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D E E T H I C A

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From the Editor

In the editorial of our previous issue, we discussed some emerging issues in publishing ethics brought about by the rapid development of AI, especially large language models. In this editorial, we would like to say a few words about a much more slowly developing topic in the same field: editorial ethics.

In a recent interview, given in the aftermath of Wiley's mishandling of the editorship of the journal *Political Philosophy*, Robert Goodin gave an interesting characterization of the role of the editor. He characterized the editor's role and function in Hobbesian terms:

> If every almost-as-good article were published, the value of publishing in the venue would nosedive, to the chagrin of all authors publishing there. It is a classic collective action problem. In that Tragedy of the Commons, the role of the editor is to be The Enforcer, against both self-serving authors in the blogsphere and self-serving commercial publishers in the share market.[1]

Not only does this paint a mainly plausible picture of the editorial process and the incentives that often surround it, but it also points to an essential aspect of the role of the editor: it revolves around exercising a certain kind of power. Now, political philosophy has since Hobbes been concerned with the power of the Leviathan, or the Enforcer, and how to circumscribe it. From this, one might surmise that the editor would also play a prominent role in publishing ethics, but this does not seem to be the case. The focus tends to be on the author. However, there are some exceptions.

The ICMJE, in what is known as the Vancouver Recommendations, has developed guidelines for the editorial work. These recommendations include principles that emphasize the importance of confidentiality and timeliness in the publication process, but also principles on diversity and inclusion in the editorial team and a warning about over-reliance on single metrics in evaluating journal quality. The importance of proper peer review is emphasized. Finally, the principle of Integrity says:

> Editorial decisions should be based on the relevance of a manuscript to the journal and on the manuscript's originality, quality, and contribution to evidence about important questions. Those decisions should not be influenced by commercial interests, personal relationships or agendas, or findings that are negative or that credibly challenge accepted wisdom.[2]

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[1] Berndt Rasmussen, Katarina. 2023. "Interview with Robert 'Bob' E. Goodin, Emeritus Distinguished Professor at Australian National University, Editor of The Journal of Political Philosophy." *Tidskrift för politisk filosofi*: https://www.politiskfilosofi.se/extra/goodin_augusti_2023/tpf_interview_with_robert_bob_e_goodin.pdf p.11

[2] Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals. Updated January 2024. https://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf

This formulation notably excludes some considerations – money, friendships, and personal agendas – as reasons that should play a role in editorial decisions, but of course, the positive reasons – originality, quality, contribution, and importance – all tend to be contested concepts. Anyone with a career in academia will have at least an anecdote about judgments from editors or reviewer 2 concerning these values that they would have liked to contest. Both the content of and the process of coming to these judgments will tend sometimes to cause controversy.

Indeed, COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) has developed guidelines for developing editorial processes. This points to the importance of having policies in place for the following areas: allegations of misconduct, authorship and contributorship, complaints and appeals, conflicts of interest/Competing interests, data and reproducibility, ethical oversight, intellectual property, journal management, peer review processes, and post-publication discussions and corrections.[3] This is a list of important but labor-intensive work to be done for journals and their editorial teams. The list also entails that in order to set up the processes needed to run a journal according to this standard, many judgments concerning the process and its goals must be made. At present, De Ethica is working with our publishers, Linköping University Electronic Press, on developing guidelines on such work for the journals publishing with this press. You can expect further updates about this in future issues of *De Ethica*.

But now to the actual publications. In this issue, the power invested in us had been used to bring, to our readership, articles on the age-old question of why one ought to act morally, how value theory can inform discussion on moral rights, the concept of age, and on the issue of how evil relates to a meaningful life.

Per Sundman investigates to questions to the foundational question: why be moral? The first answer is that this is how one acts with respect in the relationship of being God's closest friend. The second answer is that being moral realizes Eudaimonia. Sundman finds both answers lacking. The favoritism inherent in thinking about humanity as God's best friend seems troubling, and the optimism that morally right action necessarily leads to happiness is unwarranted. However, Sundman observes that both these answers to the question of why one ought to be moral seem to presuppose the obligation to act morally right as an inherent force. Reasons for being moral can be understood as internal to the moral domain.

Henrik Andersson argues that new advances in value theory can help interpret the relationships between different human rights. He argues that when it comes to the problem of ranking which human right is more important than others, concepts like "more important" and "equally as important" fail to fully account for the value conflict at hand. Therefore, he introduces the concept of "on a par importance," which is shown to better take account of intuitions in ranking cases.

Age may seem straightforward, but it just concerns the time elapsed from birth or creation to the present. Recently, this view has come under criticism. In his article, William Simulket takes on Joona Räsänen's position that age instead has to do with the question of one's biology, experiences, and self-conception. However, Simulket argues that such a view comes with a heavy burden in terms of ontology and that it has difficulties handling our intuitions in numerous cases.

[3] Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). 2017. *Core Practices*: https://publicationethics.org/core-practices

In his article, David Matheson investigates the relationship between evil and the meaningful life. He claims that evil cannot provide meaning in life. Since activities that endow life with meaning cannot be of the worst sort, but evil activity is of the worst sort, then it follows that life is not endowed with meaning by evil activity.

Lars Lindblom, *executive editor*

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Why be moral? Because God wants me to, because it will make me happy, or simply because it is right?

Per Sundman

This article critically examines two different answers to the ancient question, why be moral. The first suggests that valid reasons refer to a specific relation between human beings and God. Here, being moral means to treat oneself and others with the respect that is the due of God's closest friend. The second argues that we have good reasons for being moral when being moral makes us happy (realizes Eudaimonia). The investigation offers two results, one critical and the other constructive. The critical shows how and why both theistic accounts of bestowed human dignity and eudaimonistic accounts offer no relevant reasons for being moral. The constructive result builds on an observation; both accounts presuppose the inherent force of the obligation to act morally right. It shows that the reasons for being moral should be explicated as internal to the very meaning of being moral.

1. Introduction

Why be moral? This is the existential and philosophical quandary investigated in this article. The article starts from an important qualifying assumption, that concrete acts are instances of moral action when they express concern and respect for beings as an ends, as beings vulnerable to humiliation. Acts can have other purposes, of course. Personal enjoyment can motivate eating a piece of bread and, when we are ill, eating can be a way of relieving a loved one, for example. The eating of bread occurs in both cases, but different ends make them different actions. As Christine Koorsgards has argued, ends are internal to actions. Eating bread without any purpose is not an act but mere behavior. Ends determine what kind of action a certain intentional movement is an instance of, and they provide reasons, possibly good ones, for acting.[1] The question here concerns possible good reasons for moral action, i.e. for acts that serve the purpose of respecting humanity, as an end.[2]

[1] Cf. Christine M. Korsgaard. *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 227. Korsgaard writes: "The reason for an action is not something that stands behind it and makes you want to do it: it is the action itself, described in a way that makes it intelligible."

[2] Cf. Jürgen Habermas. "The concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights" in *Philosophical Dimensions of Human Rights Some Contemporary Views*. Ed. by Corradetti Claudio

Many attempts to ground dignity in a specific set of morally interesting properties distinctive of human beings have been found wanting.[3] This article starts from a different angle. It investigates whether relations, and one purported relation in particular, the one between human beings and God, can offer a grounding for equal human dignity and by extension a strong reason for being moral.

2. The Theistic Account

In a response to commentators Nicholas Wolterstorff makes the following claim: a Christian believer "[…] has an account of why all human beings have the worth that they must have if there are to be human rights; the rights inhere in this shared worth."[4] The believer is supposed to hold the following beliefs: "[…] he believes that there is a mode of love that bestows value on the one loved; he believes that God exists and loves each and every human being equally and permanently with that mode of love; and he believes that all human beings, no matter how impaired they may be, share a nature (human nature), and that their possession of this nature is a factor in why God loves them."[5] The argument is bold and significant. If valid, it stablishes that certain theists only have access to a *grounding* of human rights. Having a grounding is different from a rationale for being moral, and from being merely entitled to believe that all human beings have equal worth. A grounding should establish truth or validity.

2.1. A short Digression on Appraised and Bestowed dignity

Wolterstorff's argument is formulated in a specific context. The subsequent presentation therefore benefits from a short background.

Gene Outka formulated the distinction between appraised and bestowed dignity in his seminal work *Agape an Ethical Analysis*. Outka writes the following about appraised human dignity: "Those who speak of appraisal will normally treat observable characteristics as a persuasive part of a claim to be acknowledged. Perceived uniformities between persons are stressed accordingly."[6] In western history of philosophy, rationality and a self-conscious ability to transcend the laws of nature by being an independent source of action are the most frequently suggested examples of shared and morally interesting capacities.

On the one hand, it appears reasonable to stress the importance of these capacities. Rationality is essential for our ability to deliberate, to act, and to feel in ways that are more

(Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), p. 72. Habermas writes: "The issue is the *worth of the individual* in the horizontal relations between different human beings, not the status of 'human beings' in the vertical relation to God or to 'lower' creatures on the evolutionary scale. Second, the relative superiority of humanity and its members must be replaced by the absolute worth of any person."

[3] Cf. Jeremy Waldron. "Basic Equality" in *New York University School of Law, Public Law & Legal Theory Research Paper Series* Working Paper No. 08-61, p. 44. Waldron writes: "But it is not enough to come up with some (range-)property that we all share. It must be a property which is intelligible in light of the massively important and pervasive work that principle of basic equality has to do. It must be a really important range-property and it must help us make sense of the normative consequences of this principle […]." Moreover, such a range property must be possessed by all human beings, if it is to fulfil the task of justifying human dignity.

[4] Nicholas Wolterstorff. "Justice as Inherent Rights: A Response to my Commentators" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37.2: 261-279, p. 272.

[5] Nicholas Wolterstorff. "Justice as Inherent Rights", p. 272.

[6] Gene Outka. *Agape: A Philosophical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 166.

subtle than mere inarticulate pain sensations, for example. Furthermore, the very ideas of respecting the agency of others and of holding them responsible for what they have done, presume that human beings can at least participate in determining their behavior and their identities. Hence, the conclusion; a capacity to be self-directing is morally interesting. Let us, for the sake of the argument, assume that worth supervenes on rationality, similarly to the way the picture on a screen supervenes on numerous electric digits.

The problem is; some human beings will never develop this capacity, others will lose it, irretrievably, and the rest of us have unequal shares of it. In addition, given that the capacity determines worth, it is difficult to show why having more of the capacity does not entail having more worth. The logic of the arguments leads to the unwanted conclusions, firstly; that human worth is unequal, and secondly; that merely most human beings have this (unequal) worth.[7] It looks like an account of unequal moral standing.

For e.g. Wolterstorff, bestowed dignity offers a better explication of why we should think human beings ought to be respected equally just because they are human.[8] The idea here is that our alleged equal worth is conferred on us, rather than supervening on morally relevant and typically human properties. Gene Outka writes the following telling words: "[…], if God bestows value, man ought to appraise his fellow-man in light of God's bestowal."[9] Thus, the bestowed-dignity argument basically says that worth is given in equal shares by God to each and every human being. This is how the problems of the appraised dignity arguments, their inability to justify equal dignity of all human creatures, are avoided. No human abilities on which worth is supposed to supervene serve as argumentative cornerstones.

2.2. The Use of Counterfactuals

Whereas Outka's contributions consisted primarily in explicating important distinctions, Wolterstorff shows how bestowal of worth actually works.[10] He offers a short, telling, and surprising example. Wolterstorff asks; what if it became known that "the queen in a monarchy" had become friends with one of her subjects, would it not elevate the social standing of that person? The answer, of course, is yes.[11] When a monarch becomes the friend of one or a few of her subjects, the status of these individuals changes. It increases in comparison to those who are not the Queen's friends. So far all is well. It is easy to

[7] Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 333. Wolterstorff writes: "I submit that the problem confronting Kant's version of the capacities approach confronts every other version of the capacities approach as well. Whatever capacity one selects, it will turn out that some human beings do not possess the capacity. There is no way around the problems that that fact poses."

[8] Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice Rights and Wrongs*, p. 352. Wolterstorff writes: "What we need, for a theistic grounding of natural human rights, is some worth-imparting relation of human beings to God that does not in any way involve a reference to human capacities."

[9] Gene Outka. *Agape*, p. 159.

[10] See for example Gene Outka. *Agape*, p. 164, 181. On page 164 Outka writes about "[…] bestowal as ascription-of-a-status." Though this is explicated as a status that is conferred by God, not human beings (it is not supposed to be possible for human beings to alienate themselves, or others, from their God given status), Outka just states this as an alternative way of grounding human dignity, the text does not explain how it works, though it says important, neglected by Wolterstorff, things about theological philosophical reasons for preferring a notion of bestowed dignity. The latter relates to its independence of their being any shared morally interesting distinctively human capacities that could serve as ground for thinking that each and every human being is very important, equally important and more important than individuals of any other species.

[11] Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice Rights and Wrongs*, p. 358-360.

imagine how, among many groups in present western societies, becoming the friend of say Xi Jinping, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, or Queen Elisabeth would alter one's social standing. It would constitute an obvious status elevating honor in *some* current status orders. Wolterstorff's point, of course, is that each and every human being has received the great and equal honor of being "one with whom God desires to be a friend."

