

# Meaningfulness

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## 1. Introduction

When he loses his brother, Konstantin Levin, the true hero of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, faces a kind of existential crisis:

From that moment when, at the sight of his beloved brother dying, Levin had looked at the questions of life and death for the first time through those new [atheist] convictions [...] he had been horrified, not so much at death as at life without the slightest knowledge of whence it came, wherefore, why, and what it was. ... 'Without knowing what I am and why I'm here, it is impossible for me to live. And I cannot know that, therefore I cannot live,' Levin would say to himself. [...] And, happy in his family life, a healthy man, Levin was several times so close to suicide that he hid a rope lest he hang himself with it, and was afraid to go about with a rifle lest he shoot himself. (Tolstoy 1877/2001, 528, 530)

Levin is a respected, wealthy and hardworking landowner, and a proud father married to a beautiful and insightful woman who loves him deeply. He seems to have it all. Yet he worries that it is all for nothing. It is the *meaningfulness* of his life that is the object of his concern. In idle moments, he asks himself about the point of it all – is there sufficient reason for him to go on living and doing the things he does, or is it all the same if he ceases to exist now rather than a little while later, as he inevitably will?

These are hard questions that many of us with the luxury of reflection must face from time to time. Philosophical theories of meaning in life are attempts to articulate systematically what it would take for our lives to have a point or purpose. Although they are often pursued separately, they seem to be at least closely related to, if not a species of, theories of well-being. Other things being equal, it seems to be in our self-interest to lead a more rather than less meaningful life. Meaningfulness appears to be a central aspect of a life

worth living – it seems to be among the things we rationally want for those we care about for their own sake. Indeed, for someone like Tolstoy, life is not worth living without meaning, even if it contains happiness, health, and other putative intrinsic goods.

I will begin this chapter a brief look at the concept of meaningfulness or meaning in life in Section 2. Sections 3 to 5 discuss the three leading types of account of what makes life meaningful: supernaturalism, subjectivist naturalism, and objectivist naturalism. It turns out that the main dividing issues concern the role and nature of value. Supernaturalists and objectivist naturalists believe that engagement with objective value is necessary for meaning in life, while subjectivists deny this. Supernaturalists believe, roughly, that God's existence is necessary for the right kind of objective value and the right kind of relation to it, while objectivist naturalists deny these claims. Among objectivist naturalists, the key debates concern the nature and role of subjective engagement with objective value, and the specific kind of objective value needed for meaningfulness.

Section 6 addresses the precise relationship between meaning and well-being, in particular the claim that meaning in life is a distinct kind of value from both well-being and morality. Section 7 turns briefly to empirical research on meaningfulness, and argues that its proper object is people's finding their lives meaningful. This is an important topic, since sense of meaningfulness is plausibly important for happiness. Meaning itself, however, remains beyond empirical investigation, since it is one thing for someone to find her life meaningful and another for it to *be* meaningful.

## **2. What Is Meaning In Life?**

Before looking at accounts of what makes life meaningful, it is important to get clear on just what the question is that they're trying to answer – what it is that we say when we say that someone's life is meaningful, or more meaningful than another's. I believe the best way to

approach this question is to start with the kind of existential concern that held Levin in its grip. ‘Meaning’, after all, is a word with many senses, some of which have nothing to do with such concerns. Our lives don’t have meaning in the way that linguistic items do, for example – they don’t have sense or reference. And while words are either meaningful or not, life can be more or less meaningful (Kauppinen 2012, 353–354).

The object of the concern for meaningfulness is evidently something that is desirable or good, indeed desirable for its own sake. We worry that our lives lack a fundamental feature that is needed to make it worthwhile. Yet as Tolstoy nicely points out, meaning is distinct from other final goods, such as happiness. It is too broad to say, as Kai Nielsen does, that questions about meaning are questions about “what ends – if any – are worthy of attainment” (Nielsen 1981, 240). In this respect, analyses that maintain meaningfulness is a matter of transcending our own limits and connecting to something larger (Nozick 1981) are superior, since they point to a distinct kind of putative good. But it is unclear just what “transcendence” and “connection” mean here. In any case, Nozick’s view may be best understood as an account of what makes a life meaningful, not of what it is for life to be meaningful.

