

# Immorality and the Meaning of Life

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## 1 Introduction

Does a life need to pass a certain threshold of moral level in order to be meaningful? Could highly immoral people, such as Hitler or Stalin, have meaningful lives? To focus on the relation between immorality and the meaning of life, we may bracket other considerations that complicate the evaluation of the meaningfulness of lives. For example, in the case of Hitler, we may disregard his failure to realize his ends, assume that he took his own life to be meaningful, and ignore that he did not behave immorally all his life. We may then ask if the radical immorality of his life undermines its meaningfulness.

Advocates of subjectivist theories of the meaning of life imply that highly immoral lives could be meaningful. Advocates of subjectivist theories do not rely on objective criteria, but take the endorsement of certain beliefs, feelings, or sensations about a person's life to be a sufficient condition for leading a meaningful life. Richard Taylor, for example, argues that "if Sisyphus had a keen and unappeasable desire to be doing just what he found himself doing, then .... it would ... have a meaning for him."<sup>1</sup> But this also suggests that if Hitler had a keen and unappeasable desire to be doing just what he found himself doing his life, too, was meaningful. This is also the case for other subjectivist theories of the meaning of life. Since on subjectivist theories a person's belief that his life is meaningful is a sufficient condition for leading a meaningful life, advocates of such theories allow that radically immoral lives could be meaningful.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," in Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 265.

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Advocates of some other theories present both subjective and objective conditions for meaningfulness, but since the objective conditions they present do not have to do with morality, they too allow that highly immoral lives would be considered meaningful. A. J. Ayer, for example, posits “subjectively ... the degree to which one achieves self-fulfillment” and “objectively ... one’s standing in one’s society and the historical influence ... that one exerts” as conditions of meaningfulness.<sup>2</sup> But since, for Ayer, our prominent standing in our society need not have morally beneficial results, and our historical influence need not be positive, his criteria allow that tyrants and mass murderers, who used their standing in society in horrid ways, could be considered to have led meaningful lives if they only sensed self-fulfillment. Paul Edwards sees a meaningful life as a life in which our actions are performed “with a special zest,” but this zest should be related to “some dominant, overall goal or goals which gave direction to a great many of the individual’s actions” or that one’s attachments “are not too shallow.”<sup>3</sup> Since Edwards does not hold that our non-shallow attachments and overall goals must be moral, his criterion allows that individuals who feel sufficient zest and are guided by immoral non-shallow goals and attachments would have meaningful lives. Edwards is fully aware of the implications of his position, and accepts claims such as “as long as I was a convinced Nazi ... my life had meaning ... yet most of my actions were extremely harmful.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the conditions of meaningfulness that John Kekes gives include genuine identification by agents with their endeavors and successful rather than futile activities whose success relates to objective conditions in the natural world.<sup>5</sup> But a person may genuinely identify with and successfully realize immoral plans in the objective world. If Hitler were successful in carrying out his plans, Kekes’s criterion would have rendered his life meaningful. Like Edwards, Kekes too is fully aware of the implications of this position: “that immoral lives may be meaningful is shown by the countless dedicated Nazi and Communist mass murderers ... [who] may be successfully engaged in their projects, derive great satisfaction from them, and find their lives as scourges of their literal or metaphorical gods very meaningful.”<sup>6</sup>

Some other theories of the meaning of life do make morality relevant for meaning, but only as a contributing factor that increases meaningfulness rather than as a necessary condition for it. Laurence Thomas, for example, holds that “on the one hand, it seems too strong to say that it is impossible for an immoral person to lead a meaningful life. On the other hand, we should like to think that a morally decent human being ... is ... more favored to lead a meaningful life than an immoral

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Ayer, “The Meaning of Life,” in A. J. Ayer, *The Meaning of Life and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), p. 196; see also p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Edwards, “The Meaning and Value of Life,” in E. D. Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 143–144.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> See John Kekes, “The Meaning of Life,” in Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein, eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, 24: Life and Death* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

person is.”<sup>7</sup> But this too allows that an immoral life that fulfills some other conditions for meaningfulness could well be meaningful.

This is also true of theories that make moral behavior a sufficient condition for meaningfulness. On such theories, lives of moral people must be meaningful, but lives of highly immoral people may also be meaningful. Peter Singer, for example, argues that meaningfulness is found in pursuing what is beyond our own self-interests and in transcending ourselves. But “if we are looking for ... something that will allow us to see our lives as possessing significance beyond the narrow confines of our own conscious states, one obvious solution is to take up the ethical point of view.”<sup>8</sup> This suggests, however, that transcending our own narrow self-interests and pursuing something beyond the narrow confines of our own conscious states in immoral ways could also make life meaningful. Hitler, for example, probably did not pursue only his own narrow self-interests and what was within the narrow confines of his own consciousness when he was behaving in racist and murderous ways; he was guided also by his ideal of the Third Reich. Taking morality to be merely a sufficient condition for meaningfulness, then, also allows attributing meaningfulness to highly immoral lives.