It is an effective example. We can say: "Aha, this is how bestowal of equal worth works". If dignity or worth is to be morally relevant, it must contain or imply concrete prescriptions about the standing of each and every human being; that equal social standing among all human beings, is right. It is easy to imagine that learning about X being the queen's friend would raise the status of X, at least if X lives in Cambridge and labors as a doctoral student in political philosophy.

Connecting God's friendship with human beings to a worldly mechanism of status elevation offers no easy solution to the problem of justification though. The first unresolved worry concerns the hypothetical nature of the argument. Wolterstorff writes: "Those who believe that there is no God will of course not find God a plausible candidate. But they can ask, in a hypothetical mode, whether theism provides a way of grounding human rights. The main question to consider is what might be the worth-bestowing relation."[12] We shall subsequently return to the meaning of *grounding* a moral conviction. The present task is to step into the shoes of those who believe there is no God, and imagine what a hypothetical argument could achieve, in their eyes. Since one major merit of Wolterstorff's account is its explication of how bestowal of dignity actually works, I offer the following explication of the critical point.

- What if I was a close friend of Alicia Keyes. Would not that make me a celebrity in your eyes?
- Yes, it most certainly would. But her Keyness doesn't even know you exist, does she?
- No.
- So, what is the point?
- I guess I need you to believe that Alicia wants me and her to be friends.
- Good luck.

The example shows that the success of the friendship-version of worth elevation depends completely on whether people believe that I or you and the bestower really are friends. This is important. The success of Wolterstorff's argument does not depend on whether say Josephine Jones and Alicia Keyes are friends. It is the recognition of the relation, not the relation in itself, that accomplishes the elevation. Being Alicia's secret and very real friend would not make any status difference at all. If, however, it would become known that Jones for the last twenty years have been a close friend of her Keyeness, then at the moment this became public, Jones's social standing would raise with the speed of a skyscraper elevator, among some people. The thing is, the same elevation would most probably occur if the same people for some strange reason, in spite of Alicia's and Jones's public denial, came to the steadfast *false* belief that Alicia and Josephine were the best of friends (Alicia fans may have thought that Alicia for the usual privacy reasons just did not want people to know).

So again, as far as social standing is concerned, the important thing is not to become Alicia's friend, it is to make people believe that you belong to her circle of friends. This I contend reveals the troubling insufficiency of references to a counter factual *grounding*, e.g.

[12] Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), p. 150.

in the form of status-elevating relationships. It is the actual belief that makes the elevatory difference. However, it also indicates the other-directed character of the justification of moral beliefs or judgments, such as the one about human dignity. In the end, it must be about validating a conviction, by providing intelligible conviction-supportive reasons, to others.[13]

Could replacing Alicia with God make a relevant difference? Perhaps the elevating function of a friendship with God is not recognition-dependent in the same way? Maybe, in this case, there would be an actual ontological change of status, lowering of some, e.g. T. S. Eliot's beloved cats, and increase of many, just in virtue of God's actual desire to make friends with each of us humans? If so, this would be an effect of an actual relation, not a hypothetical one.

However, besides the fact that it probably is insuperably difficult to justify the belief that *any* God (e.g. Nicholas Wolterstorff's, James M. Gustafson's or Sallie McFague's God) exist, it has not yet been shown that the friendship argument is relevant, i.e. that recognition of the status elevating effects of prestigious friendships pertains to the validity of believing in human dignity.[14] On the contrary. It can explain random upheavals of relative social status, but it does not show that those elevations are morally justified, that adjusting action and politics in ways that recognize them is right.

2.3. Inarticulateness

Nevertheless, perhaps there is a way of saving the idea of bestowed worth from being a mere affirmation of whatever actual status orders there actually are. Though staying within the sphere of royalties, Wolterstorff changed his account in a significant way and wrote as follows in the subsequent monograph: "[...] imagine a monarch. He's a good monarch. Loved by all his subjects; he bestows on all of them the great good of a just political order that serves the common good. But he's rather lonely. So in addition to being a benefactor to all his subjects, he decides to choose a few of his subjects as people that he would like to be friends with. This, for the ones chosen, is an honor. 'I am honored that you would choose me for a friend, they say."[15] This time it is a *good* monarch. The moral tragedy of British colonial history seems to be evaded with one brushstroke. A good monarch could not be and have never been involved in the administration of any kind of oppression, whether this means that she still is a monarch is debatable of course, given the incompatibility between monarchy and democratic legitimacy. Be that as it may.

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[13] Cf. Richard J. Bernstein. "Does He pull it off? A theistic Grounding of Natural Inherent Human Rights?" in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37.2:221-241, 2009, p. 227. Bernstein writes: "Although Wolterstorff does not explicitly define what he means by 'grounding,' we can reconstruct what it means for him. To ground a claim is to justify it, to support the claim with good reasons."

[14] Considering it possible to prove that certain positive claims about God correspond to living reality, whatever "correspond" means, involves taking on a tremendous burden of proof. For example, one must explain how the alleged true being of God is available, so that the veracity of accounts about her being can be evaluated. Cf. James M. Gustafson. *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective. Vol 1. Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981). In this volume Gustafson reconstruct a non-anthropomorphic and non-anthropocentric conception of God as power that bears down upon us and sustains us. Cf. Sally McFague. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). In this modern classic Sallie McFague challenges Christians' usual speech about God as a kind of monarch. She suggests instead three other possible metaphors for God—as mother, lover, and friend. See also Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice in Love*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), for a more traditional alternative, i.e. God interpreted as similar to a super perfect person.

[15] Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice in Love*, p. 154.

The indirectness by which the trouble is avoided points towards an interesting and problematic inarticulateness. The adjustment of the original explicatory example, from the queen to a good monarch, conceals that admiration of elevated social status, or sheer popularity, are the actual elevators within *the status orders of creation*. A new way of seeing people, offered by say the lens of God's *equalitarian* way of conceptualizing morality does not play any role here. Put in other words, whereas many stories of the gospels, like the good Samaritan narrative, works by inviting the reader to think differently about who counts, and by extension to see why the new way of seeing things is superior, the monarch example does nothing of the sort. The contribution of the divine monarch seems to be nothing else than; "look here, since the supreme power of the universe wants to be your friend, it does not really matter that you are a nobody in the eyes of worldly celebrities." Examples of actual though obviously morally dubious status elevations show that the moral quality of the elevator (Hitler or Mussolini?) determines whether the elevation is right or not. Yet, power or sheer popularity effect the status change.[16]

Perhaps there is a different answer. Being loved by someone who loves perfectly might trump fallible human love, even if the human "lover" is a global celebrity. Perhaps the perfectly loving subject is a better status elevator than the very popular one? After all, God is arguably not only omnipotence, i.e. power. Indeed, any emphasis on God as almighty must confront theodicy objections as well as objections about disturbing correlations with anthropomorphic projections ("God" as a mere projection based on a human longing for being loved by a perfect super-parent). Therefore, narratives about the love of God are relevant for the task. Perhaps this love could serve as an interpretative pattern, a conceptual scheme allowing us to identify equal worth in human beings independently of whatever status orders there are. This might be so, since arguably, a perfectly loving God sees things this way. The answer, unfortunately, must be no. The reason is brought forward if we consider the following example.

Imagine two citizens of England. Ava Evans is a successful medical doctor in London. The other, Mia Jones, is a homeless person who lives on the streets of Newcastle, suffering from Schizophrenia and drug addiction. Through coincidence and mutual connections, the doctor befriended the Queen, Elisabeth II. Mia Jones on the other hand lived a lonely life on the margin. One day she met Archie Smith, an unknown retired vacuum cleaner salesperson, who had come to dedicate his life to practicing neighbor love at the local hostel for homeless people.

There are ingredients in this embryo of a story deserving our attention. The first is simple. Being loved by Archie Smith made no difference for the social standing of Mia. Archie's love could never be expressed in actions that turned Mia into a healthy well-adjusted citizen, with a respectable job. Being the Queen's friend, on the other hand, made a quite significant difference for Ava. It boosted her private practice whose services became demanded by many wealthy people in the proximities of Chelsea, London. She became well known, among people that *counts*.

The bestowing subjects are different, in two ways that are as simple as they are significant. One has great cultural capital combined with a significantly elevated social position, and the other dedicates time to concrete care for vulnerable outsiders. The

[16] Cf. Peter Morriss. *Power: A philosophical analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 29 f. On page 30 Morriss writes: "Benn's bankrupt financier had a certain amount of power *before* his fall, which he lost when his empire collapsed; although his fall possibly affected people more drastically than any of his previous actions, he did not thereby exercise power. To affect something (or somebody) but not effect (accomplish) anything seems, then, not to be an exercise of power."

straightforward upshot is, being recognized as a very important person by a widely recognized cultural as well as social celebrity is a more effective status elevator than being cared for by an unknown loving person. Indeed, eventually Mia lost contact with the charity were Archie spent his days, she got ill, died alone in an emergency room, and was quickly forgotten. However, as time went by, Archie's social standing changed for the better. In 2021, the local newspaper published a front-page text about Archie, the local hero of 2020.

Moreover, the example contains another possibly crucial asymmetry. Ava is the Queen's friend, whereas Mia is the object of Archie's impersonal other-regarding care. In the first case, there is a special relationship, but not so in the latter case. This brings us to our second point. If it became known that Archie loved Mia more than and differently from how he loved other homeless people, this would discredit Archie's growing reputation. Saint-like local heroes are not supposed to act out of favoritism. Moreover, since the moral qualities of the bestowing subject is not effecting bestowal of worth here, a relevant grounding of human dignity is indeed missing. It apparently cannot consist in the power of love, neither literally nor metaphorically speaking.

So far, we have seen that the force of Wolterstorff's examples, underlines that relationally based changes of worth are recognition dependent, and that equal human worth supervenes on a relation that allegedly would be honoring if one believed there is such a relation. In the eyes of the non-believer, the convincingness of the argumentation is frail. It depends on something which is not argued, i.e. that specific ideas about God are true, or at least credible. This is paradoxical in a bad sense.

Moreover, even if an almighty God, who cares more about the fate of human beings than about the lives of others, in fact manages creation, the conceptual resources needed in order to explicate this as an instance of problematic favoritism in the form of speciesism are available and ready to be used. Having integrated them in our mindset we could say: "Wanting to be attached to humans only, is just random favoritism." The alleged bestowal/grounding of human worth would be compromised.

2.4. The Collapse into Appraised Dignity

Can the allegation of favoritism be avoided and the relevance of God's bestowal be retained? Wolterstorff writes:

> The very same consideration that makes it understandable why God did not choose crocodiles for friendship makes it understandable why God chose human beings. Since it's in our nature to be persons, we have the potential for friendship with God. Of course, there are blockages to the realization of that potential that have to be overcome by God and by us. The moral breach between us of our having wronged God will have to be repaired; and those who cannot presently function as persons will have to be healed, in this life or the life to come, of that deep malformation.[17]

Furthermore, in anticipation of critiques Wolterstorff continues on the next page:

> Our possessing human nature provides the potential for friendship between God and us. It's a necessary condition for friendship. But it's not an explanation. The explanation for God's wanting to be friends with us is presumably much like the explanation for why we want to be friends with some fellow human being. We seek to become friends with someone not because we think he merits it, not because his worth

[17] Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice in Love*, p. 155 f.

> requires it, but because we anticipate that our friendship will be a significant good in the lives of both of us. So too for God's desire to be friends with us.[18]

Arguably, God is not guilty of favoritism when desiring to be friends with human beings only, because only human beings are beings with whom friendship is possible, for God. This is so since friendship presupposes personhood and only human beings have the capacities necessary for personhood.[19]

What about the fact that not all human beings will ever be persons in this life, and some will cease irrevocably to be persons before they die? This challenge is addressed as follows: If a human being is not a person in this life, God will see to that she or he will develop person specific capacities in the next (eternal) life and because of this, God does desire to be her or his friend here and now, in spite of its temporary one-sidedness. Thus, God makes sure that God eventually has reasons to desire being friends with each and every human being, and with them only. It is a complicated argument. Specific capacities, for personhood, are a presupposition for worth, but arguably, they do not confer worth. A cosmologically significant special relation accomplishes the latter. Worth is created by a relation, which presupposes the same person-making capacities as those on which worth supervenes according to appraised dignity accounts.[20] One might consider it simpler just to assume that in the perspective of eternity all human beings have the relevant value-making capacities to a sufficient degree.

The rationale for thinking that every human being, in spite of appearances, has a necessary and sufficient amount of person-making properties resembles asking; what if each and every human being has a sufficient amount of morally interesting capacities, on which their worth supervenes, would not they have equal worth? The answer, of course, must be yes. It is just that this account is as unhelpful as one saying; "what if each and

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[18] Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice in Love*, p. 156.

[19] Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Justice in Love*, p. 155. Wolterstorff writes: "Of all animals, it's only human animals that can function as persons."