Perhaps it is better, then, to take a different tack. Let us begin with the *valuing attitudes* that we have towards highly meaningful lives. Paradigms of meaning, such as Hannah Arendt or Marie Curie or Mary Robinson, are objects of admiration, esteem, and imitation, and sources of inspiration and elevation. If we’re lucky, we also have our own experiences of finding life meaningful. They seem to involve a mix of related first-personal attitudes: a kind of pride in what we’ve done (call it *agential* pride to distinguish it from, say, pride in one’s country), satisfaction with and even excitement about what we’re doing, confident hope for the future. Supposing that it is correct that to *find* life meaningful is to

have such attitudes, it is plausible that for a life to *be* meaningful is for such attitudes to be *fitting* or *correct* towards it (Metz 2001, Kauppinen forthcoming a).

Among other things, this analysis of the concept of meaningfulness accounts for the connection between meaninglessness and absurdity. As Thomas Nagel observes, “in ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” (Nagel 1971, 718). If our lives are bound to be meaningless, a kind of absurdity marks all of our pursuits. On the present analysis, this amounts to the claim that there is a conspicuous discrepancy between our thinking that what we do is worthy of pride and admiration and the reality that nothing is. One kind of worry about meaning, then, is that pride in anything we do is as absurd as a fool’s pride in having received a lot of ‘likes’ on social media for building a seven-foot tower out of beer cans.

For short, then, it seems that when we say that someone’s life is meaningful or want our own lives to be such, what we say or want is that certain positive attitudes are fitting towards it. Consequently, asking what makes our lives meaningful amounts to asking what makes agential pride, admiration, and elevation fitting. How can we go about answering such a question? The *bottom-up method*, as I like to think of it, is to start with exemplars of meaningfulness – people whose lives it is fitting to admire and be elevated by – and asking what it is that they have to a greater degree than the rest of us. The *top-down method* is to start with the nature of attitudes of pride and admiration and asking what would make them fitting. For example, agential pride seems to involve the thought that we’re responsible for something excellent, so it cannot be fitting without some display of excellence. If we’re lucky, the two lines of inquiry will converge.

### **3. Objectivist Accounts of Meaning: Supernaturalism**

For *supernaturalist* views, the source or condition of meaning in life is some entity beyond the natural world (roughly, the world studied by science), such as God or an immortal soul. In this section, I will focus on God-centered views. Conceptions of God differ between and within religions, but the potentially relevant characteristics here include omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, timelessness, necessity, and being the creator of the world.

According to *divine purpose* accounts, what makes life meaningful is fulfilling God's purpose (for me or for human beings in general). One line of argument for this is that without a cosmos that is "teleologically structured" by God (Cottingham 2011, 305), our lives are random and accidental. As William Lane Craig puts it, without God, our existence has no purpose, because it is the result of "blind interaction of chance and necessity" (Craig 1994, 45). Since what is accidental is not purposeful, a life that's the outcome of blind natural processes will be meaningless. One big problem with this argument is that even if our *existence* has no purpose in this sense, it doesn't follow that our *lives*, comprised of actions and experiences, are meaningless. Indeed, mere existence doesn't seem to be a good candidate for meaningfulness – it's not the sort of thing we're responsible for. Perhaps there is a gap here between meaning *of* life in one traditional sense and meaning *in* life, where the latter has to do with whether our *actions* have a point. The latter, it seems, is not ruled out if life in general and our own existence is accidental in the sense of being a product of natural processes.

Why, then, would fulfilling divine purpose be either necessary or sufficient for meaningful living? When it comes to sufficiency, the idea seems to be that our lives have purpose when they fit into a larger whole, which is itself purposeful, somewhat like a part in a machine has a purpose when it is necessary to make the whole function properly. It is certainly intelligible that pride is sometimes warranted when we have done something that furthers a larger project, such as eradicating a disease. But unless the whole scheme is

worthwhile, playing one's part in it is ultimately pointless. In *Anna Karenina*, Levin's crisis begins when he realizes that "for every man and for himself nothing lay ahead but suffering, death and eternal oblivion" (535). All traces of whatever we do for other or for ourselves will eventually disappear – indeed, from a cosmic perspective, they're a mere flash in a pan, and in that sense, at least, entirely futile. This is where divine purpose might be thought to be necessary. God, one may think, has assigned a purpose for the whole universe in creating it, whether we know what it is or not. Religious believers typically think that revelation tells us what our own role is, at least – what we must and must not do to play our part. When we do so, we advance God's plan for the whole cosmos, far beyond the limits of humanity.

