The Rationality of Suicide and the Meaningfulness of Life

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Abstract and Keywords

A wide body of psychological research corroborates the claim that whether one's life is (or will be) meaningful appears relevant to whether it is rational to continue living. This chapter advances conceptions of life's meaningfulness and of suicidal choice with an eye to ascertaining how the former might provide justificatory reasons relevant to the latter. Drawing upon the recent theory of meaningfulness defended by Cheshire Calhoun, the decision to engage in suicide can be understood as a choice related to life's meaningfulness insofar as an individual can see no *point* in investing her agency in her anticipated future. These meaning-based reasons relevant to suicidal choice either cannot be reduced to the reasons of well-being that philosophers have typically used to analyse suicide decisions or at least forms a distinct class of reasons within those that contribute to well-being.

Keywords: agency, Camus, Cheshire Calhoun, meaning in life, rationality, suicide, time, well-being

THE sense that one's life is meaningful seems to confer a high level of resiliency and perseverance on human beings. As Viktor Frankl (1992, 87–88) observed, even the hardships associated with life in a Nazi concentration camp become more survivable for those able to develop and retain a sense of their lives as meaningful. One recent meta-review of literature concerning meaning in life and suicide (Costanza, Prelati, and Pompili 2019) found that experiencing one's life as meaningful serves as a reliable 'protective factor' against suicidal thinking, suicide attempts, and death via suicide. Correlations between meaningfulness in life and lowered tendencies for suicide appear remarkably widespread, having been identified in children and adolescents (Schnell, Gertsner, and Krampe 2018, Tan et al. 2018); elderly adults (Heisel and Flett 2016; Heisel, Neufeld, and Flett 2016), and military personnel, including those with depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (Bryan et al. 2013; Sinclair, Bryan, and Bryan 2016). And in general, the sense that one's life is meaningful appears to have the powerful capacity to bolster individuals' ability to persist in the face of adversity that might otherwise contribute to suicide risk (Kleiman

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and Beaver 2013; Khan et al. 2018). Conversely, the mental pain closely associated with suicide seems to be negatively correlated with subjects' sense of whether their life is meaningful (Orbach, Mikulincer, and Sirota 2003).

Philosophers interested in the meaning of life are likely to view these empirical findings as suggestive, but will press two critical issues. First, this research often leaves unclear exactly what conception of meaningfulness is at play here. As Martela and Steger (2016) observe, this empirical literature measures meaningfulness in life in different ways, sometimes as a matter of a life being *coherent*, that is, its making sense to the person whose life it is by exhibiting a larger pattern or narrative; as its having *purpose*, a set of goals or an overall direction; or as *significance*, as one the subject values, finds worthwhile, or endorses. This imprecision is evident in the questionnaires commonly (p. 446) deployed in this research. One prominent instrument either leaves it to the test subjects to determine what meaningfulness is, simply asking them to agree or disagree with statements such as 'I understand my life's meaning' or 'I am searching for meaning in my life', or invokes coherence ('I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful') or purpose ('my life has a clear sense of purpose') (Steger et al. 2006). To a philosophical eye, these features of a life may be positively interrelated (a coherent life may be more likely to be purposeful or significant, etc.) and each has a claim to at least being an ingredient in a meaningful life. But it less clear that any of these are what *renders* life meaningful, and they are clearly distinct. A person's life may make sense to them but lack purpose, or may not be a life they endorse or find worthwhile (Metz 2019, 408–409). A person's life may be worthwhile in their own eyes but lack the pattern or narrative needed to lend it coherence, etc. For philosophers interested in the meaning of life, this conceptual untidiness will be frustrating but unsurprising. After all, philosophical disagreement persists about what just meaning in life, meaningfulness, etc., *are*.

Second, this research appears to show that meaningfulness is, as a matter of fact, a *motivating* reason with respect to suicidal choice and action—that it plays a psychological role in how actual agents deliberate about whether to end their lives. But philosophers (and other reflective individuals) will want to know whether, and how, the meaningfulness of a person's life bears on her *justificatory* or normative reasons for continuing her life and, conversely, for hastening her death. In other words, does meaningfulness provide compelling rational grounds for ending (or continuing) one's life?

