for in fact having been the one to have produced these effects.

[27] Quoted in Moorhead, *The Meaning of Life*, pp. 128-129.

[28] Bramble, 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life', p. 450.

[29] Quentin Smith, 'Moral Realism and Infinite Spacetime Imply Moral Nihilism', in *Time and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, edited by Heather Dyke (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), pp. 43-54.

For another example, nearly all of us working in intellectual fields would be proud, and reasonably so, if we were the *first* to make an important discovery. Our sense of pride is not dependent on the idea that the discovery would not have been made had we not done so. We usually expect others to make the discoveries we do, in time, but we sensibly feel esteem if we were nonetheless the ones to have initially made them. Or consider that if one swam out in the sea, against a rough current, to rescue someone drowning and so at some risk to one's life, then one would be reasonable to take some pride in having done so, even if someone else would have done so had one not. Supposing, as per a previous section, that meaning is largely constituted by pride-worthy conditions, the discovery and the rescue would have conferred some meaning on one's life.[30]

For a final point, consider how counterintuitive an analogous principle is. Suppose one suggested that one would not have done wrong to kill an innocent person against his will for money because, if one had not done so, someone else would have done the same. The fact that someone else would have reduced the amount of final value in the world had one not is no reason to think that one has not acted wrongly in doing so. Similarly, the fact that someone else would have produced the amount of final value in the world had one not is no reason to think that one has not accrued some meaning in life in having produced it.

These and myriad similar cases suggest the principle that what matters is not so much that a certain amount of final value would not have existed had one not brought it about, but more that one is the cause of final value, even if it would have been produced in one's absence. Meaning can come from one making the world better *than it was*, even if ones does not make it better *than it would have been without one*. Note that rejecting the more neutral interpretation of meaning does not require one to forego consequentialism about meaning altogether. It is coherent to deem Aaron Smuts to be a consequentialist insofar as he maintains that 'one's life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good', that is, 'objective value in the universe',[31] regardless of 'whether the same good would have resulted if one had not existed'.[32]

Patients

This section addresses the question of whether it matters where one does some good. More carefully, supposing that meaning can be conferred by promoting well-being or excellence, does the amount conferred logically depend on whose well-being or excellence is? A neutral theory would answer 'no', unlike a more biased, partial, or relational one.

One natural angle by which to address this issue would be consideration of personal relationships. Would more meaning come from benefitting to some degree the

[30] Bramble mentions a similar case, of wading in shallow water to save a life, but the ease of the rescue is a confounding factor, I believe, inclining one to judge differently. See his 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life', p. 450.

[31] Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', p. 558.

[32] *Ibid*., p. 536.

child whom one loves or to a somewhat greater degree a stranger's child whom one does not love, supposing that their present levels of well-being were comparable (and, so, it is not as though the stranger's child is starving and one's child is not)?

Although I do believe that partial relationships provide grounds for questioning neutrality in the sphere of meaning, I doubt that the way in which they do is distinct from parallel debates that have taken place in the literature on morality over the past two decades. If one believes either that partiality is either inherent to morality and can override impartial elements of it, or that it can override morality as such sometimes (à la Bernard Williams), then one is surely going to think that considerations of meaning are partial to some degree as well.

Since that path of debate has been well trod, I raise some less familiar considerations about whose good to foster, insofar as doing so is meaning-conferring. They concern not a choice between a beloved and a stranger, but instead between a beloved and oneself. A fully neutral theory about whose good should be advanced when it comes to meaning would give one one's own good the same weight as anyone else's. I argue, however, that, depending on the sort of good involved, there are situations in which one's own good should receive either more weight or less than others'.

Focus first on the good of subjective well-being, which I presume to be constituted at least in large part by pleasure. A neutral theory entails that, insofar as promoting subjective well-being confers meaning on the one doing the promoting, promoting one's own well-being could confer meaning on one's life to a degree comparable to promoting someone else's well-being. However, this implication is counterintuitive.[33]

For one illustration of the problem with patient-neutrality, consider Angry Dog, a case in which you and a friend are unexpectedly exposed to a fierce, medium-sized canine that, while unlikely to kill either of you, does threaten to draw blood. Suppose that you and your friend's influences on other people's well-being would be equal, that you are marginally more pain sensitive than your friend, that the dog will catch at least one of you (and, to be complete, that the dog would find no difference in pleasure upon catching either of you). A neutral theory such as utilitarianism would entail that, of the actions available, escaping would confer the most meaning on your life, even if this required shoving your friend in an apparently accidental manner towards the dog (and then forgetting about what you did). However, I submit that your life would not be made any more meaningful for so acting, and that the meaningful course would instead be to enable your friend to escape.

For an additional example, think about Mum. In this case, a mother is considering giving up food for her young son, where we suppose that both are quite hungry and that the food would do her somewhat more good than it would him. A neutral theory entails that more meaning would accrue to the mother by eating the food herself (and staving off guilt) than by giving it to her son, since she would thereby promote the greatest amount of well-being in the universe. However, this is implausible; the mother's life would be no more meaningful for enhancing her own welfare. If there is

[33] The following cases are similar to a thought experiment I first presented in Thaddeus Metz, 'Utilitarianism and the Meaning of Life', *Utilitas* 15:1 (2003), pp. 50-70 at pp. 56-57.

a meaningful action here, it would be sacrificing her own good for the sake of her son's, even when this would result in a bit less welfare overall.

The cases suggest that the promotion of your own welfare, at least subjectively construed, even when this constitutes promoting the most welfare available in the world, cannot enhance the significance of your life, or, more carefully, at least that pleasure promotion cannot enhance the significance of your life when the gains to you would be marginal relative to others. Interestingly, intuitions are reversed when the relevant good is not subjective well-being but rather excellence, perfection, or virtue.

Consider the case of Married Couple,[34] both of whom are talented, indeed so talented that they have precisely calculated that the most intellectual and practical virtue would be produced in the long run if the wife stayed home and supported the husband in his professional career, more than if he instead took care of the household or if they both worked and shared the domestic labour of cleaning, cooking, and caretaking. Suppose that the amount of extra virtue realized by the husband through his work would be marginal relative to the other options. Since, according to a neutral approach, meaning is proportionate to the overall amount of virtue produced, wherever that may be, the wife ought to stay home and support the husband on grounds of meaning. However, that is counterintuitive. Even if the wife had worked hard at home to enable her husband to perfect his human nature, to a slightly higher degree than that of which she were capable, she would have had more meaning in her life, insofar as it is a function of excellence, if she had instead exhibited quite a lot of excellence in herself.

In response to this case, Mark Wells has suggested that part of its pull is a function of many readers' inclination to reject patriarchal norms. That is, we are inclined to judge that the wife ought not stay at home, not so much because of considerations of meaning, but rather because many of us do not want to see women saddled with traditional roles. Wells remarks, 'As a critic of such traditional patriarchal norms – a position I suspect I share with many other academics – I cannot be sure my judgment about the meaningfulness of the wife's life is not being influenced by the appearance of these norms'.[35]

The point is fair. However, the next issue to consider is whether parallel cases render the same conclusion when shorn of such confounding elements. And I submit that they do. For a first one, switch the positions of the husband and wife. Suppose that marginally more virtue would be produced in the world if he stayed home than if they both worked and did the domestic chores. Even so, reasons of meaning, to the extent they are grounded on excellence, counsel him to realize substantial excellence in himself, even if doing so would come at some minor cost to the net sum of excellence existing in the universe.

Similar remarks go for athletes and their coaches. Although some meaning surely accrues to a coach for enabling an athlete to flourish, more meaning would have come to her life had she been in the position of the athlete.[36] The familiar phrase 'He who can,

[34] First advanced in Metz, *Meaning in Life,* p. 195.

[35] Wells, 'Meaning in Consequences', p. 173.

[36] Wells remarks of a similar sort of case, 'When I modify the case to be about two teammates rather than a wife and her husband, I am less willing to say that teammate who sacrifices for the other

does; he who cannot, teaches' is disparaging plausibly because of the sense that more meaning would come from doing than teaching how to do. Of course, to teach something well often means being able to do it well. The point is that more meaning tends to come from actually doing something well oneself, as opposed to enabling others to do so to a marginally greater degree.

Consider, too, musicians and those who sort out the logistics necessary for them to practice and play for audiences. Which would you rather be, the pianist or the one who pushes the piano onto the stage to enable her to play? Although there is some meaning in enabling others to develop and exhibit their aesthetic excellence, there would be somewhat more meaning, when it is grounded on aesthetic excellence, in being the one to display this excellence. There are, therefore, many cases beyond Married Couple that support the judgement that it is particularly important, insofar as meaning tracks the realization of virtue, to manifest virtue in oneself.

Notice that I do not deny that there is real meaning to be had in being a coach, a teacher, or even the guy who pushes the piano onto the stage so that the pianist can exhibit her talents. In addition, I make no claim about whether, in these sorts of cases, one ought to develop the excellence in oneself all things considered; perhaps a moral reason to help others means that one should on balance enable them to realize their virtue, even though it would be a bit less than the amount one would exhibit. I merely claim that meaningfulness, to the extent that it is a function of non-moral excellence in the realms of sport or music, is such that one has *pro tanto* more reason to develop the excellence in oneself than in others.

Furthermore, I do not mean to suggest that one always has most reason to promote athletic or aesthetic virtue in oneself, if one has to choose between oneself and others. I readily agree that if someone else would exhibit a *much* greater degree of this sort of virtue than oneself, then reasons of meaning, insofar as they are a function of promoting non-moral virtue, would entail enabling her to do so. The core point is that there appears to be an independent reason of meaning of some weight to exhibit such virtue oneself.

Reflect, now, on the two sets of cases I have advanced, one concerning well-being and the other virtue. Both have served the function of providing reason to doubt a neutral account of where to promote good in order to obtain meaning thereby. The cases of well-being suggest that, all things being equal, one obtains more meaning by enhancing the well-being of others than that of oneself, whereas the cases of virtue suggest that, all things being equal, one obtains more meaning by developing virtue within oneself than helping others to develop it in themselves. Although both sets of cases provide strong reason to doubt neutrality, one naturally hankers for an explanation of why the two goods have an inverse structure. Part of the explanation might be grounded on the definition of meaning-talk provided above. If 'meaning in life' by definition involves (at least to a large degree) the pursuit of higher-order purposes beyond one's own pleasure, then doing what would avoid causing one pain or would bring oneself pleasure could not (as such) confer meaning.

thereby lives less meaningfully' ('Meaning in Consequences', p. 173). Wells is 'less' willing to say it, but perhaps still willing on balance?

Means

The last major debate about neutrality in the context of life's meaning in recent literature concerns how to bring about good in a meaning-producing way. One facet of this discussion concerns moral constraints (or restrictions or rights), and whether good produced in the wake of their violation can confer meaning or not. Since, however, I appear to have said the most recent word on that matter (namely, 'it depends on the nature of the constraint'),[37] I do not address it, and instead focus on a different issue, concerning the respect in which the manner one produces good affects the amount of meaning involved. It concerns whether the means towards a desirable end must be effortful, sophisticated, or otherwise employ one's rational nature in a robust way. Neutralists contend that they need not be, that it does not matter what the agent does, so long as the results are (expected to be) good. I have argued that it does matter, but three consequentialists have recently argued that I am incorrect. I here respond to their rationales.

Central to the debate is Robert Nozick's old hypothetical case of a Results Machine,[38] programmed to bring about an array of desirable outcomes upon a certain button on it being pressed. If the means taken towards the end of maximizing the world's amount of good were irrelevant, then, as I have contended, a maximally meaningful life would be one that programmed the machine, or pushed the relevant button, so as to bring about as much objective value as it could. However, that judgment is counterintuitive. Even if it were the case that one *ought* to get the machine running, one's life would not be *maximally* meaningful for having done so. Instead, a fully meaningful life, insofar as it involves the promotion of objective value, requires *effortful* or *hands on* activity.[39]

In hindsight, I should have acknowledged that *building or programming the machine* could well have counted as an effortful or hands on activity. However, I continue to hold that merely *pressing a button* on it would not, and hence would not make one's life all that meaningful.

Those who maintain that meaning is a function of maximizing good, whichever actions may be sufficient to do so, have responded in four major ways to this thought experiment. First, Smuts has suggested that pressing a button would not be the real cause of the good produced, and so for that reason would not confer meaning even by a consequentialist view. He remarks, 'By pressing the button one might play a causal role in the process, much like the presence of oxygen plays in arson. But it's not clear that this is the cause we are after when we want to know why our house went up in flames.'[40]

Although it would be reasonable to ascribe most responsibility to the designer of the machine itself, it does not seem right to suggest that the one who presses the button would be akin to oxygen in the arson scenario, a merely necessary background condition. Instead, the stronger analogy, I submit, is one in which the person responsible for the

[37] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 189-195.
[38] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42-45.
[39] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 194-195.
[40] Smuts 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', p. 557.

machine's existence is like the person who has provided the match, and the person who presses the button on the machine is like the person who strikes the match.

A second reply, from Bramble, is that perhaps 'what is leading Metz to think that my ability to press the button does not make my life maximally meaningful now is that he is assuming that the button is easy to press, so that if I did not press it somebody else would.'[41] Bramble then invokes the extremely neutral version of consequentialism discussed earlier in this article, contending that meaning in life is constituted by making 'a contribution to good things *that would not otherwise be made*' and imagining that no one else would indeed press the button.[42]

I have of course provided reason to doubt this version of consequentialism above. However, another point to make is that what moves my intuition in the thought experiment is that little meaning is present not so much because someone else would readily press the button, but rather because pressing the button is easy. It does not take great strength of will, sophisticated planning, substantial training, fine discrimination, and so on. Even if I knew no one else would press the button, say, because the button requires my fingerprint alone to operate, I have the judgement that, while some meaning would accrue thereby, not as much meaning would accrue as if the same outcome were produced with a more robust exercise of my rational nature.

Bramble has a third reply, which is that I might be conflating final and instrumental sorts of meaning. If one presses the button, there is no other meaningful activity to come in its wake, but if one were instead to produce the same good by using one's rational nature in an effortful, complex way, then one would probably be in a position to produce even more good down the road.[43] It is this ability to do more good in the long run, Bramble suggests, that is moving me to think there is more meaning in the latter case than in the former.

However, it is not the idea that pressing the button would not be instrumentally good in the long-term that is moving me. When I imagine someone on his deathbed, with not much time left to live, I continue to have the intuition that the sort of deliberation and volition he undertakes is relevant to how much meaning he is going to get from his last days. Imagine, on the one hand, that he could merely reach over and press the button, or, on the other, that he could creatively and strategically coordinate the activities of a diverse group of people towards a common end, or engage in some tricky financial transactions to fund a project.

The fourth and final reply to the Results Machine thought experiment is the most interesting and initially appears to be powerful. Both Smuts and Wells have suggested that what the friend of neutrality ought to say is that there can be final value present in certain actions themselves, not merely in what results from the actions. In Smuts' words, button pressing lacks 'achievement value', a plausible final good constitutive of meaning.[44] Wells similarly suggests that 'robust, active, or intense means contribute to

[41] Bramble, 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life', pp. 450-451.

[42] *Ibid*., p. 450.

[43] *Ibid*., p. 450.

[44] Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', p. 558.

the final goodness of the consequence they produce',[45] either by virtue of being good in themselves or contributing to a means-ends organic whole that is good for its own sake.

Here is why this tempting reply is not convincing: it runs afoul of the point made in the previous section, namely, that it is, all things being equal, better to display virtue in oneself than to enable others to do so. Imagine the choice were either to display achievement value oneself and thereby produce good outcomes, on the one hand, or to press the button on the Results Machine that would prompt *two others* to display achievement value and thereby produce good outcomes, on the other. The neutralist must prescribe the latter course of action, but the intuition remains that this would not confer as much meaning on one's life as exemplifying achievement value oneself. In short, how one acts matters.

Conclusion

Recall the three aims of this article. One has been to identify the major lines of debate between neutralists and non-neutralists in the context of the value of meaning in life, to the extent that the latter is a function of realizing some independent final good. On this score I have identified four major disputes, concerning when meaning is preferable in a life, whether being the source of good is sufficient for meaning, whether meaning depends on whose good is promoted, and whether meaning depends on the manner in which one promotes good.

A second aim has been to defend particular answers to these questions. I argued that, in respect of parts of a life, meaning is time-neutral, or at least is not biased towards the future, for most would prefer to have a very meaningful project in the past than to have a not so meaningful one in the future. However, in all other respects, I have argued that meaning is biased, partial, relational, or otherwise non-neutral. Considering life as a whole, most would prefer to end their lives on a high note of substantial meaning. It appears to many that being an agent who is the source of good would be sufficient to confer meaning on one's life, even if others would have produced the same amount of good in the absence of one's activities. It seems that it does matter whose good is promoted, such that advancing one's own pleasure tends not to confer as much meaning as advancing that of others, and developing others' virtue tends not to confer as much meaning as developing one's own. Finally, the way in which one produces good is intuitively relevant to the degree of meaning available, such that button-pressing produces *pro tanto* less meaning than does the robust exercise of one's rational nature. Any plausible theory of meaning in life, whether subjective or objective, must have something to say about these intuitive features of it.