[20] The following is a short selection of texts that in similar ways make use of capacity arguments, though it is not in terms of appraised accounts of human dignity in all of them (but the worth of humanity and/or the worth of excellent human beings). Robert Audi. *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 263. Audi writes: "The broad idea, then, is that *dignity is a higher-order value*. It is an axiological property that depends on moral and other 'higher' values, and it belongs to persons in virtue of their capacity for certain kinds of experiences. Immanuel Kant. *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 225. Robert Nozick. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1988), p. 48-51. Nozick tries to answer the question; "[…] in virtue of precisely what characteristics of persons are there moral constraints on how they may treat each other or be treated." Karl Marx. "The German ideology: Part I" in *The Marx-Engels Reader Second Edition*, Tucker Robert C. Red. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 194 f. Martha C. Nussbaum. *Women and Human Development The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 83 f. John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 505. Rawls writes: "We see, then, that the capacity for moral personality is a sufficient condition for being entitled to equal justice." Paul Ricoeur. *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 271. Peter Singer. *Practical Ethics* Second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 57 f. Singer writes: "If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account." Charles Taylor. *Human Agency and Language Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 73, 103. On page 103, Taylor writes: "[…] a person is an agent who has a sense of self, of his/her own life, who can evaluate it, and make choices about it. This is the basis of the respect we owe persons. Even those who through some accident or misfortune are deprived of the ability to exercise these capacities are still understood as belonging to the species defined by this potentiality."

every human being has an eternal soul upon which worth supervenes, would not those who have a rationale for believing this have a grounding of human dignity?"

The move supposed to save God from favoritism construes the relation between human and divine not as free gift, as grace with no expected return, i.e. not as worth created by being the object of God's love agape, but as something reciprocal, a mutual good that supervenes on natural capacities (range properties). Something vital is changed here. Specific capacities do the actual argumentative work. They, not God's bestowal, validate the claim about our shared worth.[21]

There are other theistic attempts to justify moral equality though. I have one particular account of bestowed equal worth in mind. John E. Hare writes: "… all humans have the same basic value because they equally receive God's call, not because they are now equally capable of valuable activities."[22] According to Hare's argument, obeying God entails respecting each and every human being as an equal, as an end in her- or himself, in virtue of them being called by God.[23] Furthermore; "We know that God is to be loved, and so that God is to be obeyed, just by knowing that God is the supreme good."[24] The (allegedly) preemptive reason for acting morally therefore is; God's prescriptions trump ordinary human practical considerations in virtue of being perfectly loving and merciful.[25] Allegedly, analogously to the good monarch, perfect love and mercy is supposed to ground God's authority. Arguably, if the obedient act is done for the purpose of realizing the perfect love of the infallible commander, it is done for a possibly perfectly good moral reason.

However, besides the unavoidable burden of providing universally valid reasons for thinking that Hare's Christian God exist, God's alleged equal calling of each and every human being, does not establish the caller as perfectly loving. On the contrary, it can and has been interpreted as another historic attempt to disguise collective narcissism, *humankind's* conception of *his* own superior importance, as morally mandatory.[26] Even if this charge is not justified, it shows that Hare's account just as Wolterstorff's ditto can explicate the moral relevance of a specific Christian faith but it does not provide justifying reasons.

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[21] Cf. Andrea Sangiovanni. *Humanity without Dignity Moral Equality, Respect and Human Rights* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 109. Incidentally, Andrea Sangiovanni's argument for opacity respect, a kind of respectful treatment Sangiovanni claims each and every human being is equally entitled to, is vulnerable to similar objections. She claims that her argument is based on "[…] the right grounding force […]" of certain interests typical of persons. However, we purportedly have these interests since as persons we are vulnerable in a person specific way, due to "[…] our capacity to develop and maintain an integral sense of self […]". Thus, this specific capacity is supposed to make persons particularly morally interesting, i.e. the reference to these capacities validate the claim that specific interests of persons, not to be treated with cruelty, have "[…] rights-grounding force […]" (something not all kinds of interest have). Again, here too capacities provide evidence for the claim that persons have specific rights.

[22] John E. Hare. *God's Command* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 131.

[23] John E. Hare. *God's Command*, p. 31.

[24] John E. Hare. *God's Command*, p. 58.

[25] John E. Hare. *God's Command*, p. 181.

[26] James, M. Gustafson. *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Volume One, Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 97. Gustafson writes: "It cannot be denied that the basic trend of the Christian tradition has always viewed God's grace and goodness primarily in terms of his grace and goodness for man." The point is; this basic trend is at best controversial, and at worst unjustified.

Is there a way out? I can see two alternatives. The first leads us back to Wolterstorff's idea of the status elevating effects of publicly befriending a Superstar. This is a *cul-de-sac*. The other option is more complicated, but perhaps more promising.

3. Eudaimonia and Moral Rightness

Besides range property and theistic reasons for being moral, we also encounter subtle (apparently) non-moral reasons within contemporary equalitarian reconstructions of the classical *via Eudaimonia*.[27] Eudaimonism names a school of thought that has been continuously influential, among philosophers as well as theological ethicists, since the antiquity, and the Church fathers, to the present day. Definitively more so than ethical egoism, a competing paradoxical account of non- or amoral reasons for being egoistic. It is paradoxical in virtue of being straight forwardly oxymoronic since natural language presupposes that acting right is not only different from but the opposite of intending to further one's own self-regarding interests only.

The *Eudaimonist* claims that we have good reasons to act right, for the sake of its rightness, since (and to the extent that) this will make our lives go well.[28] Allegedly, acting right includes a specific intention, i.e. acting because one thinks its right. The problem is how to justify the claim that letting moral motivation trump competing motivations, and determine our movements, will indeed make us happy, and that acting in order to be happy is not significantly different from acting upon moral reasons.

The attraction of happiness is hard to deny. Indeed, it appears nonsensical to claim that though helping my neighbor will make me deeply and lastingly miserable it is the rational thing to do. On the contrary, labelling the choice to offer help rational seems to depend on whether helping will eventually and somehow be gratifying, to me, the agent, or not.

There are different attractions in life though. *Eudaimonists* agree that acting on any attraction for the sake of satisfaction does not constitute happiness, on the contrary. Jennifer A. Herdt and Jean Porter has recently argued that *Eudaimonia* ought to be interpreted as perfected happiness, i.e. the happiness one can receive from practicing the virtues, which entails loving God and neighbor for their own sake, "[…] not solely for the benefit to ourselves of loving them".[29]

However, perfectionist conceptions of *Eudaimonia* are significantly different from subjective, experience related, accounts of happiness. Perfectionists like Herdt and Porter refer to the happiness of those who are happy for the right reason.[30] And, for obvious reasons, "the right reason" is not the same as "whatever makes me happy". Being happy

[27] See e.g. Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 103, 167.
[28] Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 141, 167. On page 141 Hursthouse writes the following pregnant words: "[…] the perfectly virtuous agent, when she acts virtuously, from virtue, sets the standard for 'moral motivation', for acting 'because one thinks it's right, 'from duty', etc., […]." In addition, on page 167 Hursthouse writes: "The virtues benefit their possessor. (They enable her to flourish, to be, and live a life that is, *eudaimon*.)"
[29] Jennifer A. Herdt. "Excellence-Prior Eudaimonism" in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47.1:68-93, p. 90. See also Jean Porter. "Eudaimonism and Christian Ethics A Scriptural Perspective" in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47.1:23-42, p. 37. Porter writes: "Rather, Christian eudaimonism would begin by challenging our assumptions about what counts as a happy life."
[30] Jennifer A. Herdt. "Excellence-Prior Eudaimonism", p. 91. Herdt writes: "While the virtuous rightly enjoy acting well, falling short of virtue is rightly painful, as are circumstances that hinder our good projects and aspirations."

is transformed into being virtuous. Yet the obvious attraction of being happy is different from being virtuous. Explicating feelings of e.g. deep unhappiness as possibly irrelevant for judgments about happiness is problematic.[31] Socrates presumably experienced the difference between virtue and happiness as his execution came close, for example. Put bluntly, perfectionist conceptions of happiness are difficult to recognize as accounts of happiness. However, since there purportedly is a (perfect) overlap between being truly virtuous and being moral, this equals claiming that the attraction of being moral is the answer to why we should be moral. Apparently, the motivation to be happy plays no independent role here.

Addressing this worry in order to rehabilitate the justificatory role of happiness, Rosalind Hursthouse refers to allegedly common parental reasons for inculcating virtues in one's children, namely that we simply wish them well. Supposedly, this shows that parents assume that the virtues "will enable their children to live well", which means that being virtuous will somehow benefit them.[32] Indeed, there is a saying, *honesty lasts the longest,* possibly used by many parents that seems to confirm Hursthous's claim. It is interesting in several but primarily two respects. The first concerns the straight forward question; under what circumstances is it true? The second concerns whether it articulates morally relevant reasons.

Under what circumstances then, is it true that honesty lasts longest? There is one specific precondition for the proverb to contain a reliable prediction, namely; honesty must somehow pay off.[33] Many things might make honesty pay though. One circumstance is particularly significant. Honesty must be recognized in order to benefit its possessor. Unrecognized not to mention misrecognized virtue does not benefit the person at all, unless "benefit" is interpreted along perfectionist lines, as exhaustively explicable in the terms of being advantageous to the building of one's own moral character. Arguably, when a daughter is told, "tell the truth, honesty will always prevail", the loving parent hardly means; "You will benefit from having taken important steps towards perfecting your character. Even though you will feel bad about being continuously unheralded, at times even mocked and abused, in this brute world of spite, sexist violence and will to power". On the contrary, the saying appears to come with an implicit prediction of people's tendency to praise honesty. Of course, recognition for being an honest person might lead to different kinds of praise and approval, e.g. fulfilment of job market demand. This pay-circumstance is partly about an honesty-friendly environment, and partly about skillfully, in a context sensitive manner, marketing oneself as honest. Again, if one's virtuousness is unrecognized it might mean that one's life goes well, but this is so only if being moral is the most important thing. It might not be, for me.[34] Moreover, "Make sure that being moral is your most significant source of happiness" is, again, significantly different from saying "honesty will make you happy".

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[31] See Harald Arthur Prichard. *Moral Obligation*, p. 13, were Prichard calls Aristotle's ethics disappointing in virtue of, among other things, how "[…] it really answers two radically different questions as if they were one: (1) 'What is the happy life?', (2) 'What is the virtuous life?'"

[32] Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 175.

[33] Cf. John E. Hare, John E. *God's Command*, p. 66.

[34] Cf. Harry Frankfurt. *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 57, 84 f. Frankfurt contends that the issue of importance is more fundamental than morality, that what we love is of utmost importance to us, and that we allegedly love ourselves and our children more than anything else.

The second problem, concerning whether the proverb articulates morally relevant reasons, relates to the first. It says, raising one´s child to calculate which character traits that "will last the longest", teaches children that being prudential and being moral are the same, that they are indistinguishable.[35] At the least, understanding and making the distinction appears to be downplayed. Yet, Hursthouse writes, "Our characteristic way of going on, which distinguishes us from all other species of animals, is a rational way. A 'rational way' is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do. Correspondingly, our characteristic enjoyments are any enjoyments we can rightly see as good as something we in fact enjoy *and* that reason can rightly endorse." We can add, because acting according to reason arguably is a characteristic way of going on for human beings we have a general reason to act according to reason. Supposedly, fulfilling our typical "way of going on" makes us happy, and missing out, the opposite.

The problem remains though. It makes perfect sense to tell our child, "though honesty may not always prevail, being honest is till right. Therefore, follow your moral compass, rather than ever so careful calculations about the kind of behavior that pays off." Rosalind Hursthouse responds: "…it is one thing to bring up children to seek the good of others, to be generous with their possessions, to tell the truth, to be fair, for virtuous reasons, not for the sake of immediate returns. It is quite another to attempt to do so without stressing the fact that decent returns can reasonably be expected from ordinary people as a pattern in life. (How could we bring them up to be good friends, charitable, loyal, even just, rather than censorious, self-righteous, and deeply misanthropic, if we didn't stress that?)"[36] My point is the opposite. Avoiding talk about expected "decent returns" offers a more coherent and possibly more stable way of bringing up children. Indeed the miserable truth-telling child might in time come to think of her moral upbringing as deceitful. This we can say if we like to teach our child that moral integrity is praiseworthy independently of if it makes them happy.

Of course, wishing our child happiness ought to be taken into account. Indeed, parents may wish that their child succeed in life, including that fostering and upholding moral integrity will be satisfactory in a deep sense, and that being upstanding will offer them recognition as trustworthy and good persons. This, however, I dare to claim will be confronted by brute reality. As the child comes of age, he or she will be challenged, by her or his own propensity for *schadenfreude*, and by prevalent cultural expressions of it as "the only true joy", for example.[37] Parents may hope that the future social circumstances of their children will bring neither humiliating bullying, nor early death, on those who stubbornly act righteously.[38] Still, there is no insulation against having to decide between reverence for morality—understood here as respecting the next person equally—and being alive, at all or in a richer sense of having meaningful relations and work.

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[35] Cf. Jennifer A. Herdt. "Excellence-Prior Eudaimonism", p. 84. Herdt argues that: "Self-regarding and other-regarding, conventionally 'prudential'and conventionally 'moral' reasons, are not ordered in any stable hierarchy […]." Yet she claims that "adequate reason" demands "[…] that the action is publicly communicable, publicly defensible, […]" which I take to mean that each and every affected human being is supposed to have a say. Thus, moving beyond the distinction between prudential and moral reason can only work if each and every human being is supposed to count equally, and if a general right to equal respect is taken for granted.