This chapter takes up the mantle of investigating the relationship between suicidal decision and meaningfulness in life, with an eye to ascertaining how the latter might provide justificatory reasons relevant to the former. If, as seems likely, suicidal thought or action is diminished by a sense of one's life being meaningful, and vice versa, then what notions of suicidal thought or action *and* of life's meaningfulness best make rational sense of this relation? Answering this question satisfactorily will require an exercise in seeking conceptual equilibrium, identifying those notions of suicidal thought or action and of life's meaningfulness that most convincingly vindicate the apparent rational relation between these.

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My objective is to demonstrate that meaningfulness provides reasons relevant to suicide that either cannot be reduced to the reasons of well-being that philosophers have typically used to analyse suicide decisions, or at least forms a distinct class of reasons within those that contribute to well-being. Most centrally, the decision to engage in suicide can be understood as a choice related to life's meaningfulness insofar as an individual can see no *point* in living through her anticipated future. The absence of current or anticipated meaningfulness can thus provide reasons to divest from one's future lifespan by shortening one's life, while the presence or expectation of meaningfulness can provide reasons to invest in one's future lifespan by continuing to live.

My discussion begins (in section 1) with a brief interrogation of how Albert Camus, one of the few philosophers to investigate the relationship between suicide and life's meaningfulness, understood their relation. I conclude that Camus's understanding errs insofar as his nihilism rests on an inflated conception of what is required to render a (p. 447) human life meaningful and implausibly implies that suicide, as a response to life's ostensible meaninglessness, is equally rational throughout the changing temporal circumstances of a human life. Section 2 renders more precise the ordinary conception of suicide as choosing to die, arguing that suicide is an act wherein a person alters the timing of her death, but from a prudential perspective, also evaluatively divests from her own future. In section 3, I advance a conception of meaningfulness of life, heavily indebted to Cheshire Calhoun (2018), in which meaningfulness is a function of whether a person finds her future worth investing her agency in. Section 4 unifies the findings of sections 2 and 3, proposing that choices regarding suicide are sometimes oriented around meaningfulness, where meaningfulness is measured by an individual's reasons for investing in her future. Section 5 argues that considerations of meaning form a discrete class of reasons relevant to the rationality of suicide that may stand apart from familiar considerations of well-being.

To forestall one crucial confusion: in considering whether meaningfulness bears on suicide's rationality, I set aside the vital question of the *morality* of suicide (Cholbi 2011, 39–69). Suicide is subject to multiple evaluative norms, and suicide that meets conditions of rationality does not necessarily meet the conditions of moral permissibility, or vice versa. Thus, whether suicide is rational does not exhaust the factors relevant to whether it ought to be pursued.

1. Camus on Suicide and Meaningfulness

Camus famously remarked that suicide is the only 'truly serious philosophical problem' (1955, 3). For Camus, the prospect of suicide becomes acute once we appreciate that life is essentially and unavoidably absurd, i.e. that human existence is meaningless at its core. No value, purpose, or endeavour, according to Camus, can lend our lives meaning, and the fact that we eventually die only makes a further mockery of all human efforts to live meaningfully. Our hope of leading meaningful lives is thus as futile as Sisyphus's endless struggle to push his rock to the top of the mountain. Every attempt to find meaning for our existence rolls back at us, so to speak. Although Camus saw suicide as one possi-

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ble response to the undeniable absurdity of our existence, he ultimately rejects suicide in favour of rebelling in the face of absurdity, thereby affirming our freedom. Suicide, in Camus's eyes, represents a capitulation to, rather than a triumph over, the universe's meaninglessness and indifference.

Camus deserves credit as one of the few philosophers to explicitly investigate the relation between suicide and meaningfulness in life.[1] Nevertheless, there are reasons (p. 448) to think that Camus himself gets their relation wrong. As he saw it, suicide acquires its practical gravity as a consequence of philosophical nihilism. For nihilists such as Camus, our lives are *necessarily* meaningless because there is nothing that answers to *the* meaning of life, no fact written into the nature of the universe or ordained by God to confer meaning upon *a* life, i.e. upon the life of any given individual. Perhaps Camus was correct on that score: From a wider cosmic or external perspective, a perspective outside our day-to-day experiences, his nihilism seems plausible because there are no transcendent facts about the universe to lend our lives the seriousness or gravity requisite for them to seem meaningful (Nagel 1986, 214). After all, an individual human life is but one of billions of such lives, a small and transient blip within the multibillion year history of the universe, and so when we 'zoom out' from our individual lives, they will invariably seem minute and insignificant (Fischer 2020, 16).