Finally, in having established these positions about meaning in life, a third aim of this article has been to contrast them with some salient views about prudence and morality. A hedonist account of prudence is, in contrast, time-biased for entailing that one would prefer a lesser amount of pleasure in the future than to have had a greater one in the past. A consequentialist account of morality is of course neutral when it comes to

[45] Wells, 'Meaning in Consequences', p. 172.

patients and means, entailing that it in principle does not matter whose good is promoted and in what manner.

It would be nice at this point to have an explanation of *why* meaning appears different, viz., to be non-neutral in all major respects except for one, regarding when meaning is preferable in a life (considering its parts in themselves). Why do reasons of meaning appear to exhibit the precisely inverse structure of utilitarian reasons of morality? Utilitarianism entails a bias towards the future as it includes the thesis of hedonism, is committed to the project of making people's lives go better, and therefore entails that their interests are at a given time always to experience more pleasure in the future. However, insofar as utilitarianism also includes consequentialism, it entails that an agent should be neutral about which persons are benefited and in what way, just so long as the maximum available sum of pleasure is produced. Meaning in life has the opposite features, entailing the time-neutral view that a person's interests are at a given time to perform or to have performed meaningful activities, and that it makes a difference which persons' good is advanced and in what way. Is there some deep reason for the inverse structure, and, if so, what is it?

One might object that the normative structure is not in fact inverse, since utilitarianism prescribes neutrality about time subject to the ability to influence states of affairs. That is, one might suggest that utilitarian reasons about morality are in principle time-neutral, and not biased towards the future, but that in practice they prescribe promoting pleasure only in the future because we cannot influence the past. If we could influence the past, so the objection goes, then utilitarianism would prescribe maximizing pleasure there, too.

While I accept that some forms of consequentialism are sensibly time-neutral, I do not think it is true of utilitarianism, insofar as the latter is the combination of consequentialism and a hedonist account of prudence. Recall Parfit's thought experiment, which reveals that, with regard to pleasure, we prefer it to come in the future, whereas with regard to meaning, we lack such a preference and welcome having exhibited it in the past. There is no awareness, here, of the ability to influence the past or not. *One does not prefer future pleasures because one cannot influence the past, for otherwise one would also exhibit a bias towards the future in the case of meaning, but one does not*.

The bias towards the future in respect of prudential pleasure, and hence of utilitarianism as a theory of moral reasons that includes it, is not in the first instance a function of the practical inability to change the past, but rather something else, something more principled. A thorough explanation of the time-bias of utilitarian moral reasons, their neutrality in respect of at least patients and means, and the fact that these reasons have the inverse structure of reasons of meaning, all must wait for another occasion.[46]

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Meaning in Life and the Metaphysics of Value

Daan Evers

According to subjectivist views about a meaningful life, one's life is meaningful in virtue of desire satisfaction or feelings of fulfilment. Standard counterexamples consist of satisfaction found through trivial or immoral tasks. In response to such examples, many philosophers require that the tasks one is devoted to are objectively valuable, or have objectively valuable consequences. I argue that the counterexamples to subjectivism do not require objective value for meaning in life. I also consider other reasons for thinking that meaning in life requires objective value and raise doubts about their strength. Finally, I argue that beauty is not plausibly objective, but that it seems important for meaning. This puts pressure on the objectivist to explain why objectivity matters in the case of other values.

1. Introduction

Many philosophers think that meaning in life requires the existence of objective values.[1] This paper assesses arguments for that claim. It is organized as follows: in section 2, I demarcate what most philosophers mean by a 'meaningful' life. In section 3, I explain what I mean by 'objective´ value, which I think captures the intentions of most philosophers. In section 4, I show why counterexamples to subjectivism about meaning do not warrant a requirement of objective value in the sense defined. In section 5, I discuss a consideration related to the evaluation of other people's claims about meaningfulness. In section 6, I discuss some reasons for a requirement of objectivity developed by Susan Wolf. In section 7, I argue that beauty is subjective, so that those objectivists who believe that beauty can confer meaning onto life face a challenge: to explain why some values but not others have to be objective. I conclude that there are no very strong arguments for the claim that meaningfulness requires objective value.

[1] E.g. Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Aaron Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51:4 (2013), pp. 536-562.

2. What are Questions about the Meaning of Life about?

One common complaint about the concept of meaning is that it is unclear. This complaint seems fair to me, but I'll do my best to clarify. Some people object that meaning is a property of sentences or utterances only. This objection presupposes that the concept of meaning as it occurs in thought about life is something like conceptual or representational content. But that is not the case. Most contemporary philosophers assume that life can be meaningful even if there is no God. So the notion of meaning at play is not something like *the purpose for which humankind or particular human beings were created*. These philosophers appear to have in mind a certain *value* that a life can have, whether or not there is a God.

The fact that meaning is a value is explicitly stated by Berit Brogaard andBarry Smith: 'Meaningfulness is ... a special kind of value which a human life can bear. More specifically, it is a kind of final value - something that we value for its own sake.'[2] Thaddeus Metz concurs: '[Meaningfulness] is a gradient final good that can be exhibited by an individual's life.'[3] The value of meaning is supposed to be at least conceptually distinct from that of moral worth, well-being and happiness. Its distinctiveness is often motivated by examples: Van Gogh's life is said to have been meaningful even if it was low in happiness. Those inclined to make that judgement appear to make it without particular attention to the painter's moral qualities, which might be thought to illustrate the fact that meaning is distinct from moral worth.[4]

It is much harder to show that meaning is distinct from well-being without taking a controversial stand on either issue. There are views of well-being according to which it is a matter of satisfying a list of goods, the contribution of which to one's well-being is independent of how they make you feel or whether they fulfill your desires. And there are views about meaning that coincide with desire satisfaction views of well-being.

Some philosophers say that a meaningful life is one towards which certain attitudes are appropriate, like admiration or pride, feelings of satisfaction, elevation and inspiration.[5] Perhaps the appropriateness of some of these could help to distinguish the notion of well-being from that of meaningfulness. In so far as the *concept* of well-being is equally applicable to animals, one might say that it should not entail that admiration or pride or elevation are appropriate. The life of a mouse may be high in well-being but not an appropriate object of esteem or inspiration.[6]

[2] Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, 'On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life', *Philosophical Papers* 34:3 (2005), pp. 443-458, at p. 443.

[3] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, p. 60.

[4] Although it may be that we (often) assume that meaningful lives meet at least a threshold of moral decency.

[5] E.g. Anti Kauppinen, 'Meaningfulness and Time', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84:2 (2012), pp. 345-377 and Metz, *Meaning in Life*.

[6] Even this is not obvious since the appropriateness of attitudes like pride and esteem may be relative to abilities. If a mouse's well-being is partly the result of good exercise of the mouse's abilities, we may want to say that it would be appropriate for the mouse to feel pride, or for others to admire the mouse, even if a mouse is not capable of that attitude (I owe this suggestion to Frans Svensson). The question remains whether a response along these lines is plausible for all attitudes that one may think are conceptually connected to the concept of meaningfulness.

For my purposes, it does not matter too much whether we can clearly distinguish meaning from well-being. I am interested in the question whether we have strong reason to think that it requires the existence of objective value.

3. Subjectivism about Value

Since my aim is to assess arguments for the claim that a meaningful life requires objective value, it is important to be clear on objectivity. Subjectivists about value in my sense are either expressivists, or believe that the instantiation of values is determined by (relations to) contingent standards or responses of individuals under either actual or idealized conditions.[7] Objectivists deny this.

An example of subjectivism in my sense is the position known as simple subjectivism, according to which 'X is wrong' means that the speaker disapproves of X. This view entails that X's being wrong consists in its being disapproved of by the speaker. In my stipulative use, a non-expressivist view only counts as subjectivist if it takes value either to be constituted by or metaphysically dependent on the responses of *individuals*.[8] I rule out ideal observer theories that require convergence in response between suitably idealized judges. Subjectivism, in my sense, includes at least expressivism,[9] contextualism,[10] Humean constructivism,[11] and truth-relativism.[12]

It is clear that at least some philosophers in the debate believe that meaning requires objective value in a sense which goes beyond the positions just described. For instance, Aaron Smuts says that his view involves 'strong commitments to value realism',[13] a term not usually applied to expressivist or contextualist views. Thaddeus

[7] So long as those idealized conditions do not themselves involve the perception or instantiation of standard- or response-independent facts about value.

[8] By 'metaphysical dependence' I mean that the instantiation of value properties is a function of contingent standards or responses of a judge under either actual or hypothetical conditions. This addition is required in order to cover relativist views à la John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity. Relative Truth and Its Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). According to MacFarlane, (certain) propositions about value are true or false relative to the standards or responses of assessors, even if those propositions are not about standards or responses. In that case, it is natural to think that value is not itself constituted by (relations to) standards or responses, even if its instantiation is. For more on issues relating to this, see Daan Evers, 'Relativism and the Metaphysics of Value', unpublished.

[9] For examples of expressivism about moral language, see Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) and Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[10] For an example of contextualism about value discourse quite generally, see Stephen Finlay, *Confusion of Tongues. A Theory of Normative Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[11] For an example of constructivism about reasons for action see Sharon Street, 'Constructivism about Reasons', in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics vol. 3*, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), pp. 207-245 (although Street's Humean constructivism is clearly a form of contextualism).

[12] For an example of truth-relativism about predicates of personal taste and other domains, see MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*.

[13] Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', p. 27.

Metz requires objectivity in a sense strong enough to entail that what is morally and aesthetically valuable is necessarily the same for all members of the human race.[14] Although Susan Wolf is harder to pin down, her discussion in *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* makes clear that the objectivity of value goes beyond what an individual happens to care about, even under ideal conditions. My aim in this paper is to see whether we have any strong reason to accept that meaning in life requires the existence of values that are not subjective in my stipulative sense.

4. Counterexamples to Subjectivism about Meaning

Subjectivism about meaning in life can come in various guises, but they all share the idea that a life is meaningful in virtue of nothing more than that the subject takes some positive attitude (such as desire or feelings of fulfilment) towards the dominant activities or events in her life.[15] This is a substantive position in the debate about meaning, not to be confused with subjectivism about *value* in the sense defined in section 3. The subjectivist about meaning provides a standard for ascribing meaning to a person's life: it is meaningful insofar as it satisfies the agent's desires or pro-attitudes. The subjectivist about value advances semantic or metaphysical claims: either judgements of value are non-cognitive states, or values are constituted by (relations to) the standards or responses of individuals, or the instantiation of value depends on such standards or responses.

Some philosophers motivate their subjectivist criterion for meaning at least in part by metaphysical considerations. For example, Harry Frankfurt recommends his subjectivist view in part by drawing attention to the fact that 'efforts to make sense of "objective value" tend to turn out badly'.[16] Subjectivist Steven Luper comments on what he calls 'externalism' by saying that it is 'difficult to defend'.[17] I take his point to be that objective (or external) facts *about value* are difficult to defend. But why should that support his own substantive view about meaning?

If Brogaard, Smith and Metz are right that meaning is a value, then one would expect the question what *makes* a life meaningful to be the same sort of question as the normative question what makes an action right or wrong, or a person good or bad. Such questions are normally debated without much concern for metaethics. I am not aware of anyone who takes the non-existence of objective moral facts to be a reason to embrace a subjectivist *normative* view, according to which what makes an action right is its conduciveness to the satisfaction of the agent's desires.[18] J.J.C. Smart happily combined

[14] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, chapter 5.

[15] E.g. Richard Taylor, 'The Meaning of Life', in *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, 3rd edition, edited by Elmer Klemke, and Stephen Cahn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 13-14; Harry Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf', in *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, edited by Sarah Buss, and Lee Overton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Bradford Books, 2002), pp. 245-252; Steven Luper, 'Life's Meaning', in *The Cambridge Companion to Life and Death*, edited by Steven Luper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 198-214.

[16] Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf', p. 250.

[17] Luper, ''Life's Meaning', p. 210.

[18] A reviewer for this journal suggests that the reason why no one makes this move in ethics might be that ethics is concerned with the interests of others, whereas a meaningful life seems more

his expressivist view of moral language with a first-order utilitarian moral view.[19] And Bernard Williams saw no tension between his acceptance of a non-consequentialist ethics, and his relativism about value.[20]

Once substantive and metaphysical questions are clearly distinguished, it also emerges that standard counterexamples to subjectivism do not require a move to objectivism about value. Yet some philosophers appear to think they do.

As indicated, subjectivism about meaning in life is the idea that a life is meaningful in virtue of nothing more than that the subject takes some positive attitude towards the dominant activities or events in her life. The most common reason for rejecting all versions of subjectivism is that they would entail that apparently meaningless lives are in fact highly meaningful. Metz gives a list of examples offered in the literature:

> Not only would [subjectivism] entail that Sisyphus's life could be meaningful merely for having fulfilled a desire to roll a stone, it would also entail that a person's existence could become significant by merely: staying alive; harming others; growing more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land to grow more corn, and so on *ad infinitum*; orienting her life around a single colour; maintaining 3,732 hairs on her head; engaging in conspicuous consumption and being self-absorbed; collecting bottle tops; memorizing the dictionary, or recounting the numbers of tiles on the bathroom floor; watching reruns of television series such as *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer*; lining up balls of torn newspaper in neat rows; trying to make flowers sing or becoming addicted to drugs; or (best of all!) ingesting her own excrements.[21]

Examples like these have recently convinced a number of philosophers that a life cannot be meaningful merely because the subject desires to be engaged in her activities, or feels fulfilled by them.[22] But it is important to realize that this substantive conclusion does not support the claim that a meaningful life involves engagement with *objective value*. The counterexamples to subjectivism suggest that meaningful lives are devoted to certain activities rather than others. They do not suggest that the *value* of these activities has a certain metaphysical status.

closely connected to the interests of the agent. But even if that were so, it does not make the move from the non-existence of objective value to subjectivism about meaning any more acceptable. The thesis that meaningfulness *is tied to individual interests* might justify the move to some extent, but why should the rejection of objective facts about value license it?

[19] John Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

[20] See e.g. Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*; Bernard Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', in *Moral Luck. Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101-113.

[21] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, p. 175. I have modified the quote by leaving out the references to the sources of the examples.

[22] E.g. Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*; Kauppinen, 'Meaningfulness and Time'; Metz, Meaning in Life; Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life'; Ben Bramble, 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life', *Utilitas* 27:4 (2015), pp. 445-459.

The foregoing is not always firmly held in view. For instance, Aaron Smuts offers counterexamples to subjectivism about meaning, and proposes a consequentialist view according to which the sole requirement is that the world is better off because of one's existence.[23] He then states that his view involves 'strong meta-ethical commitments to value realism'.[24] But why should that follow from the rejection of subjectivism, or the acceptance of consequentialism? If consequentialism is compatible with expressivism or relativism in the case of ethics, why should it not be in the case of meaning?

Clearly, then, one can in principle divorce meta-normative questions about the status of value from substantive questions about the conditions under which a life would count as meaningful. It may be true that our standards require more of a meaningful life than that the subject feels fulfilled, but that does not require objective truths about which standards are correct. At least the following combination of views seems perfectly intelligible: (1) Metz's view that meaning is a matter of orienting one's rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence and (2) the meta-normative view that the status *as a value* of orienting one's rationality towards such conditions is a matter of me (the speaker) holding this kind of standard for a meaningful life. Similarly, there appears to be no tension between (1) Smuts's view according to which a life is meaningful in virtue of the production of valuable consequences and (2) a subjectivist metaphysics of value. Such a combination of views would be exactly analogous to Smart's combination of utilitarianism with expressivism, or Williams's combination of a non-consequentialist ethics with a form of relativism.

The possibility of combining a non-subjectivist criterion for a meaningful life with a subjectivist metaphysics of value should be a welcome result for those philosophers who feel ambivalent about the existence of objective value, yet cannot accept that all there is to meaning is fulfilment of the agent's pro-attitudes.[25]

5. The Argument from Truth Evaluation

I've argued that counterexamples to subjectivism do not justify a requirement of objective value on a meaningful life. But there may be *other* reasons for such a requirement. One reason is a meta-normative consideration analogous to moves made in debates in metaethics. It goes as follows: if we embraced subjectivism about the value that meaningfulness is, we would have to allow that the judgement 'Sisyphus's life is meaningful' is true or correct when made by someone who values that life highly. But we think that it is false. Therefore, a life's being meaningful cannot be a matter of corresponding to the values of the judge. Call this the problem of truth evaluation.

This argument presupposes that if meaningfulness were a matter of subjective value, then a certain contextualist theory would be true. The relevant theory holds that the truth condition of a statement like

[23] Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life'.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[25] For another defence of the compatibility of expressivism, or rather quasi-realism, with meaningful lives, see Mark Rowlands, 'The Immortal, the Intrinsic, and the Quasi Meaning of Life', *The Journal of Ethics* 19:3/4 (2015), pp. 379-408.