[36] Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 184-85.

[37] Cf. Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p. 340-345.

[38] Cf. Jonathan Glover. *Humanity*, p. 382.

By now, the viciously circular components of the *Eudaimonist* account of justification appear in sight. Rosalind Hursthouse argues that; "But it is quite certain that it is primarily our acting from reason, well or ill, rather than those occasional actions we do 'from inclination', that make us good or bad human beings in the ethical sense."[39] Acting from reason allegedly means moving ourselves by what we have, consciously considered, good reasons to do, rather than just behaving from e.g. instinct or sudden strong feelings, say of adoration or hate. The thing is we need an arbiter for determining the goodness or badness of practical reasons. The determiner, as we have seen, is *Eudaimonia* or true happiness, i.e. we have reason to act if the action contributes to our own happiness, and we have negative reason to act if the action makes us unhappy. Moreover, true happiness allegedly follows from using our species-specific faculty of reason. So, if we make use of our ability to evaluate and act upon reasons we become happy, since allegedly by doing this we realize our species specific nature. Therefore, according to *eudaimonistic* naturalism, the action resulting from such a careful use of reason will indeed be right. This naturalist account says that we have good reasons to make use of our ability to reason since it will realize our common as well as distinctive, i.e. proper human functioning.[40] Put in other words, when you act upon reason you will be happy, and becoming happier, than I used to be, is better than any other kind of practical reasons. The upshot is, it does and cannot show that reason favors "being moral".

Yet, Hursthouse offers another reply: "We think that (for the most part, by and large), if we act well, things go well for us. When it does not, when *Eudaimonia* is impossible to achieve or maintain, that's not 'what we should have expected' but tragically bad luck."[41] Unfortunately, such an expectation appears uncertain, at times optimistic. Many have good reasons for fearing that if they act well, life will indeed be bad, in some cases a living hell. Moreover, even if hell seems distant, life involves moments of tragedy. Living well simply offers no insurance against unhappiness. Circumstances beyond our control inevitably affect possible outcomes.[42] Therefore, happiness related reasons cannot provide a justification of moral equality unless, of course, happiness is made redundant, by arguing that only those capable of being moved by moral reason are truly happy.

To conclude, *we* have good reasons to accept that moral reasons and happiness related reasons for acting are significantly different. This arguably is "more true to life" in virtue of retaining a conception of happiness that coheres with experiences of how righteousness might coincide with unhappiness. Human lives contain tragic choices. This section indicates that relevant reasons for being moral are internal to its meaning. They consist in coherent explications of the meaning of moral rightness. Asking; "why should I not be unjust", has no other relevant answer than; "because it would be unjust," and asking "why I ought not to humiliate people" has no answer beyond the explication of the moral wrongness of socially construing some persons *qua* persons as inferior.

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[39] Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 207.

[40] See Harold Arthur Prichard. *Moral Obligation*, p. 109, for an elegant explication of Aritotle's account of happiness as proper functioning.

[41] Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 185.

[42] Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 74. John Rawls famously argued: "Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances." To this we could add biological and other natural circumstances.

4. The Instability of Moral Reasons?

Arguing that happiness and morality provide different, sometimes mutually excluding, reasons for acting might make morality unstable. John E. Hare recently made the following observation about Kant's argument from providence: "His argument is, first, that morality becomes rationally unstable if we do not have a way to assure ourselves that morality and happiness are consistent (so that we do not have to do what is morally wrong in order to be happy), and, second, that believing in God provides such assurance."[43] Hare claims that Kant's position seemingly paradoxically should be labelled *Eudaimonist*. Kant arguably affirms that there is no other end as stable and undoubtedly worthy of our concern as our own happiness. It is paradoxical since after all, Kant argues that there is only one categorical end, namely each person as an end in her- or himself. The importance of *Eudaimonia* is, in Kant's terminology, a mere hypothetical end. It remains the case that being motivated by respect for the equal dignity of persons is judged "rationally unstable" if eternal unhappiness would be a possible consequence. Put in other words, the kingdom of ends is as deficient if partly populated by continuously unhappy righteous people, as it would be if occupied by notoriously happy wrongdoers.

Kant's argument is subtle though. He argues, only beings worthy of being happy will "participate in happiness at the hand of a *wise* creator", and only those who are moved by reverence for the moral law, by reverence for humanity as an end in itself, that is not primarily by inclinations to be happy, are worthy of being happy.[44] And he famously ads, reason demands that those who act out of respect for the moral law will in the end be perfectly happy, in union with the highest good, God. Though here, in the vale of tears, happiness might seem like a wishful dream, the righteous will in eternity pull the longest straw, and eventually be supremely happy. In apparent harmony with Kant the British ethicist Nigel Biggar claims; the stubborn humanism of Albert Camus's character in *The Plague*, Doctor Bernard Rieux, is allegedly absurd, since it has no cosmic home, since no good God has the last word in this story.[45] Biggar resembles Kant as he claims that providence offers good reasons (a rationale) for moral action. Nonetheless, the moral law remains the same in a God-less universe. The God of Immanuel Kant does not provide a different or original concept of righteousness. God merely safeguards that the virtue, of being motivated to act on the precious ability to see every next person as an equal, will in fact benefit its possessor.

It is time to turn the argument upside down. We have seen that acting right entails intending to do the right thing, and that this is different from intending to be happy. Thus, unless intention is removed from the concept of action, and besides being speculative, "predictions" about *eudaimonistic* outcomes of intending to act right are irrelevant as moral reasons. Removing intention from the concept of action is an obvious cul-de-sac. It would make talk about responsibility senseless and make it impossible to distinguish between action and mere behavior. However refined, accepting happiness as a morally relevant reason is inseparable from transforming moral into mere strategic reason, and strategic reason is indeed morally stable only if it has the greatest power on its side.

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[43] Cf. John E. Hare, John E. *God's Command*, p. 66.
[44] Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1956), p. 135.
[45] Nigel Biggar. *Behaving in Public. How to Do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 104.

However, moral action is explicable as stable in a different sense. Anyone who acts upon the conviction; "Of course there is a reason for my action. It is something I had to do. It would be inhumane not to", reinforces the stability of moral action. [46] At times and places when e.g. a loving Christian God appears to make no practical difference, when faith is not an option; a plain unfounded call to be humane can still motivate action.

Moreover, viewing moral motivation as internal to the recognition of the force the moral demand enables us to explicate the defining properties of *true* heroism. She who risks her only life arguably risks more than he who expects his flawed earthly existence to become an eternal blissful communion with God. Naming the humanism of Doctor Bernard Rieux's absurd equals saying, aiming at being humane for its own sake is foolish rather than heroic. Probably inadvertently, the moral imperative to respect every next person is transformed into an imperative about smartness; "don't be stupid!"

So why be moral, if morality demands of us to show equal concern and respect for each and every one? Why not be smart and indulge in what we happen to love, wholeheartedly, ourselves, and a few near and dear ones? [47] There is a reason. To use those we do not particularly care about as mere instruments is to construe them as commodities, and viewing creatures who can be loved and be vulnerable to cruelty of different kinds as indistinguishable from things, destroys the simplest and most obvious presupposition of moral languages, the distinction between right and wrong. The obvious answer to our question must be; "because the alternative is wrong". In other words, the result of this investigation consist in an explication of how being wrong in spite of claims to the contrary is indeed different from both disobedience of God, and from erring in terms of malfunctioning (failing to realize eudaimonia, the alleged proper ordering of our nature). Indeed, both of these accounts aspire to provide non-moral reasons for the obvious, that acting morally right is indeed right.

Finally, it might not be the calling of everyone to be a hero, not even just for one day. Nevertheless, taking a stand for equal human worth, in spite of risk, serve the purpose of keeping humane interpretative abilities alive. The future is open. We have learned and we can still learn. Working together to make societies where political dehumanization of strangers is absent, and where the virtues benefit their possessor. It is possible. If many of us humans are smart and care about being moral.

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[46] Cf. Malka Drucker. "Introduction" in *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust.* By Gay Block & Malka Drucker (eds.), (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1992), p 5. Drucker writes: "Rescuers do not easily yield the answer to why they had the strength to act righteously in a time of savagery. It remains a mystery, perhaps a miracle. Many helped strangers, some saved friends and lovers. Some had humane upbringings, others did not. Some were educated, others were barely literate. They weren't all religious, they weren't all brave. What they did share, however, was compassion, empathy, an intolerance of injustice, and an ability to endure risk beyond what one wants to imagine."

[47] Cf. Frankfurt, Harry G. *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 57.

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The Importance of Human Rights

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This paper argues that recent advancements in value theory can inform discussions on the interrelation of human rights. More precisely it is argued that the importance of human rights, i.e., the ranking of their priority, cannot be fully accounted for by "more important" and "equally as important". The concept of "on a par importance" is introduced and it is argued that this concept captures implicitly held intuitions in the debate. Furthermore, with this new conceptual insight, it is possible to justify certain assumptions that previously lacked a justificatory ground.

1. Introduction

It is tempting to accept the view that most human rights have the same weight, i.e., that they are equally as important. This view fits well with a common-sense view on the importance of human rights, i.e., it seems counterintuitive to suggest that a complete ranking can be made of human rights such that all or most are ascribed different weight.[1] The view may also find support from certain schemes to justify human rights, i.e., if most human rights can be derived from a few basic normative assumptions, then it is plausible that most human rights will be ascribed the same weight since they share a common source. A major drawback with this view is, however, that it fails to make sense and provide guidance in situations where it seems to be the case that human rights come into conflict. If they are equally as important then how can we decide on which human right to prioritize? Inspired by recent advancements in value theory, I will in this paper, argue that the intuition that most human rights are not rankable by a "more important" relation is correct, but it is also correct that most human rights are not equally as important. The importance of different human rights can be determined by a *non-conventional* relation. By accounting for the interrelation of the importance of human rights in terms of a conceptual scheme well-known in value theory it will be possible to retain the advantages that came with the view that human rights are equally as important and yet possible to account for the possibility of apparent conflicts between human rights.

In section two of the paper, I will describe the advantages and disadvantages of the view that human rights are equally as important. In section three I will present a

[1] As the reader will notice, I will primarily adopt a common-sense perspective on the nature of human rights. I won't delve deeply into the potential sources and normative foundations of these rights. Throughout the paper, I will reference various positions that support my claims regarding human rights, but I won't commit to a specific viewpoint. The reason behind this approach is my intention to maintain as much neutrality as possible concerning the philosophical underpinnings of human rights. Consequently, the content in this paper should be relevant to a wide range of theorists. While some conceptual translation may be necessary, I leave this as an exercise for the reader.

conceptual scheme of possible value relations that has in recent years been developed in value theory. In section four I will show how this scheme can make sense of the interrelations of the importance of different human rights. In the final section of the paper, it is shown how these novel conceptualisations of human rights can justify certain common assumptions.

2. Are all human rights of equal importance?

The claim that human rights are of equal importance can be interpreted in many different ways and an elucidation is therefore needed before its validity can be discussed. The term "importance" can here be tightly connected to a question of prioritization. While it is true that rights, normative principles, and the like, may all ascribe to us what we ought to do, it is not clear that they are given the same priority in cases where we are constrained, such that only some of these can be satisfied. Metaphorically speaking they may have different weights, i.e., count more or less strongly in practical deliberation.

It seems to be a common conception that most human rights are of equal importance. Informal layman discussions on the status of human rights corroborate this. For example, we often use the general term "human rights" to refer to a set of rights. This general approach to human rights can be understood to imply that the rights are uniform and thus not of different importance. Of course, on its own, this does not establish that we take human rights to be of equal importance. However, the general discourse in politics and philosophy provides further support for the claim that it is the common conception. The following quote from the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights shows how this is salient in political ideology:

> All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis.[2]

It is not as evident in philosophical discussions that human rights are of equal importance, but some claims can be found in the literature that confirm that this is a common conception. The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for example states that: "Human rights are typically understood to be of equal value, each right is conceived of as equally important as every other."[3] Similarly, James W. Nickel notes in his influential *Making Sense of Human Rights* that the four rights that he takes to justify all human rights also have roughly equal weight or priority.[4]

More so, claims that acknowledge that human rights are of paramount importance could be understood to entail the view that they are of equal importance.[5] That human rights have a high degree of importance is necessary if they are to have an impact in practice. Similarly, those who believe that human rights are absolute in the sense that

[2] The United Nations, 'Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action', *World Conference on Human Rights*, (1993).

[3] Andrew Fagan, 'Human rights' in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 2003. It is important to note that Fagan rightly acknowledges that this is a mistaken view and refers to the possibility conflicting moral rights in order to put doubt on this common conception.

[4] James W. Nickel, *Making Sense of Human Rights*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 67.