One telling objection to the sufficiency of doing God's work is that not just *any* divine purpose would do – the heroism of those who sacrificed themselves for humanity would only be comical if God's plan was to raise us "to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh" (Nagel 1971, 721). The theistic response is that an omnibenevolent creator would not have such a plan for us. God wants the best for Her creatures, so our role is to do the morally right thing. As Tolstoy's Levin puts it, "In place of each of the Church's beliefs there could be put the belief in serving the good instead of one's needs" (Tolstoy 1877/2001, 537). But this leads directly to a challenge to the necessity thesis: if what gives meaning to our lives is doing the right thing, what does God have to do with it?

At this point, theists like John Cottingham (2003) argue that God is necessary for an objective morality, and objective value in general. The shape of the argument is as follows:

*The Value Argument for Divine Purpose Theory*

1. Engaging with objective value is necessary for meaning in life. (Value Connection)
2. The existence of God is necessary for objective value.
3. Hence, the existence of God is necessary for meaning in life.

Suppose that Value Connection is true. In that case, it is the second premise that is crucial. Here the debate becomes metaethical. And the ground is not favourable for the theist. After all, very few contemporary metaethicists believe that objective morality (or value in general) depends on God. Indeed, it is common to believe that objective morality *couldn't* depend on God's will, since such a will would either be unconstrained by independent moral truths (in which case it would be ultimately capricious and unauthoritative) or it would be constrained by independent moral truths, in which case such truths would obviously not require God for their existence. Varieties of this Euthyphro argument (named after the Platonic dialogue where it was first introduced to the canon) have been influential in convincing most metaethicists that premise 2 is false.

In short, while it is plausible that playing one's part in fulfilling a loving God's purpose for the cosmos would *suffice* to make one's life meaningful, it is hard to see why it would be *necessary* for meaningfulness, if there is some kind of objective value without God.

#### **4. Subjectivist Accounts of Meaning**

The key argument for Divine Purpose Theory involved Value Connection, the thesis that objective value is necessary for meaning in life. This assumption is not universally accepted. *Subjectivists* about meaning hold that objective value is not necessary or sufficient for meaning. Instead, our lives are meaningful when we invest them with meaning – when we in some suitable way *subjectively endorse* what we do, whatever it is. As Harry Frankfurt puts it, “Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved” (Frankfurt 2002, 250). On this picture, the image of *meaningless* existence is one in which our heart is not in what we

do – we go through the motions, lose ourselves in the crowd, feel alienated from and bored with what we do.

A key motivation for subjectivism is belief in the possibility of meaning combined with skepticism about objective value. Clearly, if there is to be meaning in a world without objective value, it has to come somehow from within. However, defenders of Value Connection may well be willing to bite the bullet and say that if there is no objective value, our lives are indeed bound to be meaningless and absurd. And they have a strong case to make, for it is easy to come up with examples of activity that remains intuitively meaningless in spite of subjective endorsement: making handwritten copies of *War and Peace* (Wolf 2010, 16), maintaining 3,732 hairs on one's head (Taylor 1992, 36), or lining up balls of torn newspaper in neat rows (Cottingham 2003, 21). Such activities seem no less pointless for being subjectively endorsed – our response isn't to be glad for someone whose life is organized around such activity, but perhaps to feel pity for them.

Perhaps the most famous example of a meaningless life is found in the Greek legend of Sisyphus, who was condemned by the Gods to repeat eternally the hard toil of rolling a rock up a mountain, until it reaches the crest and rolls down to the valley again, at which point the cycle begins anew. Now, imagine that Sisyphus absolutely *loves* pushing a rock up the hill until it rolls down, and wants to do nothing else. Does this suffice to make his activity meaningful? That is highly implausible. This conclusion is reinforced if we think about what finding life meaningful actually amounts to. The relevant kind of subjective endorsement is not just wanting to do what you do, but rather, as suggested in Section 1, taking pride in what one does or feeling elevated by it. And it is highly doubtful that everything anyone actually takes pride in is worthy of pride.

In response, a subjectivist may want to distinguish between objective meaningfulness and meaningfulness *for* someone. That is the line that Richard Taylor (1970/2000) takes.

Taylor believes that the legend of Sisyphus is an apt image of our lives: none of our achievements is worthwhile beyond our own interest in them or lasts for long – we strive for the sake of more striving, the main difference from Sisyphus being that it is our children and their children who continue the toil into the indefinite future (24–25). But were the Gods to mercifully endow Sisyphus with “a compulsive impulse to roll stones”, as we are endowed with a desire to do the ephemeral things that comprise our lives, Taylor maintains that “although his life would in no way be changed, it would nevertheless have a meaning for him” (26).