(1) Sisyphus's life is meaningful

involves the standards for meaningfulness held by the speaker. If the speaker's standards rank Sisyphus's life sufficiently highly, then contextualism of this variety predicts that (1) is true, and the fact that we are not inclined to *call* it true is a problem for the theory.

There are two ways of responding. One is to offer contextualism-friendly explanations of our reluctance to call (1) true. For moral discourse, such explanations are attempted by Stephen Finlay and for judgements of personal taste and epistemic modals by Gunnar Björnsson and Alexander Almér. Finlay suggests (among other things) that our tendency to assess the truth of moral claims from our own perspective is explained by the assumption that others share our standards at least in relevant respects.[26]Björnsson and Almér offer a complex, yet plausible explanation of the insensitivity of assessments of judgements of personal taste to the responses of the speaker.[27] I will sketch the most important aspect of their view.

Björnsson and Almér note that the naturalness of in sensitive assessments in various domains depends on what is of interest or at stake in the conversation, which need not always be the truth conditions of the proposition uttered by the speaker. Take the following exchange:

(2) A: I wonder if the keys are in the car.
(3) B: No, Beth has them in her pocket.[28]

Clearly, (3) is not the negation of the proposition expressed by A in (2). Its naturalness is explained by the fact that what is at stake is the location of the keys. Björnsson and Almér suggest that a similar mechanism could explain the naturalness of exchanges like the following:

(4) A: These fish sticks are delicious!
(5) B: No, they are disgusting.

(5) might be natural as a response to (4) for similar reasons as (3) is a natural response to (2), even if the proposition expressed by A's utterance in (4) is really about the relation of fish sticks to A's standards, or has truth conditions involving those standards: of interest in this conversation is a comparison of taste, not the truth value of the proposition uttered by A.

When we apply this to discourse about meaningful lives, we can explain why we may not be inclined to call (1) true, even if its truth conditions involve the standards for

[26] Stephen Finlay, 'The Error in the Error Theory', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86:3 (2008), pp. 347-369.

[27] Gunnar Björnsson and Alexander Almér, 'The Pragmatics of Insensitive Assessments. Understanding the Relativity of Assessments of Personal Taste, Epistemic Modals, and More', *The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication* 6 (2011), pp. 1–45.

[28] The example is from Björnsson and Almer, 'The Pragmatics of Insensitive Assessments. Understanding the Relativity of Assessments of Personal Taste, Epistemic Modals, and More', p. 22.

meaningful lives held by the speaker: what is at stake in the conversation is a comparison of values.

Even if the foregoing fails, there is a more powerful response to the problem of truth evaluation. It is that a subjectivist metaphysics of value does not entail (this or any kind of) contextualism about the semantics of value discourse in the first place. Perhaps discourse about value is expressive, as opposed to descriptive, of our standards.[29] Or perhaps a sophisticated kind of relativism works, such as John MacFarlane's.[30] According to MacFarlane's relativism, the truth of statements about value depends on the standards of an *assessor* of the proposition expressed, even though such propositions are not *about* anyone's standards (including the standards of the speaker). Expressivism and MacFarlane-style relativism both predict that we would reject Sisyphus's life as meaningful - and assess (1) as false - even though there are no objective facts about value.

So the argument that subjectivism about value entails that apparently false statements are in fact true does not support the view that meaning requires objective value. For (1), subjectivism does not entail that in the first place, and (2), there may be explanations of our reluctance to consider such statements true that do not involve commitments to objective value.

6. Wolf's Endoxa

Susan Wolf uses what she calls the 'endoxic method' to defend her hybrid view about meaning in life.[31] This method is essentially that of synthesizing the various elements involved in thought about meaning.[32] Wolf believes that two important strands are, first, that finding meaning in life is a matter of finding something you care about, or love, yourself, as opposed to something that's merely expected or required by others. Subjectivists give pride of place to this consideration (sometimes called "the passion requirement"). A second important strand is the idea that a meaningful life requires involvement with something "larger than oneself".[33] The idea here is that a meaningful life is not just a matter of doing things *you* like or that are good for you, but also something that is valuable from a more objective standpoint:

> When we consider what deep human interests or needs a meaningful life *distinctively* answers to ... the objective aspect of such a life needs to be stressed. Our interest in living a meaningful life is not an interest in a life *feeling* a certain way; it is an interest that it *be* a certain way, specifically, that it be one that can be appropriately

[29] Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*; Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*; Michael Ridge, *Impassioned Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[30] MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity. Relative Truth and Its Applications*.

[31] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*.

[32] Though not in a sense which requires that whatever is commonly thought about meaning is infallible. The "endoxa" are starting points for thinking about meaning, or desiderata that matter for an assessment of a view. What this means, I think, is that the endoxic method is that of seeking reflective equilibrium.

[33] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, p. 18.

> appreciated, admired, or valued by others, that it be a life that contributes to or realizes or connects in some positive way with independent value.[34]

Wolf thinks that longing for meaning is longing for more than subjective satisfaction. One also wants to contribute to something of more than merely personal value. The question is whether this requires objectivity in any very strong sense. Part of Wolf's view is that a life that is 'totally egocentric, devoted solely toward the subject's own survival and welfare' is not meaningful.[35] This is of course compatible with a subjectivist metaphysics of non-egocentric value.

But Wolf also thinks that the desire to contribute to something larger than oneself requires metaphysical objectivity:

> in order for one's activities or projects to contribute to the meaningfulness of one's life, not only must the locus or recipient of value lie partly outside of oneself, the standard of judgment for determining value must be partly independent, too.[36]

One of her main reasons for this claim appears to be that one can be mistaken about the meaningfulness of one's projects. First, she notices that a person can be mistaken from a third-person point of view, as when Sisyphus feels fulfilled by rolling his rock up the hill forever:

> Sisyphus Fulfilled [was] meant to suggest the conceivability of a person finding an activity fulfilling that we might find inadequate for meaning from a third-person perspective. Insofar as (this version of) Sisyphus thinks his life is meaningful, he is mistaken, finding something in stone-rolling that isn't really there.[37]

This phenomenon is still compatible with a subjectivist metaphysics of value, as I've argued in the previous section: we can legitimately consider Sisyphus's life as meaningless, even if there are no objective values. But Wolf also notices that one's own standards can seem mistaken:

> The judgment that what seemed worthwhile wasn't really so may be made by the person himself, looking back on a past phase of his existence. One might even 'wake up' more or less suddenly to the realization that an activity one has been pursuing with enthusiasm is shallow or empty.[38]

Does this require objective values? Notice that one's former standards may be mistaken as considered from one's current ones. So the phenomenon can still be explained without

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 43. Notice that Wolf requires that the values that *make* one's life meaningful are objective, not (primarily) that meaningfulness is itself an objective value. But it seems strange to say that although the values on which meaning supervenes have to be objective, meaning is itself a subjective value. So Wolf is most naturally interpreted as holding the view that both meaning and the values on which meaning supervenes are objective.
[37] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, p. 43.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

appeal to objective values. But Wolf clearly thinks that this is insufficient. She believes that our desire to contribute to something larger than oneself is best understood in terms of relating to objective value.

If that is right, then it won't help to go quasi-realist, and insist that there is some interpretation of the language of objectivity as a matter of first-order normative discourse, as Blackburn does in *Ruling Passions*. The point is that the right metaphysical story about the nature of value should involve something over and above human tendencies to care about and value things.

Although I have no knock-down arguments against Wolf's position, the judgement that a requirement of objective value is part of the best systematization of our thought about meaning can be doubted. There are at least four sources of tension between such a requirement and aspects of our thought about meaning. Bringing these out will help to see the advantages of a view that does not require objective values. I will discuss the first three sources in this section, and the fourth one in the next.

The first source of tension is the fact that we are strongly inclined to consider some lives as meaningful, like those of Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Philippa Foot and Bridget Riley. Thaddeus Metz even takes some of these as paradigms of meaningfulness, part of what determines our grip on the concept of meaning itself. So there is some pressure to preserve these judgements. But if objective values were required for meaning, then there is a serious chance that all lives were in fact meaningless. Wolf herself considers various options concerning the metaphysics of objective value and finds all of them wanting. According to her, a plausible metaphysics for objective values is "an unsolved problem in philosophy".[39] In my view, this problem is unsolvable because there *are* no objective values. But does this make us significantly inclined to say that the lives of Darwin, Einstein, Foot and Riley were meaningless?

The second source of tension is that objectivity sometimes doesn't seem to make a difference. Imagine a world inhabited by just one person. Imagine that she discovers important truths about the universe. Her discoveries are a great source of satisfaction to her, but no one else will ever learn about them. Are we supposed to think it makes a difference to the meaningfulness of her life whether acquiring knowledge is objectively valuable? That is not clear to me. I do think that her life would become more meaningful the more her discoveries were shared with others. But that doesn't tell us anything about the nature of value. One can perfectly well hold the normative view that a life is more meaningful the more one's achievements are shared with others, and combine this with a non-objectivist metaphysics of value.

The third source of tension relates to our interest in God with respect to questions about the meaning of life. One reason why God may seem important to the meaning of our lives is that people want to matter *to* someone, which in turn may reflect a lack of interest in values that are no one's, or matters of abstract, soulless fact. We may find it more important to matter *to* someone, than that our mattering is independent of perspectives. Similarly, we may care more that our activities are acknowledged as valuable by others, than that the nature of their valuableness is a matter of objective fact.

[39] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, p. 47.

Thomas Nagel's observations about the role of value in answering questions about the meaning of life also suggest that what matters is not primarily the status of the values we promote, but their relation to our own perspectives:

> Those seeking to supply their lives with meaning usually envision a role or function in something larger than themselves. They therefore seek fulfillment in service to society, the state, the revolution, the progress of history, the advance of science, or religion and the glory of God.
>
> But a role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant. And its significance must come back to what we can understand, or it will not even appear to give us what we are seeking. If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh, who planned to turn us into cutlets before we got too stringy - even if we learned that the human race had been developed by animal breeders precisely for this purpose - that would still not give our lives meaning, for two reasons. First, we would still be in the dark as to the significance of the lives of those other beings; second, although we might acknowledge that this culinary role would make our lives meaningful to them, it is not clear how it would make them meaningful to us.[40]

Nagel's observations indicate that any purpose our lives might have must be recognizable by us as valuable in order to have a chance of answering concerns about the meaning of our lives. They suggest a kind of priority that the content of our values has over their status, in the sense that *if* what is objectively valuable turned out to be wildly at variance with anything we might consider important, *then* we could not be persuaded of life's meaning.

The foregoing does not *prove* that the status of the values that confer meaning onto our lives does not matter as well. All that it strictly shows is that objectivity by itself is not enough, and that the content of the values matters too (they must be appropriately related to our own concerns). This is one reason why I claimed to lack knock-down arguments against a requirement of objective value.

My fourth and final reason to doubt that a requirement of objective value is clearly part of the best systematization of thought about meaning has to do with beauty. It deserves a separate section.

7. The Subjectivity of Beauty

Many people who think that lives can be meaningful think they can be meaningful in virtue of the creation of or engagement with beauty. But beauty is not plausibly objective, as I will argue below. If so, then at least some values that can make a life meaningful don't have to be objective. That places a burden on objectivists to explain why it should matter for others.

Something like the foregoing consideration is used by Thaddeus Metz to argue against an overly robust requirement of objectivity.[41] He points out that some lives

[40] Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd', *The Journal of Philosophy* 68:20 (1971), pp. 716-727, at pp. 720-721.
[41] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, chapter 5.

devoted to art seem very meaningful, and beauty plays at least an important role in art. However, it is not plausible that what is beautiful or not is independent of human beings. For this reason, Metz thinks a kind of naturalism about beauty should suffice. According to the form he favours, beauty is identical to a natural property in virtue of a baptism that fixes the reference of the term for all subsequent (human) users.

Metz believes this view, often associated with Cornell realism, imbues beauty (and morality) with enough objectivity and universality to avoid a charge of arbitrariness: the charge that whether lives are meaningful is just a matter of what anyone happens to like or accept. At the same time, it does not require the existence of either supernatural or non-natural entities. Metz believes that the existence of the latter is more uncertain than that some lives were meaningful, to the point where he claims to know the latter, but not the former. Since he cannot consistently claim to know

(6) that some lives were meaningful

and

(7) that meaningfulness requires supernatural or non-natural entities,

but not to know

(8) that supernatural or non-natural entities exist,

he opts for a form of naturalism instead. Metz presumably does this because naturalists have few controversial elements in their ontology (even if it is controversial whether those elements comprise everything that exists).

However, it would be a mistake to think that uncontroversial building blocks suffice to make his claim to knowledge of (6) of comparable certainty as his naturalist theory of value. Cornell realism may itself be more uncertain than that some lives were meaningful. In fact, I think that it is false. And even if it were true, it would fail to secure the universality of beauty. A plausible, naturalism-friendly metaphysics and semantics of beauty is much more subjective than Metz allows. If so, and if we think that some lives are meaningful in virtue of the creation of beauty, we cannot be objectivists about all values that confer meaning on our lives. This is significant because it raises an explanatory challenge: why would any values have to be objective if some do not?

In what follows, I will first argue that the most plausible version of Cornell realism fails to distinguish itself from relativism. Then, I will give a reason to think that no objectivist account of beauty, including Cornell realism, could be right.

More plausible versions of Cornell realism say that the reference of value terms, like 'beautiful', is determined by a causal process: 'beautiful' refers to whatever is appropriately causally responsible for tokenings of the concept of beauty. (The reason for this is that one does not want to be stuck referring to whatever it is that cavemen dubbed 'beautiful' throughout the centuries.) Now, quite obviously, people find different things beautiful. This means that different features tend to cause their respective tokenings of the concept of beauty. In order to avoid rampant talking-past-one-another, the Cornell realist needs to identify the property of being beautiful not with whatever properties

(tend to) cause a favourable response in the speaker, but with the dispositional property of being such as to (have a tendency to) cause a favourable response (I will leave out the qualification about the tendency henceforth). This allows the reference of 'beauty' to be the same property, even when the term is used by people with very different tastes. Both could then refer to the same property of being such as to cause a favourable response.

However, if people do have different tastes, then it is possible for two speakers to make opposing claims about the beauty of an object. Speaker 1 might say that it is beautiful, while speaker 2 might say that it is not. Furthermore, their respective judgements may be stable upon further encounters and reflection. I think it is reasonable to assume that one and the same object cannot both have the property of being such as to cause a favourable response, and simultaneously lack that very same property. What this suggests is that the first and second speaker's tokenings of their concept of beauty is causally regulated by different properties. Plausibly, speaker 1's tokenings are regulated by the property of being such as to cause a favourable response in people like speaker 1, and speaker 2's tokenings are regulated by the property of being such as to cause a favourable response in people like speaker 2. But if so, then this non-reductive naturalist view of beauty cannot guarantee its universality.[42]

Of course, there is still a sense in which such a view *can* guarantee that beauty is universal. You might say that speaker 1 and speaker 2 are using different concepts ($beauty_1$ and $beauty_2$), and that it is universally and necessarily true that $beauty_1$ is identical to the property of being such as to cause a favourable response in people that resemble speaker 1, and universally and necessarily true that $beauty_2$ is identical to the property of being such as to cause a favourable response in people that resemble speaker 2. Anyone who uses the concept of $beauty_1$ would be mistaken in ascribing it to anything that isn't such as to cause a favourable response in people that resemble speaker 1.

However, this is small comfort to the Cornell realist, as it gives the view no discernible advantage over indexical contextualism. An indexical contextualist says that value claims are really claims about the relation in which objects stand to certain standards. In the case of ordinary claims about beauty, the standards are plausibly determined by dispositions of the speaker. So if speaker 1 says:

(9) Bach's music is beautiful

then she expresses the proposition that Bach's music ranks highly in relation to speaker 1's standards. If speaker 2 says:

(10) Bach's music is awful

then she expresses the proposition that Bach's music ranks lowly in relation to speaker 2's standards. This is a form of subjectivism about beauty. However, the indexical contextualist could make the same move as I just canvassed for the Cornell realist. She could say that speaker 1 and speaker 2 are using different concepts, $beauty_1$ and $beauty_2$. Anyone who uses the concept expressed by speaker 1 would be wrong to say that Bach is

[42] It is not very plausible that this result can be avoided by appeal to referential intentions in speaker 2 to refer to whatever it is that speaker 1's use of the concept is regulated by.

awful. I doubt that anyone would take this to mean that contextualism is after all a kind of objectivism about value.

You might think that Cornell realism at least allows metaphysically necessary property identities, even if many different people refer to different properties with their use of 'beautiful'. However, the indexical contextualist can appeal to even stronger forms of necessity. She can say that the property of being beautiful$_1$ is – as matter of *conceptual* necessity – identical to the property of ranking highly on the standards held by people similar to speaker 1.

So I doubt that Cornell realism fares any better with respect to beauty than indexical contextualist accounts. That by itself does not establish that there is no plausible, objectivist account of beauty available. But there is a good reason to think that no (overly) objectivist account could work.