But one might reject Camus's nihilism because he subscribed to an overinflated understanding of what a meaningful human life requires. Specifically, his nihilism may reflect a kind of vanity, assuming our human lives can only be meaningful insofar as they are indispensable to the world's history. Perhaps lives can instead be meaningful, especially from within the internal perspectives of those whose lives they are, even if their meaningfulness disappears when viewed from a larger third-personal or timeless perspective (Bradley 2015, 416–417). It may, in other words, suffice for our lives to be meaningful that we be the right kind of protagonist within our own lives, even if it is impossible for us to be central to the story of the world as a whole.

Thus, we may reasonably doubt that our meaning-based reasons concerning suicide rest on anything like Camus-style nihilism. His position also has counterintuitive implications regarding judgements of meaningfulness in life and the reasons that bear on suicidal decision. For nihilists, the meaninglessness of our lives is a necessary truth, unrelated to the particular circumstances of individual lives. But this seems unlikely. Sisyphus's life may well be meaningless in Camus's terms, but it is difficult to swallow that (say) Nelson Mandela's life was *equally* meaningless, and all the more, that Mandela had reasons of the same kind or magnitude for suicide that Sisyphus has. Furthermore, Camus's nihilism implies that meaningfulness is invariant across our lifespans. After all, young Sisyphus pushing his rock up a hill is engaged in no less futile an endeavour than old Sisyphus; well-rested Sisyphus pushing his rock up a hill is engaged in no less futile an endeavour than weary Sisyphus; etc. But this too strikes me as an unlikely implication. Most actual human lives seem to oscillate in their meaningfulness or the prospects for meaningfulness, with meaningfulness rising or falling in response to various contingencies (our relationships, health, etc.). Nihilism seems to overlook how, because meaningfulness varies

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across and within lives, the question of whether facts about meaningfulness can matter to the justification of suicide will only be salient at *certain* points during the lives of *some* human beings.

Camus's understanding of the relation between suicide and meaningfulness thus seems questionable both in terms of the nature of the reasons that meaningfulness bears vis-à-vis suicide and their ubiquity. The reasons that meaningfulness provides are not cosmic and timeless, but local, personal, and temporally specific. But before filling in (p. 449) these reasons, we must work from the other side of the relation, clarifying the nature of suicidal decision.

2. Suicide, the Time of Death, and Time's Prudential Significance

Suicide is standardly defined as intentional self-killing, i.e. intentionally choosing one's own death (Cholbi 2011, 20–34; Hill 2011).[2] This definition is apt to mislead, however. If we possessed what philosophers have called *medical immortality*, suicide would amount to a choice to die. For medical immortals cannot die from aging, disease, or deterioration. But they can die from external causes (falling off a cliff or being mauled by a wild animal) or as a consequence of human agency, including their own (Fischer 2020, 95). For inherently mortal creatures like ourselves, though, death itself is *not* chosen. We will die, and the clock is ticking on our lives the moment ovum and sperm meet. Suicide does not therefore introduce death into the human condition. Rather, suicide is a choice to alter the *timing* of one's biological death, to wit, to knowingly act with the aim that one die earlier in time rather than later. Hence, just as saving a person's life prolongs it, suicide represents an attempt at foreshortening one's biological biography, hastening death and thus forgoing some quantum of lifespan that one could otherwise have expected to have. Note that the stretch of lived time a person forgoes need not be very extensive (a person with advanced stage cancer may engage in suicide and thereby forgo only a day, or even hours, of life). Nor need the stretch of lived time a person forgoes be imminent in time. Imagine that there exists a toxin whose ingestion invariably leads to a medical condition known to reduce lifespan, such as multiple sclerosis. A young adult who ingested such a toxin, aware of its tendency to reduce lifespan, is engaging in suicide inasmuch as she acts with the aim of reducing her lifespan, even though her actual death may not occur until much later.

These metaphysical claims are, I hope, uncontroversial. But time matters to our understanding of suicide not merely definitionally. Time also plays a distinctive part in prudential decision-making, one that (it turns out) will help illuminate how considerations of meaningfulness bear on the rationality of suicide.

Our lifespans are measured in time, and for mortal creatures like us, time (like most every other good) is finite. But time—and I have in mind here *lived* time, or time as we

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(p. 450) consciously experience it—occupies a special place among the resources we draw upon in trying to live good lives (Brown 1970).