While this sort of response may have some appeal, it amounts to changing the topic. When we ask what it would take to make life meaningful, we’re not asking what it is to *find* life meaningful. That’s all that life’s being meaningful *for* someone amounts to. Instead, we’re asking when, if ever, it is *fitting* for someone to find her life meaningful – when it actually *is* meaningful rather than just *appearing* to be such. Since it is a genuine possibility that someone is mistaken on this score – we’re not infallible judges of meaningfulness of our lives – there is a gap between reality and appearance here. The kind of subjectivism that Taylor defends thus collapses into skepticism about genuine meaningfulness. While it may be better for us to find our lives meaningful rather than meaningless, that’s not because it makes them good in some special way, but just because other things being equal, it is better for us to feel good rather than feel bad.

## **5. Objectivist Accounts of Meaning: Naturalism**

In the two previous sections, I’ve pointed to some problems for supernaturalist and subjectivist accounts of meaningfulness. It is thus unsurprising that the most common kind of view of meaning in life these days is both *objectivist* and *naturalist*. For objectivist naturalists, roughly, our lives are meaningful to the extent we engage with objective value –

the true, the good, or the beautiful. What makes the views naturalist is commitment to some metaethical view that endorses the existence of objective value without supernatural entities. But what exactly is engagement with objective value? This section will discuss four forms of objectivist naturalism – Meaning Consequentialism, the Mixed View, the Teleological View, and Fundamentality Theory – and, briefly, issues related to meaningfulness and time.

According to *Meaning Consequentialism*, all that matters for the meaningfulness of one's life are the effects that one's actions have on the realization of objective value in the world, impersonally considered. Crudely, the more you improve the world, the more meaningful your life is. On utilitarian versions, betterness is understood in terms of welfare, so activities that make life meaningful are those that increase welfare. As Irving Singer puts it, "We attain and feel our significance in the world when we create, and act for, ideals that may originate in self-interest but ultimately benefit others....The greater the benefit to the greater number of lives, the greater the significance of our own" (2006, 115, 117). This simple view is at least initially appealing. It seems that many people whose lives we regard as particularly meaningful, such as Martin Luther King or Abraham Lincoln, really did act in ways that had a positive impact on the welfare of many others. Yet it is deeply implausible that meaning is proportional to contributions to *welfare* alone, as the utilitarian variant has it. Scientific or artistic achievement seems to contribute to meaning regardless of its contribution to welfare, nor is morality just about promoting welfare, but plausibly also about justice and respecting rights. This motivates at least moving to a broader consequentialist view that counts the promotion of non-welfare values as well.

The core problem of pure consequentialist views is that it seems to matter for meaning just *how* we promote objective value. First, we may do good *unintentionally*. Susan Wolf observes that it wouldn't contribute to the meaning of Sisyphus's life, were his rock-rolling, unbeknownst to him, to scare away vultures that would otherwise terrorize a nearby

community (Wolf 2010, 21). (Consider: would we admire or be inspired by Sisyphus in this scenario?) It seems that promotion of value must be suitably connected to our goals for it to contribute to meaning. Second, as Thaddeus Metz (2013) emphasizes, the extent to which we make use of our capacities in promoting the good makes a difference. If there existed what Robert Nozick (1974) called a ‘result machine’ that can be easily programmed to bring about any consequence, anyone with an access to it could bring about world peace in a matter of seconds. This would be a very valuable outcome, no doubt – but it would hardly suffice to make the button-pusher’s life extremely meaningful. After all, anyone else might easily have done the same. Certainly, bringing about the valuable outcome with the push of a button wouldn’t contribute as much to the meaningfulness of her life as bringing it about after years of dedicated effort requiring every last inch of her abilities.

These problems for Meaning Consequentialism suggest that meaning in life has also a subjective component. According to what I’ll call *Mixed Views*, meaningfulness requires not only contributing to the realization of some objective value, but also finding one’s life meaningful. The best-known view of this type is defended by Susan Wolf (1997, 2010). She says that meaning arises from “actively engaging in projects of objective worth” (2010, 26) or when “subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (1997, 221). Wolf characterizes subjective attraction as loving, or being gripped or excited or fulfilled by an activity. She regards these as ways of finding what one does meaningful (2010, 22).