Many aestheticians accept a principle along the following lines: one cannot sincerely call an object beautiful unless one has had a positive response to it oneself.[43] I think this principle is plausible only for judgements of beauty based on an encounter with the object (as opposed to testimony),[44] but even that makes trouble for objectivist theories of beauty. For suppose the word 'beauty' refers to a natural or non-natural property that is objective in the sense of not being instantiated in virtue of the production of a positive response in the speaker. That makes it very hard to see why it should be a requirement on sincere, non-testimony based judgements of beauty that the object elicits a positive response in the judge.

One might try to explain the requirement by saying that the property of being beautiful is the property of being such as to cause a favourable response in *any* human being, including oneself. That would give it universality, and explain why it is odd to call an object beautiful prior to having reason to believe it would produce a positive response in oneself (which we ordinarily find out by actually experiencing such a response). However, the suggestion makes it hard to see why anyone would feel comfortable making judgements about beauty without first acquiring evidence about the object's effect on other people's, and threatens to condemn all - or at least most - , judgements about beauty to falsehood. For there are very few things that all human beings *necessarily* find beautiful.

So, objectivist accounts have a hard time explaining the sincerity condition on statements about beauty. What this suggests is that the most plausible accounts of beauty are subjectivist. If a meaningful life really did require engagement with objective values, then we should have a strong tendency to consider lives devoted to art as meaningless. But I don't think that we have that in the slightest.

If one did want to hold on to the need for objective values, the best route would be to push the idea that even though what is beautiful and ugly is subjective, it is

[43] This principle derives from Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), §33. It is sometimes referred to as the principle of the autonomy of aesthetic judgement (e.g. Cain Todd, 'Quasi-Realism, Acquaintance, and the Normative Claims of Aesthetic Judgement', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44:3 (2004), pp. 277-296, at p. 278). The principle of autonomy should not be confused with the Acquaintance Principle, critically discussed by Malcom Budd, 'The Acquaintance Principle', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43:4 (2003), pp. 386-392.

[44] An encounter can be either direct or mediated by a reproduction.

objectively valuable to produce *experiences* of beauty. That would be like saying that although what is pleasant and unpleasant is subjective, it is objectively valuable to produce pleasant experiences. But this has problematic implications. It would make it hard to justify according more meaning to the life of someone who devotes their life to promoting Bach than to the life of someone who devotes their life to promoting James Last. The latter life may, after all, induce a lot more experiences of beauty. Notice that such differential rankings are unproblematic once you separate normative questions about what makes a life meaningful from metaphysical questions about the status of value: one can simply hold a standard that ranks Bach more highly, even if the quality or beauty of his music is ultimately a matter of subjective fact.

Conclusion

Many philosophers think that subjectivism about meaning in life is false. According to this view, a life is meaningful (roughly) in virtue of satisfying the subject's desires. The most common objection against it is the implication that lives devoted to trivial or immoral tasks can be highly meaningful. Some philosophers conclude that a meaningful life requires objective value: value that exists independently of contingent concerns of human beings, and should not be understood along expressivist lines. I have argued that this is a mistake: one can coherently accept both that lives are meaningful in virtue of more than desire satisfaction and that value is metaphysically subjective. Coherence is maintained so long as one considers the question what constitutes a meaningful life as a normative question, and the question about the nature of value as a metanormative concern.

I have considered two reasons for thinking that meaningfulness requires objective value after all: one is that we don't assess other people's statements about what constitutes a meaningful life as true so long as they conform to the standards *of those people*. I've argued that metaphysically subjectivist accounts of value need not predict this behaviour in the first place, or may explain it satisfactorily. The other reason was Wolf's claim that part of the content of our desire for meaning is to contribute to something larger than oneself. Wolf thinks this is best interpreted as a desire to contribute to something of objective value. I have argued that there are at least four reasons to be sceptical of this: (1) our judgements that some lives were meaningful may survive the discovery that objective values don't exist. (2) We don't always seem to think that the objectivity of value enhances the meaning of imaginary lives. (3) Even objective values cannot answer questions about meaning unless they resonate with us. (4) Part of the paradigms of meaningful lives are lives devoted to beauty, but the best metaphysics of beauty is probably subjectivist. If some subjective values can confer meaning onto people's lives, then why would others have to be objective?

If it is more plausible that some lives are meaningful than that objective values exist, it is best to see the debate about meaningfulness as a normative issue. For that allows us to be neutral about the nature of value. However, even a subjectivist

metaphysics of value does not force us to be subjectivists about the meaning of life. I hope to have shown at least this.[45]

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A Subjectivist Account of Life's Meaning

Frans Svensson

In this paper, I propose and defend a particular desire-based theory of what makes a person's life meaningful. Desire-based theories avoid the problems facing other theories of meaning in life: in contrast to objectivist theories (both consequentialist and non-consequentialist ones), they succeed in providing a necessary link between what makes a person's life meaningful and the person's own set of attitudes or concerns; in contrast to hybrid theories (or subjectivist theories with a value requirement), they avoid the elitism or exclusivism inherent in the former; and in contrast to mental-state theories, they avoid the problem of not taking the state of the world properly into account when determining whether someone's life is meaningful. However, meaningfulness does not plausibly depend on the satisfaction of just any desires—perhaps especially not on the satisfaction of desires that we experience as alien to ourselves. I therefore suggest that the meaning in your life depends on the extent to which your categorical desires (i.e. those desires that are partly constitutive of your practical identity) are satisfied or fulfilled. In the final section of the paper, I respond to at least four possible objections to this view.

Introduction

My aim in this paper is to offer a defense of a certain subjectivist account or theory of what makes a human person's life meaningful. According to the view I will defend, your life is meaningful to the extent that your *categorical desires*—i.e. those desires that are partly constitutive of your practical identity, or of who you are as a practical agent—are fulfilled or satisfied.[1] For short I will henceforth refer to this account as CDF.

[1] The notion of *categorical desires* here is due to Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character and Morality', in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); see also his 'The Makropulos Case; Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality', in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). According to Williams, categorical desires are desires that we identify with; desires that a person 'finds his life bound up with ... and that ... propel him forward, and thus ... give him a reason for living his life' ('Persons, Character and Morality', p. 14). This is what I have in mind when saying that someone's categorical desires are (at least partly) constitutive of that person's practical identity. (Compare

I begin below with some relevant background (section 1). The subsequent three sections (2-4) are spent developing my defense of CDF in response to the problems afflicting other accounts or theories. In section 5, I respond to four possible objections against CDF. The paper ends with a brief summary of my discussion.

1. Stage Setting

In this section I will begin by making at least five remarks about what shall be meant with 'a meaningful life' and other cognate phrases or expressions in what follows (1.1). Then I will clarify what I take the philosophical discussion regarding what makes a person's life meaningful to be more specifically about (1.2). Lastly, I will introduce a distinction between two general types of theory about what makes for a meaningful life: *objectivism* and *subjectivism* (1.3).

1.1 Five Conceptual Remarks

(i) I will be concerned with meaning in life in the sense of something that is essentially exemplified by a human person. I will thus not be interested in the meaning of human life as a whole—with, e.g., the end or purpose for which human life exists or has been created by God.[2] Nor will I be concerned with the meaning that perhaps can be exemplified in the lives of non-human animals and plants; with why other species exist; or, indeed, with the meaning of life itself, in all of its different forms.

(ii) By 'a meaningful life' I shall furthermore intend a life that, in the words of Susan Wolf:

> has within it the basis for an affirmative answer to the needs or longings that are characteristically described as needs for meaning. I have in mind, for example, the sort of questions people ask on their deathbeds, or simply in contemplation of their eventual deaths, about whether their lives have been (or are) worth living, whether they have had any point, and the sort of questions one asks when considering suicide and wondering whether one has any reason to go on.[3]

One important question that needs to be addressed in connection with the above, however, is *for/to whom* or *what*, or *from which perspective*, a life must have a point or be

Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 101: 'The conception of one's identity in question here is not a theoretical one, a view about what as a matter of inescapable scientific fact you are. It is better understood as a description under which ... you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking. So I will call this a conception of your practical identity'.)

[2] The question of why human life exists is (nowadays, at least) perhaps usually thought to belong to the purview of religion. For a discussion of what alternatives there may be for secular thinkers to find a satisfying answer to that question, see Thomas Nagel's remarkable paper 'Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament', in *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays 2002-2008* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 1.

[3] Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', in *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 109.

worth living in order to qualify as a meaningful life.[4] This question is sometimes (though not always, of course) sidestepped in the recent literature on life's meaning.[5] It really shouldn't be, though, since our answer to it will surely matter with respect to which account of what makes for a meaningful life that will seem most promising to us. Here my concern will be with a meaningful life in the sense of a life that is meaningful *to the person whose life it is*; or, if you will, in the sense of a life that matters, makes a difference, or is worthwhile *from the person's own perspective*. Our lives can certainly be meaningful (important, matter, make a difference) in other ways or senses as well, however. Jill's life, e.g., may be tremendously important for her partner; George may mean a lot to the English department at the local university; John may have made a difference to the village where he lived his life; and Miriam's life may perhaps have made an important difference from a cosmic perspective, i.e. 'when ... viewed from an impartial standpoint, all things considered—*when literally all things are considered*'.[6] But it seems an entirely open question whether meaning something in one or more of the ways just mentioned, is important, or contributes to making one's life meaningful, *to oneself*. And it is, again, a meaningful life in the latter sense that I will be interested in here. This is, I believe, also the sense of a meaningful life that most of us actually have in mind when thinking about whether our lives are meaningful or not.[7]

(iii) Thirdly, when using expressions such as 'a meaningful life', 'meaning in life', etc., I shall be intending a *final value*, i.e. something that is valuable or worth having for its own sake.[8] I shall furthermore be intending a value that human persons can exemplify to a higher or lower degree in their lives.

(iv) Fourthly, and in the light of what was said in *(ii)* above, perhaps unsurprisingly, I will assume that meaning in life is a *prudential*, as opposed to e.g. a *moral* or an *aesthetic*, value. I will thus assume that if one's life exemplifies meaning, then one's life is, in at least one respect, going well for one.

Two things may be worth noticing in relation to this. Firstly, that meaning in life is prudentially valuable in no way excludes the possibility that moral uprightness and

[4] No sense, it seems to me, can be made of the notion that some lives just are meaningful, *full stop*. As e.g. Guy Kahane, 'Our Cosmic Insignificance', *Nous* 48:4 (2014), pp. 745-772, points out (at p. 750): 'significance [which, I take it, is a synonym to meaning in this context] is relative to a point of view, it can vary in this way even as value stays fixed'.

[5] E.g. Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, 'On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life', *Philosophical Papers* 34:3 (2005), pp. 443-458; Antti Kauppinen, 'Meaningfulness and Time', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84:2 (2012), pp. 345-377; Arjan Markus, 'Assessing Views of Life: A Subjective Affair?', *Religious Studies* 39:2 (2003), pp. 125-143; and Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter 2, all touch upon this issue in various ways.

[6] Kahane, 'Our Cosmic Insignifcance', p. 750 (emphasis in original).

[7] This is, I would suggest, to at least some extent confirmed by the vast amount of self-help or popular psychology books, webpages and TV-shows, offering advice on what we should do to make our lives more meaningful to ourselves.

[8] This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that living a meaningful life might also be *instrumentally* valuable in various ways. (In an important paper, which I do not unfortunately have the space to engage with here, Chris Woodard suggests that meaning in life may in fact *only* be instrumentally valuable; see Woodard, 'What Good Is Meaning in Life?', *De Ethica*, this issue.)

aesthetic activity may belong in the class of things that contribute to making people's lives meaningful. Rather, if moral uprightness and aesthetic activity do belong in that class of things, then besides making our lives morally and aesthetically valuable, they also contribute to making our lives prudentially valuable (in at least one respect). Secondly, that meaning in life is prudentially valuable does not exclude the possibility that there may be other prudential values as well. One such example would plausibly be happiness. At least in its modern sense of (roughly) experiencing feelings of pleasure or contentment, happiness seems to lack the dimension of depth that is characteristic of meaning in life (it is quite possible to, e.g., feel happy for no particular reason, or about things such as eating an ice cream, having a cold beer on a warm summer afternoon, etc., neither of which would (for most of us, at least) be important enough to confer meaning on our lives.). But happiness is plausibly a prudential value, something that makes one's life go well for one in at least one respect.[9]

(v) In the literature on life's meaning, it is commonly assumed that we can distinguish a class of *paradigmatic examples* of meaningful lives, including, e.g., the lives of Albert Einstein, Mother Teresa, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Mahatma Gandhi, Pablo Picasso, and Nelson Mandela. The lives of these persons, as one author puts it, 'come to mind as unquestionably meaningful (if any are)'.[10] And because of this, it should be possible for us to use these lives as test cases for different accounts or theories of what makes a person's life meaningful.

However, while attending to examples such Picasso, Einstein, and Mother Teresa presumably can be helpful when inquiring into what makes for a meaningful life, we should make sure that we attend to them with some care. For one thing, they are all lives of exceptional accomplishment. And even though great aesthetic, intellectual, or moral accomplishment is not, of course, incompatible with living a meaningful life, it is certainly not essential for doing so; on the contrary, most lives that qualify as meaningful (if any do) are *not* lives of such accomplishment. It is important, I submit, that we already from the beginning take seriously not only the lofty goals of the true, the good, and the beautiful, but also, and perhaps even in particular, the great variety of (in comparison) mundane things that we ordinarily seem to take it for granted do or can contribute to making people's lives meaningful, including, e.g., spending time with one's family, bird watching, cooking, collecting wrist watches, moral decency, singing, travelling, working as a teacher, and gliding. Secondly, the status of lives such as Picasso's, Einstein's, and Mother Teresa's as *paradigmatic* or *unquestionable* examples of meaningful lives is not, as it were, set in stone. Suppose, for example, that biographers were to recover unassailable

[9] There are, of course, also other and much more demanding notions of happiness (even today!); see e.g. Philippa Foot's excellent discussion of what she characterizes as *deep* happiness in her *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 6. On the contrast between modern and classical eudaimonistic conceptions of happiness, see, for example, Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapters 8-9; Richard Kraut, 'Two Conceptions of Happiness', *The Philosophical Review* 88:2 (1979), pp. 167-197; and Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Comparing these more demanding notions of happiness with meaning in life would be quite interesting, but it will have to wait for another occasion.

[10] Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', p. 109.

evidence that Mother Teresa was not, in fact, motivated by compassion when caring for her patients, but only by a deeply held fear for the wrath of God, which tormented her inside and made it impossible for her to ever find any satisfaction or personal fulfillment in what she did. Many of us would then start to waiver in our conviction that Mother Teresa's life was really a meaningful one; at least some argument would now be required to show that it was. Or suppose that certain documents were found showing that Einstein stole the discoveries that he is known for from a friend or colleague who passed away before she was able to make them public. Einstein's life would then surely not come to mind as *unquestionably* meaningful anymore.

1.2 What Makes a Person's Life Meaningful?

When asking the question of 'What makes a person's life meaningful?' it seems we could be interested in simply coming up with a list of things that do or can give meaning to people's lives. Alternatively, however, we could be interested in finding a more basic and systematic answer to the question: an answer consisting of an account of the feature or features that all of the things that do or can give meaning to people's lives have in common and in virtue of which our lives do or could acquire meaning from them. It is answers of the second kind that will be of interest here. If we could indeed find an account of the feature(s) that makes people's lives meaningful (if they are), then that should be quite interesting in its own right. But having such an account at our disposal could, it seems, also be useful: in cases of uncertainty, e.g., it should (at least in principle) enable us to determine whether (and to what extent) someone's life really does exemplify meaning or not.

1.3 Two Types of Account: Subjectivism and Objectivism

It will facilitate the discussion below to distinguish between two general types of account or theory of what makes a person's life meaningful: *subjectivism* and *objectivism*. I will here appropriate Wayne Sumner's way of distinguishing between subjectivist and objectivist theories in the case of welfare. Thus:

> Subjective theories make [meaning in life] logically dependent on our attitudes of favour and disfavor. Objective theories deny this dependency. On an objective theory, therefore, something can be (directly and immediately) [meaningful] for me, though I do not regard it favourably, and my life can [be meaningful] despite my failing to have any positive attitude toward it.[11]

On this way of drawing the distinction, objectivist theories deny that meaning in life is even partly dependent on one's own attitudes or concerns. It is with this type of theory that I shall begin. I will argue that objectivist theories as a group can be set aside for one

[11] L. Wayne Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 38. Since Sumner's concern in this passage is with welfare rather than life's meaning, I have changed 'well-being', 'good for me', and 'my life ... going well', to meaning in life and (in two places) meaningful.

and the same reason, namely, for failing to make sense of how or why meaningful lives are meaningful to the persons whose lives they are.[12]

2. Objectivist Theories

In this section I will begin by introducing a general problem that I believe afflicts all objectivist theories of what makes a person's life meaningful (2.1), and then go on to illustrate how the problem arises in the case of at least three influential examples of objectivist theories in the literature (2.2).[13] After that I will consider a possible response to my objection against objectivist theories (2.3). That response, however, turns out to involve the rejection of objectivism in favour of a certain kind of subjectivist theory. I will end the section with a short addendum concerning the possibility that proponents of objectivist and subjectivist theories are perhaps best understood as being concerned with different concepts of meaning in life (2.4).