For one, time has a special sort of value because we expend it in the course of every other pursuit. A two-week holiday costs money, plus two weeks of time. Getting a university education costs money and energy, as well as several years of time. So we are constantly expending time in the pursuit of other goods. Indeed, to commit to some pursuit is necessarily to commit some quantum of one's time to it. This makes time and the expenditure thereof relevant to all of our choices; for we must consider not only the wisdom of a given option in its own right, but also whether the time needed to successfully pursue an option is wisely spent thereby. The economics of time thus sits in a uniquely foundational place in our practical rationality, a penumbral 'balance sheet' that lurks in the background of all our choices and actions.

Furthermore, the human capacities for memory, imagination, etc., ensure that we know of these facts about time as a distinctive kind of resource. We are aware of ourselves as having personal pasts, and orient our intentions and choices toward a personal future. We can regret how we have spent durations of time now past, for instance, or look forward to future uses of our time. We live, then, in awareness of time's distinctive importance. In contrast, to the extent that non-human animals can be viewed as agents, their comparatively limited awareness of time, along with their presumed ignorance of the inevitability of their own deaths, ensures a kind of obliviousness to time unavailable to us human agents. Our experience of ourselves as agents is therefore greatly shaped by the temporal scarcity characteristic of human life and our knowledge thereof.

Of course, we *experience* different spans of time differently. For instance, our experience of time varies in pace: time flies when we are having fun, and seems to pass oh-so-slowly when we are bored or listless. But we must not confuse our first-personal sense of time's passage, whose pace can vary, with the passage of time, whose pace does not. Time itself passes steadily and unrelentingly, indifferent to our concerns. Can we nonetheless therefore hope for more time? In a sense, yes. We speak of medical treatments 'buying' a patient time, and we sometimes compensate others for their time in order that we may use our time differently, as when we hire another person to perform a task for us. Still, our relationship to time differs from our relationship to other scarce goods. Again, we expend our time at a constant rate. In extending or shortening our lifespans, we do not create or destroy time, in the way that we might create or destroy wealth, relationships, or other goods. For time is not a commodity in the ordinary sense; it cannot be manufactured, preserved, banked, or improved upon. At most, then, we can decide to try to be *present* for more or less time. This is why the question of suicide is so momentous: for mortal beings, ending one's life is final, a choice to relinquish one's remaining time that cannot be revisited.

These considerations underscore that the choice to engage in suicide is not simply a choice to change the timing of one's own death. From a prudential point of view, suicidal choice *concerns* time. Under the ordinary conditions of human life, we are evaluatively in-

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vested in our futures. We look forward to the future as the time when various pleasures may occur, commitments may be pursued, projects may be realized, and so forth. To end (p. 451) one's life prematurely, on the other hand, is to decide that one lacks sufficient reasons to be present for some future span of time. That future span of time is not a resource one wishes to exploit in the pursuit of one's other concerns. Just as every reason to continue living is a reason to expend some future time, any reason not to continue living is, *inter alia*, a reason not to expend some future time.

Thus, suicide represents not only a change in the timing of one's death. It also represents the relinquishing of a resource—time, or one's future—that, if one's suicide is rational at least, one has judged it is not worth trying to benefit from. Suicide is therefore an act of *temporal divestment*, an act wherein a person opts to forgo biological existence and in so doing gives evidence of having determined that her future time lacks sufficient value to warrant her continuing to live to be present for it.

Pivoting, then, to address meaningfulness explicitly: if suicide represents a temporal divestment, then whatever considerations speak in favour of maintaining one's investment in the future or divesting from it could be among the reasons for (or against) suicide. And if those considerations in turn are considerations pertaining to life's meaningfulness, then in at least some cases, the decision to engage in, or to forgo, suicide will be a decision concerning the meaningfulness of one's life. Let us now consider a recent account of meaning in life that appears to vindicate these claims.

3. Life's Meaning and the Expenditure of Time

Cheshire Calhoun (2018, 46) has recently proposed that one's life is meaningful to the extent that one's time is expended on 'ends that, in your best judgment, you take yourself to have reason to value for their own sake and thus to expend your life's time on'. How we expend our time, according to Calhoun, thus determines how meaningful our lives are. She observes that our time expenditures vary with respect to their relationship to those ends we pursue for their own sake. Some time expenditures bear essentially no relationship to such ends. For instance, some of our time is spent conforming to various norms (moral or legal, norms of etiquette, etc.). Other parcels of time are devoted to what Calhoun calls 'filler spending', i.e. 'what we do while waiting, or when we're too tired or ill or unmotivated to do much of anything else' (2018, 15). Filler-time expenditures amount to passing the time, in a literal sense: in the absence of some more valuable activity being available to engage in, we doodle, scour social media, bend and unbend paper clips, etc. What Calhoun terms 'entailed' time expenditures are those concerned with doing those activities that are instrumental to those ends we value for our own sake (commuting to a job, for instance).