According to her,

People who do valuable work but who cannot identify or take pride in what they are doing – the alienated housewife, the conscripted soldier, the assembly line worker, for example – may know that what they are doing is valuable, yet reasonably feel that their lives lack something that might be referred to as meaning. (2010, 21)

Consequently, Wolf believes that “If one’s involvement brings no such reward [finding one’s life fulfilling] [...] it is unclear that it contributes to meaning in one’s life at all.” (2010,

22) On the objective side, Wolf emphasizes the plurality of worthwhile projects, which go beyond morality to maintaining relationships, art, conservation of nature, and developing an excellence, to mention just a few things. What they have in common is just that they have enough value beyond being pleasant or interesting or fulfilling to the agent herself to merit serious investment of time and effort (2010, 37–38). She also observes that it is not enough to *try* to do something objectively valuable, but to actually *succeed* in doing so.

The objections to Meaning Consequentialism do suggest that some subjective element is necessary, as the Mixed View maintains. But does it have to amount to finding one's life meaningful? That is dubious. Suppose that Mahatma Gandhi didn't love what he did – imagine that instead of being excited by the nonviolent struggle for independence, he was bored by it. As long as he nevertheless aimed to do as he did – it wasn't just an unintended side effect – and exercised his human capacities to a high degree bring it about, he was sufficiently engaged with the good of peaceful resistance for successful pursuit to contribute to meaning in her life. On this kind of *Teleological View*, the fact that someone is not as a matter of fact *fulfilled* by her life doesn't make any difference to whether it is *fitting* for her to be fulfilled by it (Kauppinen forthcoming a). (Compare: it is no less fitting for me to desire clear drinks when I'm dehydrated if I don't as a matter of fact have the desire.) There is a subjective element to meaningful activity, but it is much thinner than the Mixed View allows. Wolf may be right that the lives of the alienated housewife or the reluctant soldier are not as meaningful as they might be, but not because of their lack of fulfillment, but rather their half-hearted and lackluster pursuit of valuable goals.

Objective naturalists agree that meaning arises from engagement with value. But can we say more about the *kind* of objective value that contributes to meaning? Nozick, who maintains that “meaning is a connection with an external value” says that “intrinsic value is degree of organic unity” (1981, 595, 611), where something is organically unified, roughly,

when it is a complex whole whose diverse parts are integrated with each other. This is a highly controversial claim in value theory, and neither can nor need be settled by an account of meaningfulness. What matters is that Nozick, like many others, seems to be committed to the *Value Proportionality* thesis that other things being equal, an activity contributes the more to meaning in life the higher the amount of intrinsic value beyond the self it promotes or realizes. (Plausibly, promoting one's own happiness, though intrinsically valuable, doesn't contribute to meaning.)

In his recent theory, Thaddeus Metz (2013) appears to reject Value Proportionality. On his *Fundamentality Theory*, roughly, meaning comes from exercising one's reason so that one positively orients one's rational nature towards fundamental conditions of human existence ( ). Here positive orientation of rational nature is a broad notion comprising things like promoting the realization of, learning about, or creating representations of something. Fundamental conditions of human existence are those "conditions that are responsible for many other conditions in a given domain", such as our ability to reason, feel, and to relate to each other, or laws of nature that account for what happens to people and their environment. So when we exercise our intelligence in pursuit of social justice or make significant scientific discoveries or create works of art about "facets of human experience responsible for much else about the human experience", we contribute in proportion to the meaningfulness of our life. Thus described, the theory is quite plausible (though vague), and largely coincides with the Teleological View. It is questionable, however, whether orientation to fundamental conditions really does the work Metz thinks it does. This is clearest in cases in which the view conflicts with Value Proportionality. The aesthetic value of a work of art, for example, is unlikely to be a function of the fundamentality of what (if anything) it represents. Nevertheless, painting or composing a piece that is highly aesthetically valuable does seem to contribute to meaningfulness. Likewise, the moral value

of an action is unlikely to track positive orientation towards fundamental conditions, for example when respect for property rights conflicts with an undoubted general good. Again, in such cases it seems that Value Proportionality holds, and Fundamentality Theory gives the wrong result.