2.1 A General Problem for Objectivist Theories

The problem for objectivist theories that I will focus on here is basically the same as the problem that is often raised in relation to objectivist theories of wellbeing. This should not be especially surprising. In 1.1, remark *(ii)*, I made it clear that I will be interested in what makes a life meaningful (matter, important, etc.) to the person whose life it is, and (remark *(iv)*) that meaning in life is therefore plausibly a prudential value. In the light of this, denying that meaning in life is even partly dependent on one's attitudes or concerns does indeed become problematic. Because by denying that the meaningfulness in a person's life depends at least in part on what that person likes, enjoys, cares about, or desires, it seems impossible for objectivist theories to explain why a meaningful life is one that matters, is important, or makes a difference to the person him- or herself, and thereby also why exemplifying meaning in one's life is something that is essentially good for one.

2.2 Illustrations

To illustrate how this problem arises for the objectivist type of theory, let us look at a few examples of objectivist theories that have been proposed recently.

2.2.1 Consequentialism

We might begin with the *Good Cause Account* (GCA), defended in an important paper by Aaron Smuts.[14] GCA is a consequentialist theory, according to which a person's 'life is

[12] My critique of objectivist theories of meaning in life is thus basically the same as Sumner's critique of objectivist theories of welfare; see Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, pp. 42-44 and chapter 3.

[13] As we shall see, in the case of one of these theories viz. that of Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter 2, it is not entirely clear whether it in the end constitutes an objectivist theory or not.

[14] 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51:4 (2013), pp. 536-562.

meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good'.[15] This is, it seems, a clear example of an objectivist theory. A person's life is meaningful, on GCA, insofar as it is the cause of objective value; there is no additional requirement that the person must also have one or another positive attitude (or, for that matter, lack any negative attitude) towards her life and the good that she is causing. The person's life would be meaningful even if she herself hates it or is entirely indifferent towards it. GCA would thus imply that, e.g., Sisyphus' life was meaningful, if we just add to the original version of the myth that his stone-rolling kept scaring off vultures that would otherwise cause much harm to the inhabitants of the village on the other side of the mountain.[16] It would not matter if Sisyphus at all cares about helping the villagers, or if he is aware of helping them. In fact, it seems a person's life could be meaningful, according to GCA, even if the person is unable to exhibit any attitudes at all. Suppose, e.g., that someone spends his entire life in a comatose condition, in which he does not desire or feel anything. As it happens, however, he has an expression on his face that (for some reason) causes everyone who catches a glimpse of it to experience complete contentment and harmony inside. Assuming that experiencing complete contentment and harmony inside is objectively valuable, and that at least one person does catch a glimpse of the expression on the comatose individual's face, then that should be enough for making the comatose individual's life to at least some extent meaningful.

Now, both the existence of the comatose individual and the life of Sisyphus, in the revised version of the myth, are indeed meaningful, or make a difference, to *others*. And making a difference to others can plausibly contribute to making a life meaningful also to oneself; for most of us, it presumably does. But GCA fails to establish a necessary link between the attitudes or concerns of the person whose life it is and his or her making a difference to others. And in cases where such a link is missing, as it is in the two cases above, nothing is present to explain *why* the difference that one is making to others would make a difference to oneself.

2.2.2 Non-Consequentialism

In the literature, there are also examples of objectivist theories of a non-consequentialist stripe. According to Thaddeus Metz's *fundamentality theory*, e.g., one's life is meaningful (roughly) to the extent that it involves orienting one's 'rationality towards fundamental

[15] Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', p. 535. Consequentialist accounts of meaning in life are proposed also in, e.g., Robert Audi, 'Intrinsic Value and the Meaning of Life', *Philosophical Papers* 34:3 (2005), pp. 331-355; Ben Bramble, 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life', *Utilitas* 27:4 (2015), pp. 445-459; Irving Singer, *Meaning of Life, Vol. 1: The Creation of Value* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Mark Wells, 'Meaning in Consequences', *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5:3 (2015), pp. 169-179. One advantage of GCA, it seems to me, in comparison to the account proposed in, e.g., Bramble, 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life', is that GCA is (at least potentially) less demanding. In contrast to Bramble's account, GCA does not require that in order for one's life to count as meaningful, it must make the world a better place than it would have been had one not existed at all. GCA may instead be read as saying simply that one's life is meaningful to the extent that it causes good, irrespective of whether even more good would have been produced by someone else if one had not existed.

[16] The example is due to Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 21; cf. Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', p. 551.

conditions of human existence'.[17] Another example might be the Aristotelian-inspired theory proposed by Erik J. Wielenberg, according to which a person's life is meaningful insofar as she is engaged in intrinsically valuable activities, including e.g. 'falling in love, engaging in intellectually stimulating activity, being creative in various ways, experiencing pleasure of various kinds, and teaching'.[18] Since both of these theories involve essential references to activity of some form or other, they avoid the implication that the life of a permanently comatose individual could exemplify meaning. And on the seemingly plausible assumption that Sisyphus, even in the revised version of the myth, is not engaged in either intrinsically valuable activity (though he is, of course, engaged in *instrumentally* valuable activity) or in orienting his rationality towards fundamental aspects of the human condition, both Wielenberg's and Metz's theories avoid the second example above as well. However, insofar as being engaged in intrinsically valuable activity or orienting one's rationality towards fundamental aspects of human existence can be done independently of whether one has any kind of positive attitude towards it, it is nevertheless clear that these theories too are unable to explain why living a meaningful life is a matter of living a life that necessarily matters or is important to oneself.

2.3 A Possible Response?

Maybe, though, Metz, Wielenberg, and proponents of other similar non-consequentialist theories could respond to my criticism by arguing that the kinds of activities that they claim are essential to meaning in life are such that they in fact necessarily involve one or another positive attitude. At least with respect to Wielenberg's theory, this may indeed seem a fairly natural response. The theory is explicitly inspired by Aristotle, and Aristotle, after all, made it a condition on excellent or virtuous activity—the kind of activity that, I take it, he considered to be intrinsically valuable—that one enjoys it.[19] Furthermore, at least some of the examples on Wielenberg's list of intrinsically valuable activities do involve references to attitudes (in particular 'experiencing pleasure of various kinds'). Whether the response is open in relation also to Metz's fundamentality theory is perhaps less clear (it is hard to see why orienting one's rationality towards fundamental aspects of human existence would *necessarily* have to involve any positive attitude on one's part), but I do not see any reason for why the theory could not be just slightly amended to incorporate it.[20]

[17] Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 222. Metz's full statement of his fundamentality theory is quite a mouthful. It reads: 'A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality toward fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them; in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence' (p. 233).

[18] Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, p. 34. A similar view is developed at greater length as a theory of welfare in Stephen Darwall, *Welfare as Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), chapter 4.

[19] See, e.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; translated and edited by Roger Crisp), II.3.

[20] If I understand him correctly, Metz himself would not be disposed to amend his theory in such a way. He writes, e.g., that he takes there to be 'reason to doubt that *any* propositional attitude,

Now *if* Metz and/or Wielenberg were to respond in the way suggested just above, then that would enable them to avoid the general difficulty for objectivist theories that I have been pressing. It would do so, however, only as a consequence of *giving up* on objectivism (as that is being conceived here) in favour of a certain kind of subjectivism, since it would no longer be the case that meaning in life, on their views, is entirely independent of our attitudes or concerns.

2.4 Addendum: Might Objectivists and Subjectivists Be Talking Past Each Other?

One worry that perhaps could be raised here is whether proponents of objectivist theories should not be understood as being concerned with a different notion or concept of meaning in life than the one that I indicated in section 1, and which I think at least comes close to being the one that most subjectivists are interested in. In particular, should we perhaps think of objectivists as being concerned with what makes a person's life meaningful *to others*, or, say, *from the perspective of the universe as a whole*, whereas I, and perhaps other subjectivists, are concerned with what makes a person's life meaningful *to oneself*?

At the current stage of the philosophical debate regarding meaning in life, however, I think it makes good sense to treat objectivist and subjectivist theories as being concerned with the same topic. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, most participants in the discussion so far have indeed treated objectivist and subjectivist theories as competing theories of one and the same thing. And, secondly, treating them in this way should hopefully help us become clearer about the strengths and weaknesses of the respective theories in relation to what, upon closer examination, may turn out to be different concepts of meaning in life.

3. Subjectivism I: Subjectivist Theories with a Value Requirement

If Metz and Wielenberg were to endorse the response suggested in 2.3 to the general problem for objectivist theories, then their theories would count not as objectivist but rather as *hybrid* ones—or, as they (again drawing on Sumner) could also be labelled, *subjectivist theories with a value requirement*.[21] I.e. they would then constitute examples of theories according to which a person's life is meaningful not only in virtue of meeting a certain condition of objective value, but also in virtue of meeting one or another subjective attitudinal condition. Now, the single most influential theory of meaning in life in contemporary philosophy in fact constitutes a theory of precisely this kind. The theory I have in mind is Susan Wolf's *fitting fulfillment view*, which, in its by now rather famous slogan version, says that 'meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness'.[22] The details of Wolf's view, as it is presented in this slogan version, could

positive or negative, is *necessarily* constitutive of one's life being *somewhat* more meaningful' (*Meaning in Life:*, p. 184; emphasis in original). He adds, however, that 'certain attitudes ... might [nevertheless] be necessary for one's life to count as meaningful on balance' (*Ibid*.).

[21] See Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, p. 163f.

[22] Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', p. 112. R. W. Hepburn, 'Questions about the Meaning of Life', *Religious Studies* 1:2 (1966), pp. 125-140, seems to be an early

be filled out in different ways. Wolf herself, however, argues that a meaningful life should more specifically be conceived as one of finding fulfillment in activities of objective worth, or perhaps as one of loving engagement in projects that are, objectively speaking, worthy of being loved.

By constituting a kind of subjectivist theory, Wolf's does indeed contain a necessary link between what makes a person's life meaningful and the person's own 'set of attitudes or concerns'[23]. It is thereby able to make sense of meaning in life as something that matters essentially to the person whose life it is. So far so good! However, her theory (as well as other theories like it) is subject to another important problem, namely that it is implausibly *elitist* or, if you will, *exclusivist*.

To see why this is the case, consider two of the examples offered by Wolf (the first one) and Wielenberg (the second) of activities that perhaps may be relaxing and/or enjoyable, but which are, allegedly, in themselves worthless, and therefore, on the hybrid view, cannot contribute to making anyone's life meaningful—not even if one were to find them deeply fulfilling: solving crossword puzzles and playing video games.[24] One obviously quite important concern in relation to these two examples is how, if at all, we can *know* that solving crossword puzzles and playing video games are intrinsically worthless or unimportant (and similarly we may of course ask how we can know that certain other activities are intrinsically valuable or of objective worth).[25] I shall set this concern to one side, however, and instead simply grant, for the sake of argument, that the relevant activities do actually lack value in themselves, and that there is some way in which we can, at least in principle, gain knowledge about that. Even if these things are granted, however, it seems clear that someone could—and I suspect some people in fact do—in part live for playing video games and/or solving crossword puzzles; that these

proponent of this kind of view. Hybrid views are (if I understand them correctly) endorsed also in, e.g., Todd May, *A Significant Life: Meaning in a Silent Universe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), and Owen Flanagan, *Self-Expressions: Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Kauppinen, 'Meaningfulness and Time', develops a view that I believe is, in the end, objectivist, but which is explicitly influenced by Wolf's work in important respects. For a defense of Wolf's view against some recent objections, see Daan Evers and G. E. van Smeden, 'Meaning in Life: In Defense of the Hybrid View', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54:3 (2016), pp. 355-371.

[23] Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, p. 81.

[24] See Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, p. 16, and Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, p. 34f.

[25] Wolf certainly acknowledges this problem, but she does not really have anything to offer in response to it. Wielenberg, though, recommends that we use G. E. Moore's (in)famous isolation test: 'To see if an activity is intrinsically good, consider whether you would find it worthwhile *even if it had absolutely no consequences*. If it seems to you that it *would* be worthwhile, then you have a good candidate for an intrinsically good activity on your hands' (Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, p. 35; emphasis in original). But there are a number of problems associated with that procedure. For example, we may wonder whether our upbringing, cultural and social context, physical and psychic health, etc., will not play a rather large role in determining the judgments we make when considering things in the way the isolation test involves. Furthermore, if there is anything to *holism* about value, it seems the value of things might depend on their relation to other things, something which cannot, it seems, be taken into consideration when considering each thing in isolation from everything else.

activities could be (and perhaps are) part of what makes the world go round for some people; that they matter deeply to them; that they are part of what gives a point or purpose to their lives. Now, maybe these activities do not plausibly confer any meaning on your, my, or on his or her, life. But why would we want to exclude the possibility that they may very well confer meaning on some other people's lives? How could that amount to anything but an unacceptably elitist or exclusivist stance on our part?

Perhaps it will be objected to what I have just said that it is surely conceivable that for many people, the importance that they attach to different activities in their lives—whether it be to playing video games, attending performances of Wagner's Ring, or teaching in the English department—is, as it were, *conditional* on the relevant activities being objectively valuable. If these people came to realize that the activities to which they are deeply attached were not, in fact, objectively valuable, then they would thus immediately agree that their attachments to those activities had been wasted—that devoting themselves to the relevant activities, whatever they used to believe about it, never did confer any meaning upon their lives. With respect to such persons, is it not *I* who could be accused of being elitist? Given what I said above, must I not say that they would be wrong to think that their lives lacked meaning even before they realized that the objects of their attachments were not objectively valuable?

No, I neither must nor want to say that at all. I fully agree, in fact, that it is conceivable (indeed, I think it is true) that there are people whose attachments in life are conditional on the objects of those attachments being objectively valuable. But that does not commit me to a hybrid—or, for that matter, an objectivist—view of what makes a person's life meaningful. It would, e.g., be perfectly open to me to argue (as indeed I will argue in section 4 below!) that the crucial feature with respect to the kind of persons that the objector is referring to is that their *desires* for the activities they are attached to are conditional upon those activities being objectively valuable. And thus if the activities are not objectively valuable, then being engaged in them does not satisfy or fulfill the relevant persons' desires, and *that* may conceivably be the reason why being engaged in (or attached to) the activities never contributed to making the persons' lives meaningful (whatever they themselves used to believe about it). No particular value requirement on meaning in life is needed for that explanation. It should furthermore be noticed that it is surely conceivable also that some people live for the projects that they do *without* any particular concern for whether the relevant projects are objectively valuable or not (my guess would be that this is actually true for quite a few people): the projects matter *to them*, and that is all there is to it. And with respect to such people, hybrid theories—or subjectivist theories with a value requirement—seem unavoidably elitist.

4. Subjectivism II: Subjectivist Theories Without a Value Requirement

Let us now move on to consider instead subjectivist theories *without* any value requirement.[26] Below I will first distinguish between two kinds of subjectivist theory:

[26] Such theories are strikingly unfashionable among philosophers working on meaning in life today (for a few exceptions, see Harry Frankfurt, 'The Importance of What We Care About', in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and *The Reasons*

state-of-mind vs. *state-of-the-world* theories (4.1).[27] I will then show why state-of-mind theories of what makes a person's life meaningful should be rejected (4.2). This leaves us with state-of-the-world theories, and I will argue that the most promising version of such a theory is CDF (4.3).

4.1 Two Kinds of Subjectivist Theory

We may recall that according to subjectivism, the meaning in your life depends (at least partly) on 'your set of attitudes or concerns'.[28] Now, on one kind of subjectivist theory the meaning in your life depends *entirely* on your mental states, whereas on another kind of subjectivist theory it *also* depends on states of the world (on states outside of your mind). According to the former kind, whether a person's life is meaningful is determined solely by the extent to which s/he favours—in the sense of likes, enjoys, finds pleasant or fulfilling—what is the case and what happens. According to the latter kind, whether one's life is meaningful is instead determined by the extent to which one's desires are satisfied or fulfilled. And since many of our desires are indeed about the state of the world—that we actually *do*, *achieve*, or *have* this or that—meaning in life is, on this second kind of theory, dependent on the state of the world as well as on our attitudes.

4.2 Against Mental-State Theories

Could the meaning in our lives plausibly depend *only* on the quality of our mental states—on the extent to which we, e.g., like, enjoy, or take pleasure in our circumstances? With respect to most of us, at least, it seems that the answer to that question must clearly be no. The reason for this is that if meaning did depend only on the quality of our mental states, then it would not really matter whether the circumstances that we favour (like, enjoy, take pleasure in) correspond to the circumstances that we are actually in. But to most of us that makes a crucial difference! For example, suppose that I for many years have found great fulfillment and pleasure in my marriage, my friendships, my work, and in my personal projects. Then one day it is suddenly revealed to me that, just as in the movie *The Truman Show*, my life has in fact been rigged since day one and broadcasted around the world by a sinister media production company. All of the things that I have found so rewarding and cared so deeply about were actually fake: my 'wife', my 'colleagues', my 'friends'—they were all just actors following a script in their relations to me. Now was my life nevertheless meaningful up to the point when it was revealed to me what was really going on? Obviously not, I would say. What I cared about, and desired to continue, was being in a loving relationship, having close friends, an interesting job, and so on, none of which actually obtained in my life. Contrary to what I

of Love (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Steven Luper, 'Life's Meaning', in *The Cambridge Companion to Life and Death*, edited by Steven Luper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil: A New Direction* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), chapter 18; and Williams, 'Persons, Character and Morality'), something which is, I suspect, to a large extent due to some of the objections that we will consider in section 5.