[5] See, Maurice Cranston, 'Human rights, real and supposed', in *Political theory and the rights of Man,* edited by D.D. Raphael. Indiana University Press, 1967, for the view that they or of "paramount importance". I take this to mean that they trump everything else. This normative power is common for all human rights and thus they are of equal importance.

infringements to the rights cannot be compensated by other means could be interpreted to believe that they are of equal importance.[6]

Furthermore, if the normative justification of all human rights is carried out by referring to some common ground, such as the principle of equal human dignity, it seems probable that all of the human rights that are deduced from this ground ought to be treated as if they have the same importance.[7] My suggestions in this paper may be less interesting for those who take a more pluralistic approach to justifying human rights. With a multitude of grounds for human rights, it becomes less unclear why they are seemingly of equal importance.[8]

It is thus clear in the discourse that human rights are often implicitly and sometimes explicitly believed to be of equal importance, but it is also clear that this is a controversial claim if one follows it through. It seems after all plausible to maintain that certain human rights are more important than others. To give one such example, consider the characterisation that places human rights into different generations.[9] While it is unclear what this characterisation exactly amounts to, some may be tempted to interpret it as a ranking where human rights that belong to one generation may have precedence over human rights belonging to another generation. That is, the right to life, for example, that belongs to the first generation may be believed to have precedence over the right to a healthy environment that belongs to the third generation.[10]

The characterisation of human rights as belonging to different generations is controversial.[11] Indeed, this characterisation seems to conflict with the view that human rights are interdependent and indivisible.[12] And it is not far-fetched to conclude that the view that human rights are equally as important plays an important part in the controversy surrounding the characterisation of human rights belonging to different generations.

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[6] With "absolute" I here mean something similar to Alan Gewirth's "principle absolutism". Alan Gewirth, 'Are there any absolute rights?', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 31:122, (1981), pp. 1-16.

[7] The idea of a common ground is often expressed in terms of the principle of equal human dignity. See the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, The United Nations 1948. There are several attempts to make a more explicit characterization of this common ground. One such much discussed source for the common ground is a person's agency and autonomy see e.g., Alan Gewirth, *The community of rights*. Chicago, USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1996 and James Griffin, *On human rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. For general discussions on dignity as a ground for human rights see e.g., Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012, and Charles R. Beitz, 'Human Dignity in the Theory of Human Rights: Nothing But a Phrase?', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41 (2013), pp. 259-290.

[8] I owe this clarification to an anonymous referee. As was suggested to me, if one believes that there are diverse moral and ethical theories (as claimed by, e.g., Charles R. Beitz, *Political theory and international relations*, Princeton University Press, 1979) it is less clear that my claim holds. Of course, Beitz argues that these theories overlap in such a way that they can serve as a justification for certain basic principles. Perhaps, this is sufficient ground for some human rights to be of seeming equal importance. This, merits more consideration but as stated above I will not delve into details on different specific theories on human rights here.

[9] See Karel Vasak, 'A thirty-year struggle', *Unesco Courier* 29, (1977), for a presentation of the distinction.

[10] If one accepts that there is a fourth generation of human rights this claim seems even more plausible. A right relating to emerging technologies, as the fourth generation of human rights is characterized as, seems less important than those belonging to a first generation.

[11] For a convincing criticism of the characterization of human rights in terms of generations see Patrick Macklem, 'Human rights in international law: three generations or one?', *London Review of International Law*, 3:1, 61–92, 2015.

[12] See The United Nations, 'Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action', *World Conference on Human Rights*, (1993).

One needs, however, not to refer to "generations" in order to advance a categorisation of rights in terms of their importance. This idea of different importance can be found elsewhere and one such prominent example is in the work of Henry Shue. Inspired by Rawls' "primary goods" Shue developed the view that certain rights are "basic rights" and that these should be given precedence in their realisation as compared to other rights.[13] It is interesting to note that Shue does not claim that these basic rights are of a higher value than the other rights, rather they are merely more important to realise, due to their instrumental merits.

However, even if one believes that certain human rights are objectively more important than others, e.g., human rights belonging to the first generation being more important than human rights belonging to the third generation, it seems clear that there is a group of human rights for which this is not the case, human rights within the same generation are believed to be of equal importance. Scholars may disagree on how many human rights that are of equal importance but it is clear that at least *some* are taken to be of equal importance and the considerations mentioned above support that, if not all, then *some* human rights are believed to be of equal importance.

With this I submit that there are indeed, several considerations that speak in favour of the view that some human rights are of equal importance; there are both pragmatic and theoretical advantages to this view. Independent of your favourite view on human rights these advantages must be taken into consideration.[14] However, this view also has clear disadvantages and as we will see does not hold up to scrutiny. I believe that this becomes most obvious when one considers conflicts of human rights.

Conflicting human rights can take many forms. Sometimes the conflict is direct, i.e., the fulfilment of one human right may violate another human right. In recent times, numerous instances have arisen where the right to freedom of speech clashes with the right to non-discrimination. That is, freedom of speech is used by xenophobic parties to rationalize acts of discrimination against religious and cultural minorities. Sometimes the conflict of human rights is indirect, i.e., the means available can only guarantee that one right is fulfilled. For example, a state acknowledges that there are several human rights that ought to be met but has only the resources to fulfil one of these.

Not only is the possibility of conflicting human rights of great practical importance, i.e., it poses a possible hurdle in the implementation of human rights, but the possibility of conflicting human rights is also interesting from a theoretical perspective. This is for example acknowledged by Griffin:

> There is no better test of an account of human rights than the plausibility of what it has to say about rights in conflict. There is no better way to force thought about human rights to a deeper level than to try to say something about how to resolve conflicts involving them.[15]

This is indeed true for the claim that human rights are of equal importance. When human rights are treated by a theory as equally as important there is no obvious answer to how the conflict should be resolved. If there is a direct conflict between two human rights, such as was exemplified by the possible conflict between freedom of speech and a right to non-

[13] Shue, Henry, *Basic rights*, Princeton University Press, 1996.
[14] Of course, legal theorists or political theorists who are mostly focused on the implementation of human rights need not necessarily bother with these considerations. However, any philosophical theory on human rights ought to acknowledge these advantages.
[15] Griffin, *On human rights*, p. 57.

discrimination, then the fact that these human rights are of equal importance makes it difficult to solve the conflict.[16] If we opt for a solution that favours freedom of religion then we have not treated the human rights as equally important. Structuring our society in a manner that supports freedom of speech at the cost of a right to non-discrimination reveals that freedom of speech is of higher importance. Thus, if we are to treat them as of equal importance there seems to be no way to solve the conflict.

Similarly, if the conflict is indirect, as was exemplified by a scenario in which a state only has the resources to fulfil one right of many, then there is no way to solve this conflict. If the human rights are equally as important then the state ought to treat them equally and thus one of the human rights cannot be prioritized.

Holding the view that a group of human rights is of equal importance can lead to several potential problems. The direst is perhaps if decision-makers take it to be a reason to not fulfil any of the human rights.[17] That human rights are of equal importance does not necessarily rule out that one of them can be chosen to be prioritized. This strategy introduces, however, tension. If one human right is to be prioritized over another, despite that they are of equal importance, a justification is expected. However, no convincing justification can be given since we know that it is an essential feature of the competing human rights that they are of equal importance. And we do want a justification since arbitrarily opting for fulfilling one of the human rights seems to allow for unfair prioritizations. A stakeholder whose human rights are neglected at the cost of fulfilling another stakeholder's human rights deserves a justification for this prioritization.[18]

Decision-makers thus need guidance in how to act when human rights that are of equal importance come into conflict. This leaves room for scholars to reject the view of human rights being of equal importance and develop a complete ranking of human rights or some sort of plan for actualizing human rights. This strategy has indeed been adopted by some as a way to solve the conflict and provide practical guidance. The strategy, however, must be matched with a compelling justification as to why certain human rights

[16] At least by an appeal to a theoretically justified solution.

[17] Here I use the intentionally vague notion of "decision-maker" to highlight the theoretical problems we face. Much more can be said about how this problem would be actualized in practice. And for such a story we need to specify what form of decision-maker we have in mind. I owe this point to a helpful anonymous reviewer.

[18] To this it could be objected that the decisions could be justified by pointing out that it is better to satisfy one of the rights rather than none. A decision procedure that settles which right to be satisfied by e.g., tossing a fair coin, is thus justified and does not imply any unfairness. It is true that in more mundane situations where we face alternatives that are seemingly equally as good, the fact that we arbitrarily opt for one of the alternatives does not imply that they are not equally as good. If I must choose between two seemingly identical bananas for a midday snack, the fact that I pick one rather than the other does not necessarily entail that they are not equally as good. Things are, however, different when it comes to human rights. Human rights are fragile in many senses of the word. To give some examples, their universality is fragile in the sense that they are not universally respected; states and individuals repeatedly frustrate human rights and consequently do not treat them as rigid inviolable rights. Depending on the correct description of their metaphysical ground it could also be argued that they are metaphysically fragile. If we conceive of human rights as a joint ethical project in which we arrive at a set of constructed rights rather than as a set of rights given by nature, then they can be argued to be metaphysically fragile. If the human rights are shaped by the attitudes and actions of us as a collective, then our agreed upon human rights are also vulnerable to our attitudes and actions. This fragility means that arbitrarily opting to satisfy one human right at the cost of frustrating another could undermine the existence of human rights. If freedom of religion is prioritized at the cost of a right to non-discrimination, then this sends the signal that freedom of religion is more important. Our actions and attitudes reveal that they are not to be treated of equal importance, referring to the toss of a coin will do little to send the signal that they in fact are of equal importance.

should be prioritized. While that would potentially solve the practical problems mentioned I believe that it is theoretically demanding to provide such a justification and I will argue that there is a more straightforward way to go about, inspired by findings in the field of value theory.[19]

3. Evaluative non-conventional relations

Recent advancements in value theory suggest that objects and options need not only to be related in terms of a betterness relation or an equally as good as relation. That is, for an evaluative predicate *F* the domain of evaluative relations is not exhausted by the conventional "*F*er than" and "equally as *F*". The idea that there may be no positive account of how some objects and options relate is, of course, well-known. In other words, two things can be *incomparable*. A more interesting suggestion is that incomparability and the two conventional value relations do not paint the full picture, in fact, there are more positive basic value relations. This possibility was considered in the 1980s, when it was suggested that things could be "roughly comparable".[20] This idea has since been developed. In 2002 Ruth Chang introduced the notion of parity to refer to this possibility.[21] She also presented ingenious arguments to support the claim that this is a genuine form of evaluative relation that is not to be confused with incomparability. Later Wlodek Rabinowicz developed a general conceptual framework for evaluative relations that not only provided an analysis of the standard value relations but also showed that there is conceptual room for more evaluative relations.[22]

An important argument in support of the claim that things need not only to be related by an "at least as good as" relation is the Small Improvement Argument.[23] Roughly the argument takes the following form:

> P1: It is false that A is better than B and it is false that B is better than A.
>
> P2: A+ is better than A.
>
> P3: A+ is not better than B.
>
> C: It is false that A is better than B, it is false that B is better than A, and it is false that they are equally as good

P2 together with P3 establish that A and B are not equally as good. "Equally as good" is a transitive relation and, consequently, if A and B were equally as good, then, if A+ is better than A, A+ must also be better than B.[24] From this and P1 the conclusion follows.

This is just, however, the structure of the argument. Examples must be provided that show that these relations can obtain. Comparing two artists in terms of their creativity can amount to such an example. Chang envisions the comparison of Mozart and Michelangelo. It is clear, she argues, that neither is better than the other since their

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[19] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.
[20] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 431 and James Griffin, *Well-being: Its meaning, measurement and moral importance,* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986, p. 80
[21] Ruth Chang, 'The possibility of parity', *Ethics*, 112:4, 2002, pp. 659-688.
[22] Wlodek, Rabinowicz, 'Value relations', *Theoria*, 74:1, 2008, pp. 18-49.
[23] This argument was first introduced by Ronald de Sousa but in the domain of rational preferences, Ronald De Sousa 'The Good and the True', *Mind*, 83:332, (1974), pp. 534–551.
[24] To be more specific it is the transitivity of betterness across equal goodness that leads to this result.

creativity is of such a different kind, which is expressed by P1.[25] We could also imagine a slightly improved Mozart, perhaps a Mozart that composed one more piece of beautiful music, i.e., P2 is established. This slight improvement does not seem to be sufficient to tip the scale in favour of the improved Mozart and thus P3 is established. From this, we arrive at the conclusion that Mozart is neither better nor worse than Michelangelo and yet they are not equally as good.

This is not sufficient in order to establish that they are on a par. It must also be shown that things that satisfy C are not incomparable. Chang has provided one such argument, her Chaining Argument.[26] I shall not describe this argument since it is somewhat technical and its validity has been questioned.[27] Rather, I think that the best way to argue that objects that exemplify C can still be comparable is to appeal to bare intuition. That is, no technical argument may be needed, it is sufficient to trust our intuition that Mozart and Michelangelo in fact are comparable. The conclusion we now have arrived at is that Michelangelo and Mozart are not related by a conventional value relation and yet they are comparable with respect to their creativity, thus it is possible that they are on a par.