But most centrally for Calhoun, 'primary' time expenditures are dedicated to those ends and activities we find worth pursuing for their own sakes, those ends and activities that constitute our 'normative outlook'. Calhoun does not seem to think that the other (p. 452) three categories of time expenditure are value*less:* norm expenditures matter inasmuch

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as it matters that we be morally decent, law abiding, or polite. Filler expenditures can be amusing and help us endure stretches of time that would otherwise be pure tedium. And entailed expenditures help us realize the pursuit of what is valuable for its own sake. But Calhoun associates meaningfulness in particular with primary time expenditures: the meaningfulness of one's life, on her view, is measured by the amount of one's time dedicated to those ends one finds valuable for one's own sake (Calhoun 2018, 18).

A thorough examination of Calhoun's view of life's meaningfulness cannot be undertaken here, and I do not necessarily intend to endorse every detail of her view. My purpose here is not to systematically evaluate rival conceptions of meaningfulness in life, but to identify how meaningfulness in life relates to suicidal decision-making. Let us now consider how a Calhoun-like view of meaningfulness fares on that score.

4. Suicide and Reasons of Meaningfulness

Calhoun emphasizes that her understanding of meaningfulness, unlike most all others, reflects the centrality of time to living a meaningful life. The question of meaning, she argues, cannot be 'entirely a question of how valuable one's projects are'. Some projects, while valuable enough to contribute a great deal to the meaningfulness of a person's life, are highly time-consuming. Others may contribute only marginally to a life's meaningfulness but involve more modest time expenditures. As noted earlier, selecting among such projects must therefore take into account the necessity of budgeting time, for without attention to the relevant magnitudes of time expenditure, a person may invest her time badly and end up with a faulty prioritization among possible projects. Thus, because our pursuit of meaning occurs within a 'finite life', we will, according to Calhoun, need to evaluate projects not only in their own right but in light of the claims such projects make on our time, a resource that (again) has a foundational role in human agency (2018, 39).

Suicide, we have noted, is a decision wherein an individual opts to shorten her biological future via death. Such a decision amounts to divesting oneself from one's future, renouncing or forgoing a resource—time—that has a fundamental role in human personhood or agency. In Calhoun-like terms, a person who rationally opts for suicide on grounds of meaninglessness has concluded that there is not sufficient value in one's present or future time to merit committing to living through additional time, to manage that time, etc. Such a person is not deciding to invest her time *badly*; she has instead lost whatever grounds she might once have had for investing *at all*. She cannot find a rational basis for expecting that her future will accommodate those primary time expenditures (again, those expenditures of time immersed in ends or activities a person values for their own sake) that accord her life meaning. Such a conclusion is compatible (p. 453) with an agent finding other kinds of value in her future expenditures of time. She may well imagine that her future will involve filled time, dedicated merely to passing time that cannot be expended other ways, or to time whose expenditure allows us to fulfil moral or social norms. What the suicidal person driven by meaninglessness cannot do is muster sufficient hope to think that her future time is worth being present for. As Calhoun writes (2018, 1),

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> as evaluators who also live through time, we have to decide not just what we value but also how committed we are to our future containing that value, and thus how much time we are willing to invest in pursuing our aims in the face of obstacles and setbacks that push the realization of our aims into a remoter future. Moreover, one of our aims as temporal evaluators is to spend time with what we value.

In the case of rational suicide motivated by meaninglessness, an individual has concluded, with good reason, that the answer to how much time she is willing to invest in pursuing her aims in the face of obstacles and setbacks, etc., is none—or at least, *no more*. She has lost what Calhoun calls 'basal hopefulness', the hope not for 'this or that particular future occurrence, but a more basic, globally motivating interest in the future' (2018, 52).