[27] Subjectivist theories *with* a value requirement (Wolf's theory, e.g.), belong to the second of these two kinds. However, since the hybrid theory was rejected in the previous section, I will set it to one side in the present section. It is noteworthy, I think, that the distinction between two kinds of subjectivist theory has been generally neglected so far in the meaning in life literature.

[28] Sumer, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, p. 81.

believed before the discovery, there was no basis within my life 'for the needs or longings that are characteristically described as needs for meaning'.[29]

Now, I have been talking about myself here. And even though I feel confident that what I have said holds for many other people as well, I see no reason to completely rule out the possibility that there could be persons who really do care only about what they feel or experience (about the quality of their own mental states), and not at all about the state of the world, and with respect to whose lives it could indeed correctly be said that in the *Truman Show* scenario, their lives were indeed meaningful at least up to the point when the truth about their circumstances was revealed to them. However, the meaningfulness in their lives would plausibly result from the satisfaction of their desires for having certain experiences, and not from the experiences themselves.

4.3 Desire-Based Subjectivism

Mental-state theories, as we just saw, put too much emphasis on ... well, on people's mental states. A plausible theory of what makes a person's life meaningful should be able to accommodate the fact that many of us care deeply about different facets of the state of the world—about what is actually the case and what actually happens—and not (or at least not just) about how we feel. What we may call *desire-based* theories can indeed accommodate this fact.

According to desire-based theories, what makes one's life meaningful is a matter of the extent to which one's desires are satisfied or fulfilled. Desire-based theories are thus clearly subjectivist, since they entail that meaning in life is dependent on one's 'set of attitudes and concerns'; more specifically on one's desires. But since our desires often concern some aspect of the state of the world, desire-based theories also entail that meaning in life depends on the extent to which the world actually corresponds to, or fits with, our desires.

I believe that the correct theory of what makes a person's life meaningful (if there is indeed a correct theory to be found about this) must be of the desire-based kind. However, it does not seem very plausible to settle simply for an unqualified or straightforward desire-satisfactionism, according to which the satisfaction of just any desire that a person may have confers (at least some amount of) meaning on that person's life. There are at least two reasons for why such a view would be implausible. To begin with, some of our desires are without any deeper significance or importance to us. They may be desires for things that we enjoy and/or find relaxing, but which do not mean anything to us on a deeper level of our lives. Wielenberg, e.g., suggests that for him the desire to play video games is of this kind, and Wolf can perhaps be read as at least hinting that solving sudokus play such a role in her life.[30] For my own part, I could mention desires for reading gangster novels, having a cold beer on warm summer afternoons, and perhaps watching episodes of *Family Guy*. While I certainly enjoy these things, and often desire to do them, they are not part of what makes the world go round

[29] Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', p. 109.

[30] See Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, p. 34f; and Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, p. 16.

for me; it would not affect my judgment about whether my life is worthwhile if I had to give them up or became unable to satisfy them anymore.[31]

It is perhaps worth stressing that my claim above is not that the satisfaction of the relevant kind of desires fails to confer meaning on one's life because they are desires for objectively worthless or unimportant things. My claim is rather there is a dimension of depth to meaning in life that the satisfaction of the relevant kind of desires fails to meet. However, the satisfaction of which desires that indeed have the required dimension of depth is determined subjectively: reading gangster novels, playing video games, or solving crossword puzzles, may indeed be of deep significance in the lives of some people, and for them the satisfaction of their desires for those things would plausibly confer some amount of meaning on their lives.

It is perhaps also worth pointing out that I am not claiming that the satisfaction of the kind of desires that are at issue here is necessarily inconsequential for our overall wellbeing. As suggested in section 1 (remark *(iv)*), I think meaning in life constitutes one aspect of wellbeing. But there may very well be—and quite plausibly are—other aspects of wellbeing as well, including, e.g., the pleasure we usually receive from fulfilling the kind of desires that I have been talking about above.

The *second* reason for why unqualified or straightforward desire-satisfactionism would be implausible as a theory of what makes for a meaningful life, is that some of our desires are ones that we wish or desire that we did not have. They are such that we feel alienated from them; they are, in an important sense, not our own. But the satisfaction of desires that are not really our own cannot plausibly contribute to making our lives meaningful.

4.3.1 A Better Alternative

But what might then constitute a better or more satisfactory desire-based account than unqualified desire-satisfactionism? In answer to this question, I propose CDF, i.e. the view that whether your life is meaningful depends on the extent to which your *categorical* desires—those desires that are in part constitutive of your practical identity—are fulfilled. CDF avoids both of the problems for unqualified desire-satisfactionism that were mentioned above. On the one hand, the desires the fulfilment of which contributes to making one's life meaningful, according to CDF, are ones that run quite deep in oneself; indeed, they must be partly constitutive of who one is as a particular practical agent. On the other hand, precisely because the relevant desires must be constitutive components of one's practical identity, the satisfaction of uncharacteristic or alien desires cannot, on CDF, confer meaning on one's life.[32]

[31] If someone prevented me by force from satisfying these desires, then *that* could very well affect my judgment about the worthwhileness of my life. But that would affect my judgment because it would constitute a violation of my integrity, not because I was no longer able to satisfy my desires for the relevant things.

[32] Alien desires are not ones that we identify with; they would not figure 'in a description under which ... you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking' (Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 101). And therefore they are not constitutive of your practical identity or normative self-conception.

Much more could of course be said regarding the details of CDF. However, I hope to have said enough to at least convince you that CDF deserves our serious attention. I will therefore turn next to considering a number of objections that could conceivably be raised against it.

5. Objections and Responses

In this section I will raise and offer responses to at least four different objections against CDF.[33] In brief, the objections to be discussed are the following:

> (5.1) CDF has radically counterintuitive implications regarding which lives that qualify as meaningful!
> (5.2) CDF cannot properly account for the importance of experiencing a sense of fulfillment in living a meaningful life!
> (5.3) CDF has radically counterintuitive implications regarding which lives that count as more or less meaningful!
> (5.4) CDF cannot make sense of the possibility of epiphanies, in the light of which people come to realize that, contrary to what they used to believe, their lives to date have in fact been wasted or meaningless!

5.1 Counterintuitive Implications I

By far the most common objection to subjectivist theories without a value requirement in the recent literature is that they have 'seriously counterintuitive implications about which lives count as meaningful'.[34] If the satisfaction or fulfillment of desires, e.g., was all that meaning in life depended on, then it seems we could acquire meaning in our lives even from such activities as (just to mention a few of the many examples available in the literature): spending 'day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies'[35]; 'collecting rubber band'[36]; 'memorizing the dictionary'[37]; 'making handwritten copies of war and peace'[38]; 'counting the blades of grass on Harvard Yard'[39]; 'collecting bottle tops'[40]; and 'smoking pot all day'.[41] But it is radically (or 'seriously') counterintuitive, we are invited to agree, that activities such as

[33] As will become apparent, the objections are such that they concern desire-based (and in some cases maybe subjectivist) theories in general. In my responses to them, though, I will focus specifically on how they can be handled by CDF.
[34] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, p. 175.
[35] Susan Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives', in *The Variety of Value: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 92.
[36] Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', p. 112.
[37] *Ibid*.
[38] *Ibid*.
[39] Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', p. 536.
[40] Singer, *Meaning of Life*, p. 113.
[41] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, p. 9. All these examples could be used also as objections against the kind of subjectivist view according to which meaning in life depends entirely on the extent to which one likes, enjoys, or takes pleasure in one's circumstances.

these could contribute to making *anyone's* life meaningful. And so subjectivist theories without a value requirement, including CDF, have to go.

5.1.1 Response(s).

In response to this objection, we might begin by pointing out that, according to CDF at least, the examples listed just above do not qualify as putative counterexamples unless it is assumed that a person's desire for either of the relevant activities is neither alien nor too shallow or unimportant to her, but rather constitutes a categorical desire—a desire that is partly constitutive of her practical identity. And once this point has been made clear, I must admit that I simply do not find it counterintuitive to think that the activities in question could conceivably contribute to making certain people's lives meaningful. If one or more of the relevant activities *really are* objects of someone's categorical desires—if they are objects of desires such that the person would find that his or her life had diminished seriously in its worthwhileness if s/he were to lose them or had to give them up—then why would not their satisfaction be said to contribute to making the person's life meaningful? Indeed, in line with my critique earlier of hybrid theories (section 3), I do not quite see how it could be anything but unacceptably elitist to deny that it would.

What I have just said is of course compatible with there being many other things that we might reasonably want to point out to someone (if, that is, we ever were to meet such a person, which we quite probably will not) who really does seem to acquire some amount of meaning in his life from one or more of the activities in the examples above. Out of concern for that person's own interest, we could point out, e.g., that drinking beer night after night in front of the TV, or smoking pot all day, will harm both his physical health and his intellectual abilities (which the person may certainly also care about!). The person should also consider the social costs associated with the relevant activities: for example, it will quite likely be very hard to initiate and sustain friendly and loving relationships to others if one spends every night drinking beer in front of the TV and/or smoking pot all day. Furthermore, as with most activities—whether they belong to those that philosophers like to suggest are objectively valuable or not—if we engage in them too much too often, we will grow tired of them. And so if someone spends all of his waking hours making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, we might quite reasonably point out that he should consider what he will do when that activity loses its grip on him.[42]

5.2 Meaning and the Importance of Feeling Fulfilled

In 4.2 I argued that the meaning in most people's lives plausibly depends not just on how they feel towards their circumstances but also on the state of the world, and that mental-state theories of meaning in life should therefore be rejected. Perhaps, however, it will be objected that by endorsing CDF I have instead gone too far in the opposite direction. Could it not be the case, after all, that the world actually fits with many of a person's desires—even with her categorical ones—even though the person does not enjoy, finds pleasure in, or feels fulfilled by her circumstances (perhaps because she is unaware of the

[42] In addition to these kinds of prudential considerations, it seems we could very plausibly also point to various *moral* considerations that the person is ignoring while being engaged in at least some of the relevant activities.

extent to which her categorical desires are fulfilled)? And if this is indeed the case—i.e. if CDF turns out to entail that liking, enjoying, or feeling fulfilled by one's circumstances, is not even a *necessary* condition for exemplifying meaning in one's life—then that, the critic might suggest, constitutes a serious blow against CDF.

5.2.1 Response(s).

It seems to me quite correct that CDF denies the necessity of liking, enjoying, or feeling fulfilled by one's circumstances in order for a person's life to exemplify meaning. But this does not constitute a problem for CDF, I think; it is rather just as it should be.

It may be worth stressing that what is at issue here is not whether a person's categorical desires must, to some extent or other, be satisfied in order for that person's life to exemplify meaning. What is at issue is instead if the satisfaction of a person's categorical desires is, as CDF claims, both necessary and sufficient in order for a person's life to exemplify meaning, or if it is also required that the person *feels* in a certain way towards her circumstances—if she in addition must take pleasure in or feel fulfilled by them. Of course, these things often go hand in hand: we are often aware of when our desires are satisfied, and, at least in the normal case, I take it we also experience a sense or feeling of satisfaction or fulfillment when they are. But it seems some of our desires—and why not our categorical ones?—sometimes can really be satisfied without our knowledge of it; we may even firmly believe that they are in fact *not* satisfied. In such cases—and I will offer an illustration of one in a minute—something that one cares about deeply (assuming at least that we are thinking of a case involving a categorical desire) would in fact be fulfilled. Now, is it not, upon reflection, quite plausible to think that that would indeed contribute to making one's life more meaningful? It seems it would provide some basis within one's life for an affirmative answer to questions about whether one's life has (or have had) a point or purpose, even though one would not happen to have cognitive access to that basis in the relevant kind of case.

For illustration, let us consider an example provided by Aaron Smuts. Smuts brings to our attention the case of George Baily, the main character in the classic movie *It's A Wonderful Life*:

> The movie tells what is now a familiar story of a suicidal man, George Baily (James Stewart), who is finally able [to] see the meaning of his life with a little help from a friend—an alcoholic angel who wants to make good. The angel takes George on a trip to Pottersville—the alternate world where George had never been born. A few hours in Pottersville is enough for George to see how meaningful his existence has been.[43]

I believe Smuts is right that the case of Baily should help us see 'that one can live a meaningful life, but mistakenly think otherwise'—without, as I would put it, having favourable feelings towards what one takes to be one's circumstances.[44] Indeed, even if Baily 'had not been shaken out of his mistaken evaluation … [his] life would still have

[43] Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', p. 544.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 547.

been meaningful. He would not have realized it. In fact, he probably would have killed himself … But this would not make his life meaningless'.[45]

However, I part company with Smuts when it comes to the explanation for *why* Baily's life plausibly exemplifies meaning even before he is taken to Pottersville (and of why his life would have done so even if he had never been taken to Pottersville at all). What makes that plausible, in my view, is that Baily really cares about the welfare of the people around him—that he has what certainly seems to be a categorical desire for doing what he can to promote their good—and that he, contrary to what he thinks before the trip to Pottersville, in fact does (and has done) just that. On Smuts' consequentialist view, on the other hand, the good that Baily causes is *all* that matters. But this means that Baily's life would have exemplified meaning even if his trip to Pottersville had only confirmed his belief that the world does not conform to his desires or concerns (which, in this scenario, would not include doing what he can to promote the good of those around him). And that seems to me unacceptable since there would then be no connection or link between what makes Baily's life meaningful, and his set of attitudes or concerns.

5.3 Counterintuitive Implications II

According to Smuts, it 'is a core datum that any theory of meaning of life must respect on pain of radical revisionism' that 'Gandhi's life is more meaningful than one spent making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, collecting rubber bands, counting the blades of grass on Harvard Yard, or consuming large quantities of excrement'.[46] And a bit further on in his paper, Smuts argues that subjectivism (without a value requirement) fails to respect to this 'core datum', since according to it:

> any two equally fulfilling lives are equally meaningful, even if one is devoted to curing cancer and the other to consuming vast quantities of excrement. But a grinning excrement eater does not live as meaningful of a life as a cancer researcher. It is absurd to suggest otherwise. Hence, we should reject the subjective theory.[47]

Throughout his paper, Smuts seems to identify subjectivism (or 'the subjective theory') with the view 'that what makes a life meaningful is purely a matter of how that life seems to the one who lives it'.[48] As we have seen, though, this is not an accurate characterization with respect to the desire-based kind of subjectivist theory. However, it seems Smuts' argument above could easily be amended to cover the desire-based kind of subjectivist theory as well. We could just rephrase the beginning of the argument so that it reads instead: 'any two equally fulfilling lives—or, for the desire-based kind of theory, any two lives in which the persons' desires are satisfied to an equal degree—are equally meaningful …'.

[45] *Ibid*., p. 546f.
[46] *Ibid*., p. 536.
[47] *Ibid*., p. 543f.
[48] *Ibid*., p. 541.

5.3.1 Response(s).

The first thing we may notice is that this is a somewhat surprising argument coming from a consequentialist such as Smuts. It is surely possible, after all, to think of circumstances (highly improbable though they may be) in which a life 'spent making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, collecting rubber bands, counting the blades of grass on Harvard Yard, or consuming large quantities of excrement' would be the cause of as much (and maybe even more) good as (than) Gandhi's life was. And on Smuts' own favoured theory—GCA (discussed in 2.1 above)—the former life would in such circumstances also count as equally (more) meaningful as (than) Gandhi's. Indeed, it seems we could easily turn his argument against subjectivism into one directed at GCA instead: any two equally [good producing] lives are equally meaningful, even if one is devoted to curing cancer and the other to consuming vast quantities of excrement. But a grinning excrement eater does not live as meaningful of a life as a cancer researcher. It is absurd to suggest otherwise. Hence, we should reject [GCA].

Perhaps it will be responded that what Smuts means must reasonably be that what is absurd about subjectivism is that it entails that any two lives that are equally fulfilling—or equal in respect of desire satisfaction—are *thereby* equally meaningful, 'even if one is devoted to curing cancer and the other to consuming vast quantities of excrement'. The problem with this response, though, is that the reason Smuts offers for *why* this is absurd is that 'a grinning excrement eater does not live as meaningful of a life as a cancer researcher'. But that, as we have seen, is not a claim that GCA respects in all conceivable circumstances either.

Whether or not Smuts' argument hits his own favoured theory, however, the question of what can be said in defense of CDF in relation to the relevant argument still remains. I shall thus turn to that question now.