While relations that exemplify C are often referred to in terms of thin value concepts, i.e., "better", "worse" and "equally good", it is clear that the reasoning and rationale behind them can be generalised. First, we can note that it is not only true for "better with respect to creativity", but extends to values that hold ethical significance as well. Consider a scenario where one must decide between promoting greater welfare and promoting increased freedom. In some cases, neither option might appear definitively superior to the other, nor are they necessarily of equal merit. Nevertheless, it appears that these options can be meaningfully compared, leaving room for the possibility that they are on par.

Chang's reasoning that supports the existence of value parity should also apply to other evaluative predicates such as "important". It is possible that A can be more important than B, equally as important as B, or A and B can be non-conventionally related with respect to their importance. It seems just as plausible that A and B can be non-conventionally related with respect to their importance as two other objects can be non-conventionally related with respect to their goodness. To further support the claim that this is possible, one could construct an argument similar to Chang's argument but in terms of "importance". There is, however, a simpler argument that supports this conclusion. Consider a scenario in which the importance of an object is fully determined by its value. How two objects relate with respect to their importance should in this scenario be fully determined by how they relate with respect to their value. If their value is related in terms of a parity relation then so should their importance be.

Before we move on it should be noted that there is a competing view to the one just presented. It is possible that "Fer than" and "equally as F" fully exhaust the conceptual space of vale relations, but sometimes, due to semantic vagueness, it is indeterminate which of the relations that obtain. That is, it may be indeterminate how two things relate with respect to *F* due to the vagueness of the predicate. To illustrate, the predicate "is

[25] If one does not share this intuition, it should not be impossible to substitute either with some other artist that satisfy each premise.
[26] Ruth Chang, 'The possibility of parity'.
[27] See e.g., 'Heaps and Chains: Is the Chaining Argument for parity a sorites?', *Ethics*, 124:3, (2014), pp. 557-571 and Henrik Andersson, 'Parity and Comparability—a Concern Regarding Chang's Chaining Argument', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19 (2016), pp. 245-253.

balder than" is vague since it can e.g., refer to the number of hairs on one's head or how the hairs are distributed on the scalp. This vagueness makes it uncertain whether a man with few, evenly distributed hairs is balder than a man with more hairs concentrated at the back of his head. There are, however, several possible precisifications of the vague predicate "is balder than". "Has fewer hairs than" is one possible precisification and "has more evenly distributed hairs" is another. For each possible precisification one man will be balder than the other, but since neither is balder than the other on *all* reasonable precisifications we judge that it is indeterminate how they relate.[28] As philosophers such as John Broome, Cristian Constantinescu, Luke Elson, and myself, have argued, alleged cases of parity can be construed in terms of vagueness.[29] In this context, this would amount to the possibility that it is not true that one human right is more important than the other nor true that they are equally as important, but it is indeterminate how they relate with respect to importance. We will have reasons to come back to this view but let us now move on and focus on parity in the context of human rights.

4. Human rights are non-conventionally related

A possibility thus presents itself. Human rights need not be equally as important, they can be non-conventionally related with respect to their importance. As I will show this allows us to paint a picture of the interrelation between human rights that shares the advantages of the view that they are equally as important, yet avoids the latter's disadvantages.

First, let us consider which non-conventional relation could provide this advantage. I believe that it is safe to rule out the possibility that the importance of human rights can be incomparable. As noted earlier we treat them often as if they are equally as important, even if this is a mistaken attitude to adopt, it is clear that they are in the same ballpark so to speak; it is possible to compare their importance. One might be tempted to say that their importance is incomparable to other considerations. In other words, the right to not be discriminated against is incomparable to, for example, the economic considerations that a state may face. This would, however, be to misuse the term "incomparable" or at least it is elliptical. What one means with such a statement is rather that human rights are infinitely more important than other considerations and that they cannot be traded-off.[30]

The more interesting suggestion is that human rights are on a par with respect to their importance. They are neither more important nor equally as important; their importance is on a par. I will now sketch out what this means and how it captures our intuitions on the interrelationship of the importance of human rights.

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[28] See Kit Fine, 'Vagueness, truth and logic', *Synthese* 30.3:4, (1975), pp. 265-300.
[29] John Broome, 'Is Incommensurability Vagueness?', in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, edited by Ruth Chang. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997;
John Broome, 'Incommensurability is Vagueness' in *Value Incommensurability: Ethics, Risk, and Decision-Making*, edited by Henrik Andersson and Anders Herlitz. Routledge, 2022; Cristian Constantinescu 'Value Incomparability and Indeterminacy', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 15:1 (2012), pp 57–70; Luke Elson, 'Incommensurability as Vagueness: A Burden-Shifting Argument', *Theoria*, 83:4, (2017) pp. 341–363 and Henrik Andersson, *How it all relates: Exploring the space of value relations*. Lund: Mediatryck 2017.
[30] Cf. James Griffin, *On Human Rights,* p. 85 and Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977. At least they cannot be traded-off in theory. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, they would not be treated as such in a legal setting, but be open for negotiation.

When two things are evaluatively on a par it means that the comparison is complex. Certain features make one object better than the other while other features make it worse. The things we are comparing are sufficiently dissimilar for this to be the case, but they are similar enough to allow them to be comparable. The same can be said about the importance of two conflicting human rights. For example, the value of not being discriminated against and suffering harassment is very different to the value of being able to freely express your views. Yet they are similar in the sense that they have the good of the individuals in focus. Furthermore, aspects can be identified that make it clear that we should prioritize one human right rather than the other and at the same time other aspects can be identified that would give the opposite account. It is also clear that these aspects can be context-sensitive. In a state where a religious minority is often discriminated the right to non-discrimination may trump the right to express oneself freely. While in a state where there is little discrimination but democracy is not as stable the freedom of speech may be more valuable than the right to non-discrimination. However, all things and all contexts considered, one is not more important than the other, neither are they equally as important. For this reason, their importance is, all things considered, on a par.

Perhaps the most important part of this suggestion is that it rejects the claim that certain human rights are more important than others.[31] It thus shares the advantages of the claim that human rights are equally as important since it rejects the claim that certain human rights always should be prioritized. We need not place the human rights in a ranking. The parity view of human rights has this advantage while at the same time avoiding the disadvantage of the "equally as important" view. That is, the parity view can provide guidance in cases where human rights conflict.

In contrast, if the two human rights would be equally as important, it is not theoretically problematic to opt for the fulfilment of one of these human rights at the cost of frustrating the other. If we accept that human rights' importance can be on a par, we can prioritize one over the other without ending up with the sort of tension described above. The difference is that when their importance is on a par, a justification can be given as to why one is prioritized. An essential feature of on a par importance is that certain aspects will count in favour of prioritizing one human right rather than the other, while the opposite is true for other aspects. This allows for the context to determine which human right to prioritize. In certain contexts, certain aspects may be more salient. The situation can thus be such that it will be clear which human right to promote. By fulfilling one of these human rights, we are not revealing that this human right is to be ranked over the neglected human right. All that is revealed is that in the specific context, certain features speak in favour of promoting this human right rather than the other. This explanation is not available for those who want to argue that the human rights are equally as important. The claim that they are equally as important is meant as *tout court*.[32] However, if they are equally as important *tout court* then the context cannot be such that the fulfilment of one

[31] Of course, we can still leave open the possibility that human rights belonging to the first generation is more important than those that belongs to the third generation.

[32] Consider also Wlodek Rabinowicz's account of parity and the equally as good relation. According to him, when to alternatives, x and y, are equally as good it is required to be indifferent between them while if they are on a par, it is permissible to prefer x to y and permissible to prefer y to x. Wlodek Rabinowicz, 'Value relations'.

can be more important than the other. That would contradict the very meaning of *tout court*.[33]

If one is not impressed by the parity account but prefers the vagueness account, a similar line of reasoning can be adopted. Remember, adherents of the vagueness account argue that there is no need to assume further evaluative relations. "Fer than" and "equally as F" fully exhaust the conceptual space, but sometimes, due to vagueness, it is indeterminate which of the relations that obtain. It is thus possible that for some human rights, it is not true that one is more important than the other nor true that they are equally as important, it can be indeterminate how they relate with respect to importance.

This position does not have all the advantages that the parity view has for accounting for the importance of human rights, but it is more advantageous than the views that are expressed in terms of solely conventional evaluative relations. Let me first address the advantages. On this view, it is not the case that a human right is determinately more important than another, which is as already explained an advantage. It also stands better than the view that human rights are equally as good. Remember, the biggest drawback with the view that human rights are equally as good is how one can solve the tension between conflicting human rights. The vagueness view more naturally provides an explanation for this. The vagueness view admits that on certain precisifications one human right may be more important than another, however, on all reasonable precisifications there is no agreement as to which human right is more important than another.[34] On some reasonable precisifications, one human right will be more important than another, and on other reasonable precisifications, the opposite may be true. Consequently, there is no determinate, all things considered, answer as to which human right is more important than the other. Furthermore, these precisifications can take context into consideration, in the sense that the precisification is nothing more than a specification of the context taken under consideration. Given a certain context, one human right is more important than another and, in another context, the opposite can be true. In situations of conflict, one can thereby promote one human right rather than another without committing to the claim that it is a more important human right *tout court*. That is, one can opt for one precisification rather than consider all reasonable precisification, and this can be motivated by the fact that it is the relevant precisification for the given context.

5. Concluding discussion

While the introduction of "on a par importance" and "indeterminate importance" is a novel contribution to the philosophical discourse on human rights, the ideas themselves seem to be somewhat familiar in the literature. They clearly mirror a common conception in the research field. It seems reasonable that if human rights suffer from an indeterminacy

[33] It could be tempting to argue that they are equally as important all things considered but that they need not be equally as important in certain contexts. It seems, however, impossible to account for such a possibility. The aggregate importance of a human right in all possible contexts must add up to the identical importance of the other human right in all its possible contexts. Metaphorically speaking, each possible context of a human right will provide a specific weight that will be added to the bowl of the scale, the other human right will likewise provide another weight that will be added to the its corresponding bowl. Each context could provide different weigh for the two human rights considered, yet when all contexts have been considered the bowls will be in perfect balance. This possibility seems highly unlikely.

[34] This is in accordance with Supervaluationism as described by Fine 'Vagueness, truth and logic'. Supervaluationism is one of the most influential theories of vagueness.

of sense as argued by Griffin, this should make it implausible that an exact ranking can be made with regard to their importance.[35]

Similarly, Nickel's claim that there is "no simple formula" for resolving conflicts between the principles that ground human rights and that "no straightforward priority ranking" can be given but all that can be said is that they have "roughly equal weight" captures the ideas behind parity.[36] It is essential to the parity approach presented that no linear ranking can be made. It is also peculiar that the phenomenon of parity has by some been referred to as "rough equality", i.e., the identical term used by Nickel. If we acknowledge that the importance of human rights can be on a par then there is no need for further theorizing on which human right is the most important. Decision-makers are free to opt for one of the human rights rather than the other as long as they are guided by the context in which their decision will have an effect. This will thus serve as a philosophical justification for a practice that is already in place. Decision-makers have obviously made prioritizations of this kind, but now they have a theoretical framework from which their practice can find further support.

Generally, this justification holds promise for beliefs expressed in the discourse. For instance, when one conceptualizes human rights as the promotion of minimal standards, it is often underpinned by the principle that the authority of the sovereign should not be undermined. This perspective suggests that states, and even more localized decision-makers, should have the discretion to determine the manner in which human rights are to be realized, taking into account essential contextual factors, including cultural values.[37]

Adherents of a pluralistic ground for human rights ought also to accept the parity view. With different sources of the human rights, it is plausible that the human rights will not be related in a conventional manner with respect to their importance. On such an account it seems reasonable that the general grounds will play different roles in grounding the more specific human rights and that this multidimensionality will give rise to their importance being on a par. [38]

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[35] Griffin, *On human rights*, pp. 14-15.

[36] Nickel, *Making Sense of Human Rights*, p. 66

[37] See Nickel *Making Sense of Human Rights*, pp. 36-37 for a developed view on why human rights should be minimal standards.

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On Age

William Simkulet

Age is determined by the amount of time that someone or something has existed. For example, a person born in 1980 and a 1980 vintage wine would each be 40 years old in 2020. Recently, Joona Räsänen has challenged this belief, arguing that in some cases one's age is not determined by how long one has existed, but by some feature or set of features about one's biology, experiences, and/or beliefs about themselves. In many cases, age is an ad hoc indicator of physical health, psychological development, and the like, but for Räsänen, it seems age isn't merely an indicator of such things; it's derived from these things! Here I argue Räsänen's alternatives to chronological age are ontologically burdensome and inconsistent with our intuitions in both normal and weird cases.

Introduction

Age is determined by the amount of time that someone or something has existed. In the year 2020, a person born in 1980 would be 40 years old, and we can say the same about a 1980 vintage wine.[1] Often, you can learn a lot about a person or thing by its age; for example, you can make educated guesses about one's health and life experiences by their age in much the same way you might make educated guesses about the flavor and chemical composition of a wine by its age.

We often use age as an *ad hoc* indicator of physical or mental capabilities. For example, you might expect a 12-year-old child to be able to reach higher shelves, carry more books, run further distances, or eat more than a 6-year-old child. Similarly, you might expect a 21-year-old adult to be a safer driver, more informed voter, and more responsible drinker than a 16-year-old teenager. By the same token, one might chastise a 21-year-old adult for acting immaturely by telling them to "act your age," or compliment a studious child by saying they are "wise beyond your years."