Naturalist theories of all kinds talk in the first instance about the conditions in which individual activities or projects contribute to meaning in life. But it is very plausible that the degree to which a life is meaningful also depends on how its parts hang together. After all, part of what makes Sisyphus the paradigm of meaninglessness is that his life is so *repetitive*, and even valuable activities can be such. The holistic claim is, however, not that a life of repetitive (or entirely disconnected) individually valuable activities, like repeatedly rescuing drug addicts on the brink, would be without meaning altogether, but that it is not a picture of the *most meaningful* life. It contributes to meaningfulness if one's life moves forward, the later activities building on earlier ones rather than merely amounting to another iteration. There are few explicit accounts of what such direction in life amounts to. Kauppinen (2012) argues that one factor that contributes to the meaningfulness of a life is having a *progressive* shape, which is a matter of earlier activities positively informing later activities with respect to either goal-setting (the agent's goals are more valuable than they would otherwise be), goal-seeking (the agent exercises her capacities more effectively), or goal-satisfaction (the agent is more successful) (2012, 368). When our lives are progressive in this way, individual activities are not only successful within their own bounds but also of (comparably) *lasting* value, since they bear fruit for one's future activities.

To be sure, on any naturalist picture, everything we do will eventually vanish without a trace. Without a divine plan or perhaps an immortal soul, we cannot achieve any kind of permanence. But naturalists strongly object to the necessity of achieving lasting value in that sense. An operation cures a little girl, who returns to joy and excitement – why would the

fact that she will eventually perish make it pointless? As Susan Wolf puts it, it's the quality and not the quantity of our contribution to the universe that matters (2010, 29n14). And obviously we can in various ways make a longer-lasting contribution to the life of future generations – what Samuel Scheffler (2013) calls our *afterlife* in a secular sense. Scheffler observes that were we to discover that the world will end after we die (or that there will be no more children), we would rightly feel demoralized – many of the things we do would lose an important part of their point. This includes not just projects that aim to make a long-term difference, like eradicating a disease, but also activities whose significance hangs in part on their being part of a tradition extending from the past to the future. A natural way to construe this is to say that many of our most important activities have what might be called a *meaning horizon* that extends beyond our own lives (Kauppinen 2014). But it doesn't follow that the meaning horizon extends into *eternity*. Again, why would it matter to the point of curing cancer if humankind only goes on to exist for 10 000 or 20 000 years afterwards?

## **6. Meaning and Well-Being**

Having canvassed the leading theories of meaning in life, we are in a good position to ask about its relation to well-being. There is broad agreement that meaning in life is something *good*, indeed something that is desirable for its own sake. But is it good *for* someone to lead a meaningful life – is meaning in life a component of well-being or self-interest? There are three main kinds of view on the issue. Some claim it is a distinct kind of value, while others maintain it is either contingently or necessarily prudentially good to lead a meaningful life.

The best-known proponent of the distinct value thesis is Susan Wolf. She argues that meaningfulness is a dimension of value that is distinct both from well-being and the morally good life. (Often, she phrases her claim in terms of meaning being distinct from *happiness*, but this is a much weaker claim, since happiness doesn't exhaust well-being.) Wolf points

out that the things that give meaning to our lives are often things we do for love, and they don't seem to fit with ordinary ideas of either prudential or moral value. She observes that when someone stays up all night making her daughter a Halloween costume, she doesn't believe it is good *for her* to "forego hours of much-wanted sleep to make sure that the wings will stand out at a good angle from the butterfly costume" (2010, 4). Nor is it something done out of sense of moral duty, however. Instead, one acts out of love, as she puts it. If meaning comes from what we do for love rather than from what we do for self-interest or morality, it is a distinct kind of value, she seems to believe.

One response to this line of argument is that our motives (or motivating reasons) for doing something can come apart from the value of doing so (or normative reasons): something can be in our self-interest even if we don't do it out of self-interest. Wolf herself should admit that some of the things that give meaning to our lives *are* done out of sense of duty rather than love. It doesn't follow that meaningfulness is morally good, however. Similarly, it doesn't follow from the fact that we don't have our self-interest in mind when we do meaningful things, whether out of love or out of sense of duty, that meaning isn't good for us. I may not think about my self-interest when I practice the cello for hours and hours, to use another of Wolf's examples, but just about the aesthetic value of a perfect performance of a difficult composition. Nevertheless, it may be that the (normative) reason for *me* to do so derives from the fact that success in this project contributes to the meaningfulness of my life. It is good for *me* to be an exceptional musician, even if it means sacrificing other opportunities – after all, it makes my life more worthwhile.