Let us begin by setting Smuts' quite extreme examples to one side for a moment, and consider instead a comparison between, say, Gandhi's life, on the one hand, and the life of a Western middle class academic, whose life revolves primarily around her family, her job as a university physics professor, travelling, music, and gliding, on the other. Now, is there any reason to think that the second life *must* have within it a weaker basis for affirmative answers to questions about whether there is a point, purpose or direction to it, than what the first life has? Of course, the first life—it is Gandhi's life, after all!—will in all likelihood be the cause of a much greater amount of good in the world at large (that will presumably be the case in comparison to the lives of the vast majority of people in the world). But let us suppose that while the person living the second life is indeed concerned to be a morally upright person, and also greatly admires Gandhi, wishing that there were more persons like him in the world, she does not cherish any categorical desires for achievements or accomplishments similar to Gandhi's, but rather for precisely the things around which her life presently revolves. For my own part, at least, I fail entirely to see why the second life, under these circumstances, could not be just as meaningful as the first life.

But it may now be asked whether the same could really be said for a life devoted to making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, collecting rubber bands, and so on? I believe it reasonably could, at least as long as we keep in mind some of the things said in response to the first objection earlier (5.1)—in particular that we must make sure that we are conceiving of the relevant life as one in which making handwritten copies of *War and*

Peace and/or collecting rubber bands really are the objects of someone's categorical desires. That is perhaps not so easy to do since it is so unlikely that we have ever met, or ever will meet, a person for whom this is indeed the case. But it is not, it seems to me, impossible to conceive of such a person. And once we do, I do not see why we would—or should—deny that that person exemplifies (some amount of) meaning in his or her life.

5.4 Wolf's Objection

Susan Wolf has argued that subjectivism without a value requirement obliterates the difference between one's life merely feeling or seeming meaningful to one, and one's life actually being meaningful. But this difference is crucial, according to Wolf, in order for us to make sense of the possibility of waking up 'either literally or figuratively—to the recognition that one's life to date has been meaningless'.[49]

5.4.1 Response(s).

On one natural way of understanding this objection, it is at most an objection against mental-state theories of meaning in life—i.e. against theories according to which the meaning of one's life depends entirely on what one experiences one's life to be like. The desire-based kind of subjectivist theories (including CDF) instead make the meaningfulness of one's life depend at least in part on the state of the world, and about that we can of course be mistaken. A desire-based theory such as CDF therefore also does leave room for the possibility of discovering that one's life to date has in fact been meaningless, contrary perhaps to what one used to think; this was indeed the point of the *Truman Show* example in 4.2.

But maybe it will be responded here that even if CDF leaves room for the possibility of making one kind of mistake regarding the meaningfulness in one's life to date, there is a second kind of mistake that one could make about that, which CDF does *not* leave room for. The second kind of mistake shows up in cases where we have been attached to activities on the assumption that the relevant activities are objectively valuable. When realizing that those activities were not, in fact, objectively valuable, however, we are forced to acknowledge that our lives to date have been meaningless.

It is not true, however, that CDF rules out even this second kind of mistake. Insofar as one has been attached to activities that one desired on the condition that they were objectively valuable, then the realization that the relevant things were actually not objectively valuable would indeed entail, even according to CDF, that one's life to date has been meaningless (this was indeed one of the points made in section 3 earlier).

Summary

In this paper I have proposed and defended a particular desire-based theory of what makes a person's life meaningful. Desire-based theories, I have argued, avoid the problems facing other theories of meaning in life: in contrast to objectivist theories (both consequentialist and non-consequentialist ones), they succeed in providing a necessary link between what makes a person's life meaningful and the person's own set of attitudes

[49] Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives', p. 96.

or concerns; in contrast to hybrid theories (or subjectivist theories with a value requirement), they avoid the elitism or exclusivism inherent in the former; and in contrast to mental-state theories, they avoid the problem of not taking the state of the world properly into account when determining whether someone's life is meaningful. However, since the meaning in one's life does not plausibly depend on the satisfaction of just any desires—perhaps especially not on the satisfaction of desires that we experience as alien to ourselves—I suggested that we should opt for CDF, i.e. the view that the meaning in your life depends on the extent to which your *categorical* desires are satisfied or fulfilled. Lastly, I raised and responded to at least four possible objections to CDF.

While CDF seems to me the most plausible theory available so far, a lot certainly remains to be done with respect to working out all the details and implications of it. Furthermore, it is still early days in analytically oriented philosophy for the topic of meaning in life. Much work still needs to be done regarding, e.g., the concept—or concepts—of meaning in life; the value of living a meaningful life; and the development and critical examination of new substantive conceptions of it. That work will of course also be relevant for evaluating CDF. However, I hope to at least have made a case for taking CDF—as well, perhaps, as desire-based theories more generally—seriously in future philosophical discussions.[50]

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What Good is Meaning in Life?

Christopher Woodard

Most philosophers writing on meaning in life agree that it is a distinct kind of final value. This consensus view has two components: the 'final value claim' that meaning in life is a kind of final value, and the 'distinctness claim' that it is distinct from all other kinds of final value. This paper discusses some difficulties in vindicating both claims at once. One way to underscore the distinctness of meaning, for example, is to retain a feature of our pre-theoretical concept of meaning in life, according to which the least possible quantity of meaning is meaninglessness. Unfortunately, this makes it harder to defend the claim that meaning is a kind of final value. On the other hand, revising the concept to allow for negative meaning renders meaning closer in structure to other kinds of final value, but also makes it harder to defend the distinctness claim. In light of these difficulties, the paper explores the prospects of a theory of meaning in life which departs from the consensus view by rejecting the final value claim. On such a view, the value of meaning in life is entirely instrumental.

1. Introduction

Philosophers who write about meaning in life disagree about many things, but they tend to agree on this: that it is a distinct kind of final value of lives. Here 'final value' means a kind of value that something could have independently of its causal consequences. Final value is a kind of value that something has for its own sake—to be contrasted with instrumental value, which is value in virtue of causing something with final value. One component of the shared assumption, then, is the claim that a life's having meaning, or an activity's having meaning, endows it with value independently of what the life or activity causes. I will call this 'the final value claim' about meaning in life.

The shared assumption has a second component. According to what I will call 'the distinctness claim', meaning in life is distinct from all other kinds of final value. We are used to the idea that lives may have different kinds of final value: for example, they may be rich in well-being (good for the persons whose lives they are), or they may be morally good (good in respect of whatever matters morally), or they may perhaps have aesthetic or epistemic value (they may be beautiful or instructive). These different kinds

of value, if all are genuine, may interact in interesting ways. They may sometimes conflict with each other, as when we think that someone lived a life that was good for her but bad for others; or we think that someone's life was instructive even though, or perhaps because, it contained significant suffering. According to the distinctness claim about meaning in life, meaning is distinct in the sense that it is not reducible to any other kind of value, or any combination of other kinds of value. To account for all of the value that lives can have, we have to add meaning to the balance sheet. As with the other values we just considered, the distinctness claim is compatible with believing that meaning in life is interestingly related to other kinds of final value. It could be, for example, that meaning in life contributes to well-being.[1] The distinctness claim denies that meaning is reducible to other values, but not that it is related to other values.

The shared assumption, then, has two components: the final value claim, and the distinctness claim. For ease of reference, I shall refer to this combination of claims as 'the consensus view'. It is a kind of consensus, among those who theorise about meaning in life.[2] On the other hand, this is only a local consensus, and 'the consensus view' is not quite universal even among this group. Among many philosophers who do not theorise about meaning in life, the consensus appears to be some form of scepticism about the phenomenon. It is common to hear the view expressed, for example, that lives are not the sort of thing that can have meaning. Moreover, even among those who do theorise about meaning in life, some demur from the consensus. For example, Robert Nozick distinguishes between meaning on one hand and value on the other, treating them as distinct kinds of 'worth'.[3] Recently, Tatjana Višak has argued that the concept of meaning in life is best understood as providing an alternative way to refer to normative reasons for action. Since the relationship between reasons and value is a further question, her view is committed neither to the final value claim nor to the distinctness claim.[4]

We should not accept scepticism about meaning in life just because lives do not have syntactic structure, or do not in other ways resemble other things that we take to

[1] Susan Wolf and Thaddeus Metz claim that it does. This is compatible with what I am calling the consensus view. See Susan Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997), pp. 207-225 and Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 74 n. 11.

[2] Examples of the consensus view include Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, 'On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life', *Philosophical Papers* 34: 3 (2005), pp. 443-458; David Matheson, 'Creativity and Meaning in Life', *Ratio* online first (2016) doi:10.1111/rati.12153; Metz, *Meaning in Life*, Ch. 4; Aaron Smuts, 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51: 4 (2013), pp. 536-562; Frans Svensson, 'Why Subjectivism About Meaning In Life Might Not Be So Bad After All', unpublished MS; Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning'; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[3] According to Nozick, value is a kind of worth that involves order within limits, while meaning is a kind of worth that involves transcending limits. See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981), pp. 610-619.

[4] See Tatjana Višak, 'Understanding Meaning of Life in Terms of Reasons for Action', *Journal of Value Inquiry* 51: 3 (2017), pp. 507-530. Her discussion is addressed to the conceptual question of how to articulate the concept of meaning in life, rather than the substantive question of what meaning in life consists in. Nevertheless, Višak's answer to the conceptual question suggests a way of conceiving meaning in life that rejects what I have called the consensus view.

have meaning. That is a flat-footed and ultimately unconvincing way of thinking about the issues. Even if philosophers often take this sort of scepticism as a default view, many non-philosophers do not. Many people evidently judge that some lives or activities are more or less meaningful than others. Scepticism about the putative object of these judgements is thus highly revisionary of common sense. For that reason, we should treat it as possibly correct but in need of significant theoretical motivation. Mere lack of resemblance between lives and other entities we take to be meaningful is not, I take it, sufficient motivation. That narrow ground for scepticism simply betrays uncharitable literal-mindedness on the part of the sceptic.[5]

In this paper I will assume that meaning in life is a real phenomenon, without either arguing for that assumption or endorsing any particular theory of the nature of meaning in life. My focus instead will be on the value of meaning in life. I will argue that the consensus view faces a serious challenge, which consists in defending both the final value claim and the distinctness claim at once. The first half of the paper (sections 2-4) explains this challenge, concluding that it is at least not obvious how the consensus view can meet it. This conclusion motivates discussion in the second half of the paper (sections 5-6) of one way of departing from the consensus view, which consists in dropping the final value claim. Meaning in life may be valuable without itself being a kind of final value. Its value may be purely instrumental, though none the less real for all that.[6]

2. A Challenge for the Consensus View

The challenge for the consensus view is simply to vindicate both of its constituent claims at once. That is, the challenge is to offer reasons for thinking that meaning in life is both a kind of final value and that it is distinct from other kinds of final value, such as well-being or moral value.

The challenge gains some traction initially because the leading theories of meaning portray it in a way that resembles other kinds of final value, and the leading examples used in discussion of these theories often seem interpretable in terms of other kinds of final value. For example, Thaddeus Metz has distinguished theories of meaning

[5] This is especially so in light of the fact that a significant body of recent philosophical writing on meaning in life has shown many promising ways in which we can try to make sense of common judgements about it. For useful surveys, see Thaddeus Metz 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life', *Ethics* 112 (2002), pp. 781-814; Thaddeus Metz, 'New Developments in the Meaning of Life', *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2007), pp. 196-217.

[6] How is it possible to reach any conclusion about the value of X without *first* knowing the nature of X? I am assuming that meaning in life is a real phenomenon, and that it is the object of ordinary judgements about which lives and activities are meaningful. My claims about value are ultimately claims about what we really think about the object of these judgements: I claim that the consensus view wrongly interprets common belief about meaning in life when it treats it as committed to the idea that meaning is a distinct kind of final value of lives. So we should not build that assumption into our theorising about meaning in life. On the other hand, common belief about meaning in life may turn out to be wrong: if we discover the nature of meaning in life, we may have to revise our views, and acknowledge that it has final value after all. My conclusion in this paper is thus about what we now have reason to believe about meaning in life.

in life according to whether they are supernaturalist or naturalist. Within the naturalist category, the chief division is between subjective and objective theories. Metz characterises the difference between these as follows:

> A subjective theory maintains that what makes a life meaningful depends on the subject … More specifically, it is the view that whether a life is meaningful essentially is a function of whether it is (or its parts are) the object of some proattitude or other. An objectivist can grant that a certain positive mental orientation helps to constitute life's meaning; subjectivism's defining point is that such a disposition is sufficient for meaning in life.[7]

It is then possible to distinguish different kinds of subjectivism, according to which pro-attitude is said to be crucial for meaning, and to distinguish different kinds of objectivism, according to whether a pro-attitude is necessary, and according to which other conditions are said to be necessary for meaning to obtain.[8]

These different kinds of theory of meaning in life certainly resemble familiar kinds of theory of well-being. It is common to distinguish subjective and objective theories of well-being, for example, and to make further distinctions within those categories along the same sorts of lines as those just mentioned in the case of theories of meaning.[9] Moreover, the examples given of lives that are rich in meaning also appear to be lives that are valuable in other ways. For example, Susan Wolf cites Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Einstein as 'unquestionably meaningful lives (if any are)'.[10] Presumably, if we are disposed to judge these lives as meaningful we will also be disposed to judge them as good in terms of one or more other kinds of final value, such as well-being, moral value, or epistemic value.

Thus there is resemblance both between the leading theories of meaning in life and the leading theories of other kinds of value of lives, and between the alleged paradigm cases of meaning and the alleged paradigm cases of other kinds of value. This naturally prompts the question of whether meaning is both a kind of final value and genuinely distinct from other kinds of it.[11]

We should not misunderstand the nature of this challenge. First, it should not be taken to apply uniquely to meaning in life, on the grounds that meaning in life is (as it were) a late candidate to enter the roster of final values recognised in ethical theories. There is no queue to enter the pantheon. Ultimately the question is simply which kinds of final value there are, and it could be that late entrants do a better job of picking those out than is done by more familiar concepts. We should not prioritise more established

[7] Metz, 'Recent Work', pp. 792-793.

[8] See Metz, 'Recent Work', pp. 792-801.

[9] For example, see Dale Dorsey, 'Subjectivism without Desire', *Philosophical Review* 121 (2012), pp. 407-442 at p. 407. For a different way to distinguish subjective and objective theories of well-being, see L. Wayne Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), Ch. 2.

[10] Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning', p. 209.

[11] Stephen Kershnar raises an objection of this sort against Metz's views in his paper, 'Thad Metz's Fundamentality Theory of Meaning in Life: A Critical Review', *Science, Religion and Culture* 1 (2014), pp. 97-100. Thaddeus Metz responds in his paper, 'Meaning as a Distinct and Fundamental Value: Reply to Kershnar', *Science, Religion and Culture* 1 (2014), pp. 101-106.

candidates just because they are more familiar. All candidate final values face the same challenge, then, though some might find it easier to meet than others.

Second, I should emphasise that I am describing a challenge for the consensus view, not seeking to demonstrate that it cannot possibly meet this challenge. I take the resemblances we have just noted to suggest that this is a genuine challenge, but I do not take them to show that, all things considered, meaning is not a distinct final value. They raise the salience of that question without answering it.

Finally, it is important to note that it would not suffice, as a response to the challenge of showing that meaning is both a kind of final value and distinct from others, that there is no other single kind of final value that plausibly explains our judgements about meaning in life.[12] Those judgements might be explicable in terms of a number of other kinds of final value. One way that meaning could fail to be distinct is for our judgements employing the concept of meaning in life to be sometimes about well-being and sometimes about moral value, for example.

3. Meaninglessness

What is the least quantity of meaning that a life or activity may have? According to common sense, it is nil. An important structural feature of our pre-theoretical concept of meaning is that it allows no negative meaning. There is nothing less meaningful than meaninglessness. Sisyphus's meaningless activity has as little meaning as it is possible for any activity to have.

One strategy in response to the challenge to demonstrate the distinctness of meaning would be to emphasise this feature of our pre-theoretical concept of meaning in life. This would serve to distinguish it decisively from well-being, moral value, and all of the other plausible candidates for kinds of final value of lives. Our concepts of these other candidates all allow for negative values: a life of unremitting suffering has negative well-being, for example, and a wicked life is not merely one that lacks moral value, but one that has moral disvalue. Not only that, but these negative values can increase without any apparent limit.[13] We can just keep piling more suffering or wickedness into them. If one kind of value has an absolute minimum, while another can keep getting worse without apparent limit, there is reason to think that they are not the same kind of value. So if meaning in life is whatever answers to our pre-theoretical concept, it cannot be the same thing as well-being, moral value, or any of the other plausible candidates for kinds of final value of lives.

[12] Metz's reply to Kershnar appears to take this form. He argues, first, that meaning in life is not reducible to the intrinsic value of a life (understood as the value a life has in virtue of its intrinsic properties) and then, second, that it is not reducible to well-being. See Metz, 'Meaning as a Distinct and Fundamental Value', pp. 101-103.