Calhoun's account of meaningfulness draws upon rich and underappreciated interconnections between temporality, agency, and selfhood. We are future-oriented agents because the future anchors our desires, goals, and plans; while the past and present no doubt shape what ends we value for their own sake, the future is 'where', so to speak, the choices and actions we undertake will bear fruit with respect to those ends. Under ordinary circumstances, we imaginatively project ourselves into futures in which we expect to retain those attitudes toward ends wherein we value them for their own sake (Calhoun 2018, 49). In the case of rational suicide motivated by meaninglessness, no such projection appears rationally well-founded. What Calhoun calls the future's 'content'—not 'the way the future will actually turn out' but 'the future as we imagine, anticipate, predict, assume, or sense it will be'—does not, from that standpoint, warrant one's investment.

Fortunately, for most human agents for most all of their lives, the future 'stretches out ahead' as a valued resource 'in which to do things'. But for all agents, future time is also a 'burden, as we will have to decide what to do with the immediate, mediate, and long-range parts of that lifetime' (Calhoun 2018, 8). When rationally motivated by meaninglessness, suicide, I propose, rests on the warranted judgment that one's future time has become irremediably or overarchingly burdensome. For the characteristic activity of agency, to wit, deliberation, cannot instantiate its purpose in a future world inhospitable to its worthwhile or effective exercise. A rationally suicidal individual may thus find reason to divest from her future so as to divest from that agency, and in divesting from that agency she divests from the continued existence of her biological self. In deciding not to use future time on oneself, an agent in effect decides not to use herself up (2018, 21). Her suicide is a final act of deliberation wherein she welcomes rather than spurns (p. 454) the death that will invariably lead to the destruction of that self and her agency. Note that her suicide may or may not preserve whatever meaningfulness her life *had*. Suicide is a choice concerning the timing of one's death, and judgements about that matter are independent of whether one's *life* is or has been meaningful (or good, desirable, etc.) on balance. Indeed, suicide may be rational even if a person's life has been meaningful as a whole, or irrational because a person stands to live a more meaningful life by continuing to exist even when her life is itself *not* meaningful (Benatar 2017, 190–194). For suicide's

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rationality, so far as considerations of meaningfulness go, flows from the belief, at least when justified, that no further meaningfulness is to be had by living further.

How might a person come to view her future as so disenchanted as to merit her divestment from it by means of suicide? To lead lives as agents, Calhoun argues, we must be able to take interest in a future in which 'exercising our agential capacities makes sense', and their making sense depends on what she calls 'background frames of agency' (2018, 52–53) that sustain our interest in exercising our agency to shape our futures. One background frame is the belief that *our* choices and actions can be instrumentally effective in attaining those ends we care about for their own sake. To learn that one's ends cannot be attained, that one's ends will increasingly be attained through the exercise of agency not one's own, that the solution as to how to attain some end is not forthcoming, or that one's efforts to implement one's plans will not realize one's ends can be profoundly demoralizing, inducing the kind of helplessness, hopelessness, or haplessness associated with suicidal thinking (Lester 1998). Another background frame Calhoun identifies is confidence that we will not succumb to 'disastrous misfortune or indecent harm' (2018, 66). To know that one's entire civilization is under threat (Scheffler 2013, 18–23) or that one's future will be suffused with pain so grotesque as to hamper any deliberation about or attention to one's ends (Velleman 1999, 618) undermines the viability of exercising one's agency in the pursuit of one's ends. But the most central of these background frames is simply finding ends worth pursuing for their own sake. The inability to identify any such ends need not occur out of frustration or disillusionment. Indeed, it may occur because all the ends one values have largely been realized, as seems to be the case for those who desire suicide because they are 'tired of life' or believe their lives are 'complete' (van Wijngaarden, Goossensen, and Leget 2018).

An intimate connection may thus exist between suicidal choice and action, on the one hand, and meaningfulness in life, on the other. In this section, I have focused on how reasons related to meaningfulness, understood as Calhoun does in terms of having grounds for investing oneself and one's agency in the future, may provide for reasons *for* suicide. But as we saw in section 1, the relation in question also holds when individuals find their lives to be meaningful, with meaningfulness serving to mitigate or protect against suicidal risks rooted in other causes. My analysis readily accommodates this conclusion: suicide is less rational to the extent that an agent correctly views her future as a time worth investing herself and her agency in. And of course, as meaning-seeking creatures, human beings are remarkably resilient and resourceful in finding ends in which to invest one's future time and agency and thereby keeping suicidal ideation at bay. As Frankl emphasizes, even in the midst of horrific suffering, some individuals (p. 455) manage to identify and engage with future goals, however modest, that foster a sense of their lives as meaningful (Frankl 1992, 79–82, 116–117).