Indeed, Wolf herself occasionally states her view more modestly. She says the concept of self-interest is *indeterminate*. The following is suggestive of what she means: "Is the more meaningful life better *for oneself* than the one that is easier, safer, more pleasant? There may be no answer to this question." (2010, 52) One way to read this is as saying that

meaning and happiness are *incommensurable* components of our self-interest, but nevertheless each *pro tanto* good for us. On an enlarged conception of self-interest, then, acting for the sake of the good of others may be good for us.

This leaves the issue of whether meaningfulness is contingently or necessarily *pro tanto* good for us. On the former view, meaning in life is good for us only when some condition is met – perhaps it is good for us if we *want* our lives to be meaningful, but not otherwise. On the latter view, meaning is on the objective list of intrinsically good things. In this respect, the status of meaning as a good hangs on a broader picture of well-being.

### **7. Measuring Meaning?**

Insofar as meaning in life is an important component of well-being, it is of considerable interest whether it can be empirically studied. In recent years, psychologists in particular have started to make claims about meaning in life. For example, Samantha Heinzelman and Laura King (in press) conclude their overview of the topic with the claim that “Large scale representative surveys and numerous studies of meaning in life suggest that meaning in life is widespread and relatively high”. But what do psychologists really mean when they talk about meaningfulness? To take a few representative examples, Roy Baumeister and co-authors define meaning in life as “a cognitive and an emotional assessment of whether one’s life has purpose and value” (Baumeister et al. 2013, 1). And according to Tatjana Schnell, meaningfulness is “a fundamental sense of meaning, based on an appraisal of one’s life as coherent, significant, directed, and belonging” (2009, 487).

Clearly, then, what psychologists are actually attempting to study is to what extent and why people *find* their lives meaningful, not whether they actually *are* such. After all, it’s an open possibility that you rate higher on a survey scale of meaningfulness than Nelson Mandela would, but it would hardly follow that your life is more meaningful than his. That’s

not to say that subjective experience of meaning doesn't matter. It correlates with many good things – for example, people with a sense of purpose live longer (Krause 2009) and are less depressed (Mascaro and Rosen 2005). And of course, feelings that constitute finding your life meaningful are positive ones – who wouldn't like to take pride in her life history and feel excited and fulfilled by what she's doing? Empirical research into factors that contribute to felt meaning can clearly help in designing policies that promote subjective well-being.

Since finding one's life meaningful consists in positive feelings, it is worth asking how it relates to happiness. In the psychological literature, felt meaning and happiness are typically treated as distinct constructs. Indeed, if people are directly asked how meaningful or happy their lives are, their answers correlate with different things – as a recent study summarizes, happiness comes from being a taker, while meaning comes from being a giver (Baumeister et al. 2013). This is plausible if happiness is conceived in hedonistic terms (as respondents seem to do). But think back on Tolstoy's Levin: in the midst of his existential crisis, in spite of being happy with his family, health, and work, is he really happy? Or is he rather quite unhappy in virtue of his doubts about the point of it all? The latter seems more plausible. According to recently popular views of happiness as a broad emotional condition (Haybron 2008), this makes a good deal of sense. Happiness isn't just about being cheerful and taking pleasure in things, but also, more importantly (though less transparently), about being attuned to one's environment and consequently feeling tranquil, unconstrained, and confident, and feeling engaged with what one is doing. So perhaps felt meaning is best thought of as an important part of the emotional condition of happiness rather than something that may conflict with happiness (for full argument, see Kauppinen forthcoming a).

## **8. Conclusion**

There are some who maintain, at least in the context of philosophical discussion and reflection, that it is ultimately all the same what we do – nothing really matters. Were such *Meaning Nihilism* to be true, it would be difficult if not impossible for us to have a high level of well-being. The best we could accomplish for ourselves would be a kind of shallow happiness or self-deceptive fulfillment with ultimately pointless activities. And perhaps nothing we do would matter, were we to live inside a computer simulation in an Experience Machine, boxing shadows. Alas, we don't. What we do can make a genuine difference. As the discussion in this chapter has shown, both supernaturalist and naturalist views of what makes life meaningful say that our lives can have a point if we engage sufficiently with genuine value beyond our own good. Somewhat paradoxically, it may turn out to be better for us to throw ourselves into the challenges of doing right by others or achieving perfection in an artistic or scientific behavior than to strive for our own pleasure and contentment.

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