[13] The idea of meaninglessness, as it is usually understood, combines two features. It is (a) the least possible quantity of meaning, and (b) zero meaning. The feature that I take to be relevant for present purposes is (a). But for simplicity I will refer to it by saying that our pre-theoretical concept of meaning in life allows 'no negative meaning'.

We might wonder whether this feature could make any sense, and so whether retaining it is a genuine option for theories of meaning. What could explain the apparent bottoming-out of meaning in meaninglessness? One obvious way to make sense of it is to assimilate it to *mattering*, as that is usually understood. To matter in this sense is to have practical significance of either positive or negative valence. Bad things matter, just as good things do. But some things do not matter at all, and that is the least possible quantity of mattering. Perhaps meaning is like that.

If we adopt a theory of meaning in life with this feature, we can distinguish it from well-being, moral value, and other candidate final values. But we would not thereby escape the challenge to the consensus view. Understood in this way, meaning would not only appear to be distinct from these specific other final values, but from all other candidate final values. In general, for any kind of final value, we tend to think that things can keep getting worse in that respect. Things can get more and more unjust or unequal; they can get more and more ugly; there is no maximum quantity of suffering. Other final values do not appear to bottom-out. Mattering, indeed, is not a kind of final value—but instead a function of other values (or other considerations). Something matters to the extent that it has any kind of value or disvalue.

So, retaining this feature supports the distinctness claim but threatens to undermine the final value claim. Again, this is hardly conclusive. Perhaps the appearance that other kinds of final value do not bottom-out is deceptive.[14] Or perhaps meaning is unique amongst final values in bottoming-out. However, we can at least say that it is not obvious how this way of defending the distinctness claim can be combined with a defence of the final value claim.

4. Negative Meaning?

Perhaps for this reason, some theorists of meaning propose that there is, contrary to common assumption, negative meaning. Thaddeus Metz argues that just as some actions improve one's standing with respect to meaning in life, and others are neutral, a third category of actions worsens one's standing with respect to meaning in life. For example, oversleeping is neutral with respect to meaning, while blowing up the Sphinx for fun worsens one's situation. Interestingly, Metz expresses this idea by saying that this action 'anti-matters', or has negative meaning. Moreover, a life full of actions like this would be one of negative meaning in life, which is to say that it would be worse, with respect to meaning, than a meaningless life.[15] Stephen Campbell and Sven Nyholm have recently made a very similar argument.[16]

[14] Some candidate final values may have the appearance of bottoming-out, but on reflection do not do so. For example, we might at first think that there is a least possible amount of autonomy. But this does not seem true on further reflection: we can always imagine making things worse with respect to autonomy by adding more manipulation or deception to the agent's circumstances.

[15] See Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 63-64, 233-236.

[16] Campbell and Nyholm give essentially the same argument as Metz for belief in negative meaning, which they call 'anti-meaning': 'To be meaningful, it is not enough that a life is "full of meaning." It must also be the case that it is not full of anti-meaning. Thus, it appears to be

Whatever the other merits or demerits of this suggestion, it is self-consciously revisionary. Metz and Campbell and Nyholm realise that our ordinary concepts of meaning in life (or of mattering) do not allow negative meaning (or anti-mattering). Of course, the fact that it is revisionary does not imply that it is unjustified. But it does have some implications for our reasons to accept these theories. Many ethicists accept a methodology according to which one desideratum is to make as much sense as possible of ordinary ethical judgements. Insofar as the idea of negative meaning is out of step with those judgements, it seems to do badly with respect to that desideratum, and so must be justified, if at all, by compensating theoretical advantages. But if we examine the cases that are presented as exemplifying negative meaning, it is not obvious what the theoretical advantages of accepting negative meaning are supposed to be. For example, in addition to blowing up the Sphinx for fun, Metz gives as examples of actions with negative meaning burning science books, and 'killing innocents and using their blood in one's paintings to make a statement about the value of human life'.[17] In all of these examples the action is undoubtedly bad, but in none of them is it clear that we have to go beyond moral value, epistemic value, or aesthetic value to explain why it is bad.

More generally, accepting negative meaning makes the concept of meaning in life resemble other candidate final values more closely. That is good news if we wish to claim that it is a kind of final value, but it also seems to make it harder to vindicate the claim of distinctness.

5. The Instrumental Value of Meaning in Life

So far I have described a challenge to the consensus view, and considered two possible responses to that challenge. One response was to try to vindicate the distinctness claim by emphasising that our pre-theoretical concept does not allow negative meaning. The downside of that response is that it seems to make it harder to vindicate the final value claim. The second response was to try to vindicate the final value claim by revising our pre-theoretical concept to allow for negative meaning. The downside of that response is that it seems to make it harder to vindicate the distinctness claim.

We have here the appearance of a dilemma for the consensus view. Since we have considered only two broad kinds of response to the original challenge, we should not peremptorily conclude that this is a genuine and inescapable dilemma. But we can say, more tentatively, that it is not yet obvious how the original challenge to the consensus view can be met.

With that in mind, we might consider various ways of departing from the consensus view. One way would be to give up on the distinctness claim, and assimilate meaning in life to some other value or values. To do that would involve recognising

impossible to assess the overall meaningfulness of lives without taking anti-meaning into account'. Stephen Campbell and Sven Nyholm, 'Anti-Meaning and Why It Matters', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (2015), pp. 694-711, at pp. 704-705. According to this argument, we need to accept the existence of negative meaning in order to account properly for the meaningfulness of whole lives.

[17] Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 64, 234.

negative meaning, however, and so would share in the revisionism that that idea involves. It would also make the concept of meaning in life in principle dispensable to ethics.

In the remainder I will argue that we should consider giving up the final value claim. Of course, this would not entail denying that meaning in life has value; instead, it would be to think of its value as purely instrumental. As I shall try to emphasise, something is not less valuable—nor its value less real—just because its value is purely instrumental. Aversion to the merely instrumental is a potentially distorting influence in ethics. Moreover, an advantage of giving up the final value claim is that it may enable us to vindicate the distinctness of meaning in life and its indispensability as a concept.

Recall that we earlier assumed that meaning in life is a real phenomenon, in the sense that some lives or activities are more meaningful than others. If we make that assumption, how might we expect meaning in life to have instrumental value? It must be through some causal chain, from whichever properties realise meaning in life to something that has final value.

One way in which this causal chain could go is via a sense of meaningfulness. That is, it could be that meaning in life causes good things in part by causing a sense of meaningfulness, which is either a final good itself or is a cause of some other final good, or both. A 'sense of meaningfulness' is that psychological state in which one's activities or life seem meaningful to one. I will not try to characterise this psychological state fully, but I will assume that it has cognitive, conative, and affective components. It involves being disposed to believe that what one is doing is meaningful to some degree, to be motivated to do it for that reason, and associated moods and emotional states.[18]

Finding one's life and activities to be meaningful certainly seems to be valuable for many people in many circumstances. It can help to generate and sustain motivation, for example.[19] It can make difficult or challenging activity pleasant or satisfying.[20] It can also help to bring narrative unity to a life or a period of one's life, as when someone says 'during my thirties I was establishing my career' or 'being a parent took up all of my time

[18] Antti Kauppinen, 'Meaning and the Good Life', online at https://www.academia.edu/28978139/Meaning_and_the_Good_Life accessed 2017.03.13, pp. 4-7 offers a good characterisation of the sense of meaningfulness. On the relationship between emotions and the sense of meaningfulness, see David Tang, Nicholas J. Kelley, Joshua A. Hicks, and Eddie Harmon-Jones, 'Emotions and Meaning in Life: A Motivational Perspective', in *The Experience of Meaning in Life: Classical Perspectives, Emerging Themes, and Controversies*, edited by Joshua A. Hicks and Clay Routledge (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), pp. 117-128.

[19] A. Will Crescioni and Roy F. Baumeister, 'The Four Needs for Meaning, the Value Gap, and How (and Whether) Society Can Fill the Void', in *The Experience of Meaning in Life: Classical Perspectives, Emerging Themes, and Controversies*, edited by Joshua A. Hicks and Clay Routledge (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013) pp. 3-15, at p. 3 report empirical research on the beneficial effects of a sense of meaningfulness. Kauppinen, 'Meaning and the Good Life' emphasises its motivational importance.

[20] Compare Rawls on what he calls the Aristotelian Principle: 'other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity'. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 374. If more challenging activities tend to be more meaningful, the instrumental value of meaning may help to explain the Aristotelian Principle.

then'. The sense of narrative unity—which is lacking in a purely episodic life—seems to be important for many people.[21]

These benefits of the sense of meaning confer instrumental value on meaning itself insofar as meaning causes the sense of meaning. It may be helpful to draw an analogy here with something's being funny. Whatever the proper philosophical account of what it takes for something to be funny, it is possible for any individual to be wrong about which things are funny, since anyone can have a sense of humour failure. Similarly, it seems safe to assume that anyone can have a sense of meaning failure. But we may speculate that anyone would be more likely to find something funny if it is indeed funny, and that anyone would be more likely to find something meaningful if it is indeed meaningful. These causal hypotheses, if true, would enable us to explain the value of something's being funny or meaningful in terms of the value of someone's finding it funny or meaningful.

We should not overstate the instrumental value of meaning in life. It seems possible, and even common, for people to be highly motivated by things that are not, we believe, genuinely meaningful. This could be because the person wrongly finds them to be meaningful. This is a tempting, though perhaps false, interpretation of many cases in which someone develops a strong interest in collecting something, such as stamps or restaurant menus.[22] Alternatively, it could be because the person is motivated independently of having a sense of meaningfulness. Not everyone has the acute sensitivity to the sense of meaningfulness displayed by characters in nineteenth century Russian novels.[23]

Nevertheless, it is plausible both that meaningfulness tends to cause and sustain the sense of meaningfulness, and that the sense of meaningfulness is valuable (either instrumentally, or instrumentally and finally). Thus it is plausible that meaning in life has some instrumental value.

6. Bad Meaning

We are exploring the prospects of a theory of meaning in life that gives up the final value claim. I have just argued that it is plausible to think that meaning has instrumental value. This might encourage us to hope that all of the value of meaning in life can be explained while denying the final value claim.

Whether we can do that depends, of course, on whether meaning in life has any final value in addition to its instrumental value. One way to address this issue would be to describe a case in which a life, or part of a life, is meaningful, and yet for some reason this meaning has no causal consequences. Were we to judge that this meaning is nonetheless valuable, that would be evidence that it has final value. However, it is very

[21] Not all: see Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio* XVII (2004), pp. 428-452. I am grateful to Frans Svensson for bringing this paper to my attention.

[22] Collecting seems on one hand continuous with the archetypal meaningless activity of counting blades of grass, yet on the other hand continuous with the presumably meaningful activity of archiving.

[23] This observation is due to Kauppinen, 'Meaning and the Good Life', p. 1.

difficult to describe such a case convincingly. It is hard to describe a life or any part of a life which is both meaningful and also such that the meaning it contains has no consequences.

A second kind of test case avoids this difficulty. We have been exploring the idea that meaning sometimes has instrumental value. Usually, things that sometimes have instrumental value can have instrumental *disvalue* on other occasions, because a change in circumstances changes their effects. If we could describe a case in which meaning in life is instrumentally disvaluable, we would have a different test case for the claim that meaning has final value. If meaning has final value, the meaning in this case should be a mitigating factor, to set against its instrumental disvalue. If we were to judge that there is no such mitigating factor, then we would not need to endorse the final value claim in order to explain the value that, we judge, meaning in life has.

Given our account of the instrumental value of meaning in life, we should indeed expect that it can also have instrumental disvalue. For example, it is plausible that someone could be more strongly motivated by a bad activity that is meaningful than by an otherwise similar bad activity that is meaningless. Meaning may then cause more zealous and effective pursuit of the bad activity. Alternatively, meaning may distract someone from important considerations, and a sense of meaningfulness may make someone arrogant or insensitive.[24] In one or more of these ways, it seems, meaning may have instrumental disvalue.

Consider, then, two torturers. One of them, Eugene, is a docile follower of commands who simply does whatever he is told to do. The other, Frederick, is a philosophical anarchist, who will execute a command only if he has some independent motivation to do so. Eugene and Frederick are instructed to commit exactly the same acts of torture, and they do so, with exactly the same effects. But whereas Eugene does this simply because he is instructed to do it, Frederick does it only because he considers it to be part of his ongoing project of researching and practising the methods of torture used in the Spanish Inquisition. After work each night he sustains his sense of meaningfulness by reading obscure history books into the early hours. Without this sense of meaningfulness he could not bring himself to turn the screw on his victims.

Frederick's torturing activities are, I assume, more meaningful than Eugene's. That is, it is not merely that they seem to him to be meaningful, while nothing seems meaningful to Eugene. Frederick takes them to be meaningful because they are meaningful. He is engaged in a complex practical and intellectual activity that challenges his powers and requires planning and sustained effort. These features, I assume, are signs that his activities have meaning. This meaning sustains his sense of meaning, and thereby causes him to commit acts of torture he would not otherwise commit.

Of course, not everyone will accept that Frederick's activities are meaningful. Moreover, it may seem extravagant to make this claim without committing to a positive theory of the nature of meaning in life. But note that we can vary the details of the case according to our theory of the nature of meaning. All that is required is that there is a way of carrying out an unambiguously bad activity in which it is not meaningful, and

[24] This is one possible interpretation of the story of Gaugin's desertion of his family, as told by Bernard Williams in his paper 'Moral Luck', which is most easily accessible in his book *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 20-39.

another way of carrying it out in which it is meaningful; whatever explains this difference can then be built into the details of the case.

Now, advocates of the consensus view may insist that it is impossible for an activity, or part of a life, to be meaningful yet unambiguously bad in all other respects. In reply, I would make two points. The first is simply to claim that, intuitively, Frederick's activity is meaningful though bad in all other respects. Admittedly, this bald appeal to intuition may not have much dialectical force. But the second point is that if it were impossible for an activity to be meaningful yet unambiguously bad in all other respects, we should once again worry about the distinctness of meaning from other values.

This worry does not depend on the false assumption that it is impossible for X to be a distinct kind of final value if it cannot exist without other kinds of value existing. As we noted at the start, distinctness does not entail independence. Notably, some theories of virtue characterise virtue as excellent orientation to goodness.[25] Similarly, some theories of well-being characterise it as loving or taking pleasure in the good.[26] According to these theories, virtue and well-being are distinct kinds of value even though they cannot exist independently of other goods. Instead, the worry is more specific. If meaning in life can exist only when the activities in which it inheres are good in other ways, it is hard to see how meaning is distinct from virtue or well-being *in particular*. If meaningfulness is distinct from both virtue and well-being, on the other hand, it is hard to see why Frederick's torturing could not be meaningful.

For these reasons I assume that it is possible for Frederick's torturing to be more meaningful than Eugene's. Does this make what Frederick does, or his life, in any way better than what Eugene does, or his life? It is hard to believe that it does. The two torturers simply draw on different sources of motivation. Frederick seems to have a more complex life, including a more complex mental life. But this does not make his life, or what he does, any better—except that it makes him, perhaps, more interesting than dull Eugene. Possibly we can imagine variants of the case in which Frederick gains some comfort from framing his torturing activity as part of a larger meaningful project of historical enquiry and re-enactment. Perhaps this distracts him from the full horror of what he does, which saves him some pain. Or perhaps others are interested in what he does, and perversely entertained by his accounts of it. In these variants, his life is in some respects better than Eugene's. But in all of them that is because it contains or causes some final value other than meaning, such as well-being.

7. Conclusion

The consensus view of meaning in life faces the significant challenge of simultaneously vindicating the distinctness and final value claims. One obvious way of vindicating the distinctness claim—by treating meaninglessness as the minimum quantity of meaning—makes it harder to vindicate the final value claim. On the other hand, allowing negative

[25] For example, see Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

[26] For discussion of views of these sorts, see Shelly Kagan, 'Well-Being as Enjoying the Good', *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009), pp. 253-272.

meaning makes meaning in life resemble other candidate final values more closely, but thereby makes it harder to vindicate the distinctness claim.

I emphasised that this challenge should not be treated as a decisive criticism of the consensus view. It is too early to tell; perhaps the challenge can be met in some way that we have not considered. We have drawn a more tentative lesson from it: the apparent difficulty of meeting the challenge motivates exploring the prospects of departures from the consensus view.

I further argued that a promising strategy is to hold on to the distinctness claim but to give up the final value claim. We can then try to develop a theory of meaning in life that fits common judgements, and treats it as both distinct and ethically important. Its importance is, under these assumptions, purely instrumental. But this is perfectly compatible with the judgement that meaning in life is of great importance. Moreover, the claim that its importance is purely instrumental arguably has intuitively correct implications in cases of bad meaningful activity.

We should be wary in ethical theory of aversion to merely instrumental value. Philosophers' eyes tend to be drawn to final goods. But the nature and importance of final goods is not all there is to know about value. We also need to know how final goods combine or fail to combine with each other in a single life or outcome; the ways in which they fit together or crowd each other out. These matters have to do with causal and other practical constraints on the combination of goods. To know these vitally important things we must know about instrumental value, not just final value. The real significance of meaning in life may lie in this domain.[27]

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