Recently Joona Räsänen (2019a, 2019b, 2020) has challenged this chronological account of age, and proposed a variety of alternatives – a biological account (2020), experiential account (2020), emotional age (2019a), and physiological age (2019a) – and suggested that a legal age might be a category plausibly be divorced from chronological age, to prevent discrimination (2019a) or better reflect their medical needs (2019b). His position seems to be informed by recent work in the medical field that draws a distinction

[1]Some people believe that human beings and many other organisms come into existence at conception, or soon afterwards, rather than birth. If this is true, humans can be said to be about 9 months older than generally reported. This inexactness is understandable, as while one's birth date is generally known, one's conception date is often less certain. As such, I don't think this inexactness should be taken to suggest that we generally believe that we come into existence at birth, only that it's easier for the bookkeeping if we treat this as such.

between chronological age and biological age (Goggins WB, Woo J, Sham A, *et al*., 2005; Jylhävä J, Pedersen NL & Hägg S., 2017; Mitnitski AB, Graham JE, Mogilner AJ, *et al*., 2002). Räsänen further bolsters his analysis with engaging thought experiments about strange cases in which he thinks our intuitions about a subject age might differ from their chronological age (2020).

Though engaging, Räsänen's analysis seems to go awry. Iain Brassington (2019) argues that Räsänen mistakes figurative speech for literal. Similarly, Toni C. Saad (2019) argues that the relationship between chronological age and Räsänen's alternatives is one of analogy. William Simkulet (2019) argues that Räsänen's alternatives to chronological age are confused and morally irrelevant.

Here, I raise new objections to Räsänen's analysis. Notably, Räsänen's proposed alternatives to chronological age are somewhat vague, but also seem to be quite ontologically burdensome. He seems to believe that talk about age for living and non-living things are radically different enterprises, such asking the age of a bottle of wine is a completely different kind of question than asking the age of a living thing. Furthermore, they seem prohibitively complex, seemingly jumping through hoops to correlate with chronological age in normal cases.

In short, Räsänen's alternatives to chronological age are inconsistent with our intuitions about age and aging in most cases, take metaphorical speech literally, and largely seem aimed at turning age from merely an *ad hoc* indicator of health, well-being, competence, or the like into something derived from one or more of those things.

I. Psychological Accounts of Age

When discussing alternative accounts of age, it seems customary to begin the discussion with a case in which chronological age might sensibly differ from our intuitions. Räsänen (2019a) begins with a discussion of Dutchman Emile Ratelband, at the time 69, who asked the government to change his date of birth by twenty years to better reflect his emotional state, in an effort to prevent ageist discrimination preventing him from finding work and love.

In the same vein, I think it's appropriate to begin this discussion with an adaptation of the story of another dutchman, Rip Van Winkle:

> *Rip Van Winkle*: Rip Van Winkle, born 1734, was a kind, but lazy fellow. In 1764, his wife berates him for sleeping 16 hours a day, and he heads off to the mountains for some respite. There, he meets a fellow dutchman in old fashioned clothing and they share a drink. Soon after, Rip falls asleep, only to awaken in 1784, with a long gray beard and body to match. (Adapted from Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*)

According to the commonsense account of age, it is (normally[2]) a simple matter to discern one's age; you simply subtract one's birthdate from the current date to determine one's

[2]I think our commonsense account of age is robust enough to handle abnormal cases in which age cannot be reliably determined by subtracting one's birth date from the current date. Two such cases are time dilation and time travel stories.
Time dilation is the phenomena predicted by the theory of special relativity by which time slows down as one's speed increases, such that if you synchronize two clocks and place one of them in a fast-moving vehicle, such as an airplane or shuttle, the two clocks will become unsynchronized, with the clock in the vehicle having experienced less time than the (relatively) stationary clock. Although this

age. For example, Rip falls asleep in 1764 and was born in 1734, so he is 30 years old when he goes missing. By the same token, it makes sense to say that he is 50 years old when he awakens in 1784.

Räsänen calls this account of aging the chronological account:

> *Chronological account:* the amount of time one has been alive determines how old one is. (Räsänen, 2020, 3)

Oddly, Räsänen's account of chronological age only applies to living things, excluding non-living things. This account of chronological age is *prima facie* inconsistent with how we often talk about age; as it makes sense to say that non-living things like wine, automobiles, philosophical writings, and the like have an age, and that their age is at least *prima facie* determined in the same way as the age of a living thing. As such, a better account of (chronological) age might be:

> *Inclusive chronological account:* the amount of time that a person or thing has existed.[3]

On either chronological account, Rip is 50 when he awakes; but Räsänen proposes an alternative in which Rip would only be 30.

> *Experiential account:* The amount of time one has been conscious and lived her life determines how old one is. (Räsänen, 2020, 4)

On this view, Rip has only "lived" 30 years (1734-1764), so when he awakes in 1784, he has an experiential age of 30, despite his chronological age being 50.

I find two things interesting about Räsänen's account of experiential age. First, though presented as an alternative to the chronological account, the experiential account of age *is* a chronological account, but one that only counts some of the time that one has existed – the time that one has experienced, or lived, their life.

Second, this experiential account seems to be more figurative than literal. The average person spends a good portion of their life asleep – let's say they sleep 8 hours a day, or 1/3rd of their life – therefore a typical chronologically 30-year-old person would *literally* have an experiential age of 20 (as they've slept for about 10 years of their life). The problem with literal experiential age is that it is (practically) never consistent with how we speak about age.

phenomenon may initially appear bizarre, intuitively our commonsense account of time asks us to track the time tracked by the individual clocks.

By the same token, our commonsense account of time is easy to grasp science fiction and fantasy stories involving time travel, whether a person travels back in time to before they were born, skips to the future, or relives the same day over and over again. As with time dilation, merely subtracting one's birth date from the current date is insufficient to calculate age in these stories, but, as with time dilation, our commonsense account of age will count the time that actually passes for these atypical time travelers.

[3] In most cases, Räsänen's chronological account and this one yield the same numbers for people; though Räsänen constructs a case in which they might yield different accounts. In *Cryopreservation while dead* (2020, 3) Bianca is killed at age 40, her body is frozen, and she is revived 50 years later. According to Räsänen's account, Bianca has been alive for 40 years, and dead for 50, so she's chronologically 40; while according to this account she's existed for 90 years, so she's chronologically 90. However, it's not clear that Räsänen's case is as described; by definition, death is often said to be irreversible (DeGrazia, 2017), but suppose scientists were able to breathe "new life" into Bianca, it's not clear that she would be the same person. If death is irreversible and Bianca is the same person, then she has been alive for 90 years, although near-death for 50 of it.

Yet, Rip sleeps 16 hours a day, so when he is chronologically 30 years old, while Räsänen would have us believe he's (figuratively) experientially 30 years old before (and after) his big sleep; he's (literally) experientially 10 years old; but this is ridiculous. It wouldn't make sense to say that chronologically 30-year-old Rip is half the age of a normal chronologically 30-year-old person merely because he sleeps twice as long!

Furthermore, keep in mind that even if people, on average, get 8 hours of sleep a night, this varies from person to person and night to night, so it would be practically impossible to calculate how old any person is according to the experiential account. But this is absurd; most people are rather confident that they know how old they are, but on this account, the only way one could really know their experiential age is to keep track of their waking and sleeping states and do copious amounts of math. I dare say that if the experience account of age is correct, no one has ever known their own age!

In short, though the experiential account is *prima facie* plausible, it seems to fall apart upon analysis. Räsänen seems committed to the idea that under normal circumstances, a chronologically 30-year-old will be experientially 30 years old as well. Räsänen asks us to consider the following case:

> *Alex:* Alex, chronologically age 40 in 2020, suffers from a disease with no cure. She is cryopreserved until the 2070, when a cure is discovered, and she is revived and treated. She has no recollection of the time she spent in cryopreservation. (Adapted from Räsänen 2020, 2)

One way to read Räsänen here is that he's not concerned with the amount of time one has actually experienced, but rather the amount of time one can experience things as normal. One solution here is to evoke the distinction between first-order and second-order capacities used by substance view theorists (Lee, 2004; Lee and George, 2008; Friberg-Fernros, 2015, 2018).[4] To have the *first-order capacity* to do x is to have the immediate ability to do x when prompted, while to have the *second-order capacity* to do x is to have the ability to do x at some point in the future should the right conditions obtain. For example, during the summer, an oak tree has the first-order capacity to photosynthesize, but during the winter, when it has lost its leaves, it only has the second-order capacity to photosynthesize – it can begin photosynthesis only after it comes out of hibernation, not immediately.

From 1980 to 2020, we might say that Alex possesses the first-order capacity to have conscious experiences, even when she's asleep. However, from 2020-2070, while she is cryopreserved, we might say that Alex lacks the first-order capacity to have conscious experiences despite having the second-order capacity to have conscious experiences (should she be revived).[5] When Alex is revived in 2070, the revival process restores her first-order capacity to have experiences. By the same token, we might contend that

[4] While the distinction between first-order and second-order capacities may be practical in other areas, substance view theorists use the distinction to argue that human fetuses, from conception, are inherently rational substances despite lacking the first-order capacity to engage in reason. Substance view theorists believe human beings are inherently rational substances, and that any substantial change that would add or remove rationality results in the destruction of one substance and the creation of another. However, they also believe that human fetuses are numerically identical to the first-order rational persons that they develop into. As such, they contend that (most) human fetuses have the second-order capacity to engage in reason, or the capacity to engage in reason (without substantial change) should certain conditions obtain.

[5] Räsänen might say the same about Bianca in *Cryopreservation while dead* (2020, 3), but this assumes that Bianca exists when she's dead, seems to be *prima facie* inconsistent with how we think of death.

someone in a reversible coma lacks the first-order capacity for conscious experience but has the second-order capacity for conscious experience.

Similarly, from 1734-1764, Rip possesses the first-order capacity to have conscious experiences, even though he sleeps more than normal; as such Räsänen could argue Rip has an experiential age of 30 in 1764. However, Rip *also* sleeps from 1764-1784!

If Rip was cryopreserved, or in a coma, or perhaps cursed like Charles Perrault's Sleeping Beauty, we might say that he lacks the first-order capacity for conscious experience, but for all we know Rip's sleep is merely quantitatively different than normal, not qualitatively different. If it is quantitatively different, Rip is 50, but if it qualitatively different (and he can't awaken), Rip is merely 30.

This wild discrepancy between (experiential) age in the story of Rip Van Winkle highlights a problem with an appeal to the distinction between first and second order capacities in general; specifically they seem to shift the focus from the topic at hand – in this case experiences – to some hypothetical underlying capacity that it not as clearly relevant or desirable – the capacity to have experiences… provided that such and such conditions obtain.

Räsänen proposes an experiential account of age to better capture our intuitions in strange cases where he thinks our intuitions about chronological age are dubious; yet it seems that he does not actually believe that experiential age is determined by the amount of time one has actually experienced. Instead, it is as though he wants one's experiential age to match the chronological age of a normal person with similar experiences.

For example, if the average person spends 2/3rds of their time conscious, the average 30-year-old would have 20 years of conscious experience, so they would be both chronologically 30 and experientially 30. However, by stipulation, Rip only spends 1/3rd of his time conscious, so in 1764 he has only had 10 years of conscious experiences, akin to someone whose chronological age is 15. Rip can say the same in 1784, when he awakens from his long slumber, so on this account he would have an experiential age of 15 before the slumber and 15 afterwards. But a normal person who faces Rip's bizarre circumstances would have an experiential age of 30 before and after their slumber.

It strikes me there are two substantive problems with the experiential account of age. First, both interpretations of the experiential account discussed above go to great lengths to make sure that chronological age and experiential age *normally* match up – in both cases introducing conceptual extra steps to make sure that the time a normal person lacks experiences counts towards their experiential age.

The chronological account is far more parsimonious than either of these interpretations of the experiential account, and has the same explanatory power, barring weird cases. Of course, Räsänen introduces weird cases to illustrate that the chronological account of age is incompatible with our intuitions; but John T. Wilcox (1989/1993) rather infamously argued that we cannot trust our intuitions in weird cases. Of course, David Boonin (2002) argues that hypothetical cases are essential tools for philosophers, so we cannot reject weird cases in their entirety. Still, our intuitions are informed, largely, by familiar situations, so the fact they are *prima facie* inconsistent with a weird case is not necessarily sufficient to justify an unparsimonious overhaul of our concept of aging, let alone one inconsistent with our intuitions in familiar cases – like our intuitions about the age of non-living things. A *prima facie* plausible theory of age should be consistent with both our everyday use of the concept and sensibly applicable to unfamiliar, but coherent, situations. It's far from obvious as to whether Räsänen's alternatives to the chronological

account of age fare better at explaining unfamiliar situations, but they certainly fail to be consistent with how we talk about age in normal, everyday situations.