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5. Well-being and Reasons of Meaningfulness

In this final substantive section, I will clarify how reasons of meaningfulness bear on suicidal decision, with special attention to how such reasons relate to reasons rooted in well-being.

As I have depicted it, meaningfulness is not a 'ground level' input in the rational appraisal of suicide. That one's future is not worth investing in is a *conclusion* reached by considering one's ends, the desirability of a future oriented toward their pursuit, one's hopes for success in attaining them, etc. Meaningfulness thus functions as a *summative*, second-order reason for or against suicide: for in deciding whether to engage in suicide, a person is deciding whether her future self is worth investing in, a decision that in turn rests on more basic judgements about whether her future time expenditures can be oriented around those ends she finds intrinsically worthwhile.

Philosophers have typically analysed the rationality of suicide in terms of well-being or happiness, in terms of whether a person's prematurely ending her life would make for a better or worse life on balance (Graber 1981; Pabst Battin 1996, 115; Cholbi 2011, 90–97). Of course, if we treat the notion of 'well-being' broadly enough so as to encompass every fact that makes one's life go well, then it may well be trivially true that reasons of meaningfulness pertaining to suicidal decision are in fact reasons of well-being. And indeed, many of the facts that inform suicidal decision oriented around meaningfulness will also be among the facts that inform suicidal decision oriented around well-being. Most centrally, pursuing and realizing those ends we value for their own sake tends to make our lives better, to contribute positively to well-being. Hence, meaningfulness—understood in terms of whether one can envision a future worth investing oneself and one's agency in—may turn out to be one among many factors that contribute to well-being, and in deliberating about suicide in terms of meaningfulness, an individual is deliberating with a focus on one among several ingredients of well-being.

However, some philosophers have thought that meaningfulness is a distinct value from well-being inasmuch as a meaningful life need not be happy, or vice versa (Metz 2013, 5; Wolf 2010, 3). I offer no refutation of the thesis that well-being incorporates meaningfulness, but the relation that I suggest holds between suicidal decision and meaningfulness speaks against it.

For one, a person's future may be good for her in various ways without being meaningful in the way I have sketched. A person may have grounds to expect her future to be filled with a large number of pleasant or amusing experiences whose acquisition does not involve any exercise of her agency (for instance, the diminishment of discomfort (p. 456) that occurs as our food is digested). Her future time is valuable to her as a resource that makes possible greater well-being, but if none of those facts that make it valuable is an end that engages her agency, she may well find suicide more compelling because that future, however amiable, lacks meaningfulness. Conversely, a person's future could be filled with suffering that, if endured, would make her life worse overall as measured by well-be-

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ing, but allow her to attain ends she judges are worth investing her time and agency in. A person with a painful terminal illness may strive to continue living in order to achieve extant ends that confer meaningfulness on her life (atoning for past wrongs, for instance). In other cases, undergoing suffering may be a necessary means to achieve ends that confer meaningfulness. (Imagine a Marie Curie–like figure, who knowingly exposes herself to life-threatening substances in the course of pursuing scientific or medical breakthroughs.) Self-sacrifice offers a still more extreme example: in a classic 'lifeboat scenario', an altruistic person may choose to sacrifice their life, thereby placing a limit of the overall well-being their life contains, in order to save others. Her death enhances her life's meaningfulness, not by rendering her future more meaningful by enabling her to attain ends she already values. (Metz 2014, 103). She divests from her future in order to enhance the meaningfulness of her life to that point, but thereby forgoes future opportunities for additional meaningfulness. Such examples suggest that reasons of meaningfulness and reasons of well-being are distinct inasmuch as they can push in opposite directions with respect to the rationality of ending one's life. At the very least, these two sets of reasons are not co-extensive.

Phenomenologically, meaninglessness also seems to register differently from negative well-being. Suicide oriented around meaningfulness is rationalized not by the agent's belief that her future is not worth investing in because it will be *bad* but because it will, so far as her agency goes, have no *point*. Such an agent may retain *conditional* desires, desires predicated upon her continuing to live (desires not to undergo pain, for instance). But the absence of *categorical* desires to 'propel' her into the future and justify her continued existence *qua* agent (Williams 1973, 85–88) will represent, for many agents, a world in which her 'deepest self' has no place (Calhoun 2018, 52). She may well retain her powers of rational agency, but she will suffer from a sense that such powers are superfluous, once-useful appendages that lie dormant, something akin to a screwdriver in a world full of nails. Such a state is likely to be profoundly disorienting, unsettling, or dispiriting for many agents. Meanwhile, time—the resource necessarily expended in our exercises of agency—will continue to pass for such agents without being expended (in Calhoun's sense) in meaningful ways by such an agent. Such time will inevitably feel like time spent in opposition to one's agency or will.

An agent confronting such meaninglessness suffers a profound sense of loss, I would venture, and so has reason not to endure that stretch of life in which such loss is evident to her. It is this state that many of those who contemplate assisted suicide near the end of life seek to avoid. Talk of 'dignity' is notoriously slippery, but many individuals contemplating assisted suicide who report concern about the loss of dignity near the end of life explicate that concern in terms of the lack of control over their circumstances, the inability to exercise their autonomy in efficacious ways, and alienation from their (p. 457) identities (Rodríguez-Prat et al. 2016). Such fears echo the link between selfhood, agency, and time that Calhoun suggests undergirds living meaningfully.

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Of course, those who believe meaningfulness is an element of well-being may respond that, because this condition of finding one's own agency superfluous *feels* bad, it represents a liability against one's overall well-being. Alternatively, perhaps such a condition represents a kind of *harm*, a state of unwilled passivity in which a person must endure the thwarting not of the exercise of their wills but of lacking a context in which exercising those wills can matter (Shiffrin 2012, 26–27). Again, I have no decisive argument against those who would incorporate meaningfulness into well-being such that the reasons that, as I have argued here, bear on the rationality of suicide are in fact reasons of well-being. But such reasons at least fit somewhat uncomfortably under the banner of well-being. For agents evaluating whether their futures are meaningful enough to justify continuing to live are not evaluating whether their futures will be good or evil *simpliciter* but whether the rational pursuit of good and evil will even be intelligible in their future lives.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that understanding suicidal decision as temporal divestment and understanding meaningfulness in life in terms of whether a person has grounds for temporally investing their agency in the future help explain how the latter could provide practical reasons relevant to the former. While the notion of meaningfulness evoked here, much indebted to Calhoun, is controversial, its potential for making sense of how meaningfulness can provide reasons relevant to suicidal decision is a mark in its favour. Partisans of other philosophical theories of life's meaningfulness should thus attempt to show how their theories can make sense of the claim, vindicated both intuitively and by empirical research, that meaningfulness makes a difference to the rationality of suicide.

In making the case for meaningfulness's relevance to the rationality of suicide, I have not addressed the very considerable obstacles we face in determining, in any given case, whether a person's suicide is or would be rational for her. Judgements about whether one's future is worth investing in can err in many ways. For instance, a person can err about what ends she may find worthy of pursuit, either currently or in the future; about whether the pursuit of those ends would justify her investing her agency in the future; or about how much time she would otherwise have in her lifetime if she did not opt for suicide. Such judgements may also be distorted by psychological conditions such as depression, which tend to lead individuals to focus emotionally on the present and discount or distort their own futures (Brandt 1975, 70–71). Hence, my confidence that I have identified the logical conditions for a suicide to be rational in light of considerations of meaningfulness is not matched by a similar confidence that we can utilize these conditions in an epistemically sound way. Indeed, in my estimation, this reflects how (p. 458) identifying what makes suicide rational is generally easier than identifying its rationality in particular cases (Kagan 2012, 336–344).

These epistemic concerns notwithstanding, I hope also to have shown that the fact that suicide is available to us is a fact we should be grateful for inasmuch as it enables us to craft lives of meaningfulness. For imagine a twist on medical immortality, call it *purely*

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medical mortality, in which we were impervious to death via human agency, whether suicide or homicide, and could only die of non-agential, 'natural' causes. That the choice to end our lives would not be available to us would be a clear drawback of such a condition inasmuch as it puts an important avenue by which to craft more meaningful lives outside of our reach.[3]

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Notes:

([1]) The relation has been explored more extensively in connection with assisted dying. See Little (1999); Varelius (2013 and 2016).

([2]) Though for a recent dissenting view, see Dowie (2020). There is also the further complication that, if human beings enjoy an afterlife or if our personhood depends on our occupying a certain social role rather than on the continued existence of our subjective consciousness, then acts of self-killing end our biological lives but do not cause us to die, i.e. to no longer exist (Schechtman 2014, 110–118, 147–150; Stokes 2019, 768–769).

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