This leads to my second concern; the experiential account seems to exclude a wide variety of living things that exist but lack experiences – plants, fungi, bacteria, and simple animals. Furthermore, it suggests that experiential age may be relative to one's species. In short, rather than age being a universal concept that applied to everyone and everything, on this view there are many different kinds of aging, each picking out a distinct concept, but (thus far) all related to chronological time.

Räsänen (2019a) offers an experience-adjacent account of age, what he calls "emotional age" or (oddly) "experienced age" (Räsänen, 2019a, fn iv). For the sake of differentiating it from his (2020) experiential account, I will refer to it by the first of these names:

> *Emotional age:* the age someone feels and identifies himself. (Räsänen, 2019a, fn iv)

Brassington contends it's difficult to tell what Räsänen means by emotional age (2019, 468), while Simkulet contends that Räsänen seems to be concerned with something like emotional maturity (2019, 469). However, as presented, emotional age has nothing to do with emotion or experience. Instead, it seems to be an oddly compound concept; one's emotional age is the (chronological) age one (i) feels like and (ii) self-identifies as.

For example, at (chronological) age 69 Ratelband wished to self-identify as 49 (by way of deceiving people about his actual date of birth); but this only satisfies *part* of Räsänen's account of emotional age; to genuinely have an emotional age of 49, Ratelband must also feel himself to be chronologically aged 49. But this makes no sense, as Ratelband knows he is chronologically 69. At best, as Saad notes, one might believe that they, temporarily or permanently, possess a status typically associated with a person of a different age (2019, 465).

If we take Räsänen's naming convention seriously, perhaps he means that Ratelband must not only self-identify as 49, but also believe that he is either emotionally or experientially comparable to someone whose chronological age is 49. Of course, chronological age may correlate with emotional maturity or a certain quality or quantity or diversity of experiences, but as is evidenced by the child "wise beyond their years" or adult told to "act their age", one's emotional or experiential background is different from what we normally mean by age.

As with experiential age above, here I think Räsänen means that a person must feel that they are comparable to how a normal person feels at a certain age; Ratelband would need to believe that he's more like the normal chronological 49 year-old than any other age. But what does this mean? Consider the following case:

> *Neil:* Neil is an atypically bright and emotionally mature chronologically 15-year-old who earned his doctorate at a young age. Neil argues that he should be allowed to vote in the presidential election because his emotional maturity, experiential diversity, and extensive educational background far exceeds that of the normal citizen eligible to vote.

(Chronological) Age is often used as an *ad hoc* indicator of emotional, physical, and intellectual maturity, as well as an indicator of competence and (legal and/or moral) culpability. However, just because many (chronologically) 15-year-olds aren't competent enough to vote responsibly doesn't mean that they all are.

Suppose Neil were to follow in Ratelband's footsteps and appeal for legal age change; what age would Neil self-identify as? Different states have different voting age requirements; one state might require voters to be 18, and another 16. But Neil contends he's more competent than a normal citizen, whose chronological age might be somewhere in the 30s or 40s.

The problem here is that emotional maturity, as well as other metrics, seems to plateau as one ages, such that while there may be a wide gap between an average 5-year-old and 10-year-old; there may be no appreciable gap between an average 25-year-old and 30-year-old. Similarly, Ratelband may wish to self-identify as 49, but whatever he believes (accurately or not) about his emotional state, he cannot sensibly believe that he is substantively more like a 49-year-old than a 44-year-old or 54-year-old; as emotional maturity usually plateaus far before one hits their 40s.

That said, like Brassington, I'm not sure I know what it feels to be a certain age (2019, 468); I know what it feels like to be me, and (I think) I know my own age, but I have no way of knowing how other people feel at my own chronological age. Suppose an adopted child believes themselves to have been born 20 years ago, but it turns out they were really born 21 years ago; would they feel like they are 20 or 21?

Perhaps a bigger problem with emotional age is that it seems to be yet another account of aging that serves to exclude; according to Räsänen's definition, someone who self-identifies differently than they feel simply has no emotional age. A 16-year-old who think they feel like an 18-year-old and self-identifies as a 21-year-old to buy beer has no emotional age. In light of this, it seems like a mistake to say that our everyday concept of age picks out emotional age, as while most people agree that everyone (and thing) has an age, charitably only some people (and necessarily no things) have an emotional age.

II. Biological Accounts of Age.

Consider the following case, adapted from Bernard Williams's discussion of the titular character from a play by Karel Čapek (1973):

> *Makropulos*: Elina Makropulos, chronologically aged 342, took an elixir of life 300 years ago, at chronological age of 42. At that point, her body stopped showing signs of aging (no more wrinkles, no more telomere shortening, etc.); however, her mind has continued to accrue experiences. She has grown bored of life, so she decides to refrain from taking the elixir again, which will lead to her death.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I have the strong intuition that Elina is 342 years old; but it's also easy to imagine someone mistaking her for 42. For those with the intuition that Elina might be 42, Räsänen offers another alternative account of age:

> *Biological account:* One's biological fitness and health determines how old one is. (Räsänen, 2020, 5)

This account is similar to an earlier account he calls "biological age" or "physiological age" (Räsänen, 2019a, fn iv). For the sake of differentiating it from the biological account, I will go with the latter name here:

> *Physiological age:* The age one's body and mind appear to others by objective measures. (Räsänen, 2019a, fn iv)

For all intents and purposes, this account of physiological age is a hodgepodge of nonsense. Like emotional age, physiological age seems to be a compound concept; one's physiological age requires that their (i) bodily age and (ii) mental age appear to others to correspond. However, whereas emotional age seems to be determined internally, physiological age seems to be determined externally, though Räsänen doesn't say much about the criteria by which others might judge bodily and mental age. And, as with emotional age, some people will just lack physiological age when there is a mismatch between how their body and mind appear to external observers.

When Alex emerges from cryopreservation, we might expect her to look and act much as she did when she went in at the (chronological) age of 40. Thus, assuming Alex looks and acts her (chronological) age, she would have a physiological age of 40 despite having a chronological age of 90.

However, when Rip awakens from his 20-year slumber, while he acts the same, he looks much older, so he simply has no physiological age on this view.

But what of Elina? To others, her body looks 42. Though Williams tells us she is more world-weary than one might expect from a 42-year-old, in Čapek's story she has become adept at deceiving others about her true (chronological) age; as such we might expect that Elina, though possessing the world-weary mind of a 342-year-old, appears to others as a 42-year-old by at least some objective criteria. If age is determined by how one appears to others, as the physiological account seems to require, then Elina is 42.

Of course, the primary problem with the physiological account is that it's not concerned with how things are, but how things appear to be. Elina might appear to have a mind comparable to an average 42-year-old, but her mind is, by objective measures such as those relevant to experiential age, clearly much older than that.

However, her body both appears, and by some objective measures is, comparable to that of an average 42-year-old (that is, if we assume Elina's body was average when she first took the elixir)!

The primary problem with the physiological account is that it focuses on appearance, rather than how things are. Because Elina can pass as mentally and physically chronologically 42, she has a physiological age of 42 on this account. However, if we're worried about how things actually are, as presumably any theory of age should be, Elina is not 42.

Fortunately, Räsänen's account of biological age seems to be concerned with how things are – actual facts about an agent's biology. Simkulet contends that rather than physiological age, Räsänen would be better off talking about physical maturity (2019, 469), but while chronological age can be used as an *ad hoc* indicator of physical maturity, much like with emotional maturity, it seems to plateau at a point, making assigning particular biological ages a foolish proposition.

Brassington, however, argues that this kind of discussion of bodily and emotional age is meant figuratively.

> When we say that a 50-year-old has the body of a 40-year-old, we are—again—speaking figuratively. We mean that their body displays the kinds of things that we would typically expect of someone of that age. We do not mean that they are in any way actually younger or that anyone would be mistaken to think that the date on their birth certificate is a reliable guide to their age. (2019, 468)

Brassington's analysis seems to be quite consistent with how we might speak of Rip; he awakens after a 20-year-old nap and in Washington Irving's original story, he falls back

into his old habits. But we can talk sensibly about Rip without knowing everything about how his brain and mind function, or whether being off his feet for 20 years might have given him better than average posture for his chronological age due to his inaction.

One might joke that a rich person's hands are child-like as they show no signs of labor compared to a carpenter of the same chronological age, but we wouldn't argue that this means labor artificially ages us, or that lack of labor arrests the aging process.

In response to this criticism, Räsänen (2019b) contends that the medical field introduced the idea of biological age to help categorize and address a variety of biomedical issues (Goggins WB, Woo J, Sham A, *et al.*, 2005; Jylhävä J, Pedersen NL & Hägg S., 2017; Mitnitski AB, Graham JE, Mogilner AJ, *et al.,* 2002). That said, Räsänen neglects to address the issue of whether such jargon is merely figurative, an attempt to better categorize patients based on their capacities and treatment needs rather than appealing to chronological age as an *ad hoc* indicator of such things.

Furthermore, even if biological age turns out to be a sensible medical category, Räsänen has yet to give reasons to suggest that talk about age in normal, especially nonmedical, capacities is best understood as talk about biological age.

As technology progresses, and we find ways to seemingly arrest the aging process, as Elina's fictional elixir does, chronological age would naturally become less useful an *ad hoc* indicator of medical need, wisdom, retirement, and the like. However, this should come as no surprise; such technologies would be largely aimed at fixing, arresting, or otherwise addressing common issues faced as one (chronologically) ages normally; often aimed at making the prospect of growing (chronologically) older less problematic.

This inexorable march of medical progress, however, undermines the medical practicality of Räsänen's account of biological age. For example, we have good reason to think the average (chronologically) 60-year-old person in 2020 is in substantively better health than the average (chronologically) 60-year-old person was in 1920, etc. Perhaps a complete account of biological age will talk about an average person, *sans* medical intervention, but given how small changes in our daily lives correct or prevent long term medical issues, as well as how genetics and natural selection play a part in changing what this average would be, what we expect to find with the average person of a certain (chronological) age, even *sans* medical interventions, would likely substantively change as technology, healthcare, and the spread of information progresses (or regresses). As such, biological age doesn't seem to be particularly *descriptive*, rather, as Saad argues, it seems to be one of analogy (2019, 465).

Conclusion

Räsänen (2020) ultimately contends that though chronological, experiential, and biological age are at least *prima facie* consistent with our intuitions in some cases, upon analysis each seems to have some insurmountable hurdles that render them inconsistent with how we talk about age. He goes on to propose the following:

> *The two-tier principle of age:* Whenever the accounts from chronology, consciousness, and biology contradict one another on the question of someone's age, we should seek guidance from whichever two accounts differ the least from one another, and reject whichever account. (Räsänen, 2020, 3)

In some respects, this appears to be a revised version of physiological age, with two substantive improvements. First, though he's light on the details, both experiential age and

biological age are said to be based on objective measures of how things are (rather than how they appear to be). Second, while both emotional and physiological age were compound concepts that required agreement between two options, the two-tier principle doesn't require agreement, but merely similarity between two of the three proposed accounts of aging. It's not clear exactly what Räsänen means by this; but it does mean that everyone will have an age (or, at least something like an age-range) on the two-tier principle account, while many will fail to have an age range for both emotional and physiological age.

However, Räsänen rejects the two-tier principle account as well, arguing that it is inconsistent with our intuitions in at least some cases. But this should come as no surprise; the two-tier principle account doesn't seem to be interested in picking out how we use age, merely looking for consistency between different (weird) accounts of age.

In many respects, Räsänen's two-tier principle account seems to be more of a decision-making tool than anything else; helping him to break ties in odd cases where two accounts of age match up. This is comparable to an ethicist, who when confronted with a moral dilemma, applies utilitarianism, Kantianism, and virtue theory to the dilemma then chooses the option that two of the three theories prescribe! However, utilitarianism, Kantianism, and virtue theory each offer strikingly different accounts of ethics; the utilitarian asks us to maximize happiness, the Kantian to treat people as ends, and the virtue theorist to seek a golden mean. Much like how Räsänen's competing theories of age come to the same conclusion in normal cases, these normative theories come to the same prescription in normal cases, but for vastly different reasons. Utilitarianism claims lying is wrong because it causes pain, the Kantian that lying is wrong because it treats others as means only, and virtue theory warns liars live short, unsuccessful lives. However, though all three prescribe telling the truth, they do so for very different, and often incompatible, reasons. By the same token, the two-tier principle of age owes any success it has to the fact that its component accounts of aging are arguably *prima facie* consistent with how we talk about age but fails to say anything interesting about age.

Ultimately, Räsänen contends we have to "bite the bullet" with regards to three accounts at the heart of his two-tier approach – chronological age, experiential age, and physiological age. But this simply isn't the case. Age refers to the amount of time that someone or something has existed; the only thing Räsänen needs to give up is treating age as though it is a reliable indicator of mental or physical fitness when (chronological) age is, at best, an *ad hoc* indicator of such things in normal cases. That (chronological) age is an especially poor indicator of such things in some cases (whether by coincidence, technology, or magic) is not evidence that our normal concept of age needs to be revised; only that discrimination based on age, rather than capacity, is *prima facie* immoral. Räsänen's discussions of age seem to make a metaphorical fallacy, mistaking figurative and metaphorical language about age as literal.

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Evil and Meaning in Life*

David Matheson

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

1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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