Although Singer sees morality only as a sufficient condition for meaningfulness, he believes it to endow life with a higher degree of meaningfulness than other conditions do, or perhaps also with the highest degree of meaningfulness. Thus, he argues that because it is improbable that all ethical tasks would ever be accomplished “the ethical point of view offers a meaning and purpose in life that one does not grow out of.”<sup>9</sup> The argument, however, seems problematic. Although we could never accomplish all ethical tasks, this does not give morality an advantage over many other endeavors. The notion of the Third Reich, too, had to it utopian aspects that were unlikely ever to be accomplished, and thus offered a purpose that a person would not grow out of. Singer also argues that morality gives us a way of “identifying ourselves with the most objective point of view possible.”<sup>10</sup> It is unclear, however, why moral behavior rather than truth seeking should be taken to identify us with the most objective point of view possible, and why the most objective point of view should be considered loftiest. But even if we grant that morality does endow life with a higher or the highest degree of meaning, Singer’s argument does not require us to opt only for activities that bestow the highest degree of meaning; in Singer’s view, stamp collecting, too, is a plausible way of making life meaningful. Thus, his theory implies that highly immoral lives could well be meaningful, even if moral lives would be even more meaningful.

Theories that suggest or imply that highly immoral lives could be meaningful make meaningfulness and morality out to be largely independent qualities of lives. On such a view, we can describe a life as having achieved a certain moral degree and as having achieved a certain degree of meaningfulness, but these descriptions

<sup>7</sup> Laurence Thomas, “Morality and a Meaningful Life,” *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 34 (2005), p. 405.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 334.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

do not imply or exclude each other. Following Kekes's example, let us consider Frank, a drunkard whose life had not been meaningful until he joined the SS, after which, his life became much more coherent and focused. It was then dedicated to an ideal, the Third Reich, and had associated to it a purpose, to annihilate all the enemies of the Third Reich. As an SS soldier, Frank experienced self-worth and contentment, related to something greater than himself and had considerable, murderous effect on the lives of many other people. Frank, on such a view, did not have a moral life, but he did have a meaningful life. We may take morality to be more important than meaningfulness, and thus condemn Frank's life as an immoral, even if meaningful, life, judging that it would have been preferable if he did not have this meaningful but immoral life, but rather remained a drunkard. Likewise, we may wish that he had a less meaningful life, since then he would have been less dedicated to his murderous activities and would have had less of an effect on the lives of other people. Still, on such a view, Frank's life would be meaningful. Just as radical immorality is consistent with good taste in music, high intelligence, or thorough knowledge of classical literature, so it is consistent with meaningfulness.

## 2 Why Highly Immoral Lives cannot be Meaningful

The view that lives such as Hitler's could not be meaningful has already been defended by Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, who argue that the lives of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and other tyrants should not be seen as meaningful because many of their activities were of the type that have "to be practiced in the dark, in secret."<sup>11</sup> However, this criterion for meaningfulness is problematic, since it is unclear why secretiveness should undermine meaningfulness. Moreover, the criterion excludes the lives of many persecuted people who have been forced to conceal their beliefs and deeds. It would have us deny, for example, the meaningfulness of the lives many Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Baha'i who, under some regimes, have had to practice their religions in hiding, of people who assisted runaway slaves or, in the former Soviet Union, people who secretly maintained freedom of thought. At the same time, the criterion does not exclude the lives of people who behaved openly in highly immoral ways, such as Attila the Hun. It also does not exclude the lives of Hitler, Stalin, or Mao, whom Brogaard and Smith mention, because much of what these tyrants did, including what brought about their exceptional success and terrible effect, was performed in the open and was known to many people. For example, Hitler's violent oppression of people who disagreed with him, his expansionist activities, his celebration of dictatorship, and his racist views were public and well-known. The same is true of the Gulags, mass deportations, hunger and the culture of fear brought about and enforced by Stalin and Mao.

There is an alternative based on a common conception of what a meaningful life is. The conception is that a meaningful life is a life that, overall, has to it a sufficiently high degree of worth or value. People can decrease or increase both the

<sup>11</sup> Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, "On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life," *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 34 (2005), pp. 446–447.

number of aspects of their lives that are of value, and the degree to which the aspects are of value. For example, a person who used to care about his children, helped his neighbors, and enjoyed music and art but becomes a drug addict who is only slightly interested in his children and mostly cares about his next dose may be said to have decreased the number of aspects of value in his life and, in the one that remained, to have decreased the degree of value. A person who expands and deepens her knowledge of mathematics, who learns to love her children better, and who adopts a more responsible attitude toward society may be said to have increased the number and degree of aspects of worth in her life.

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. We do not consider a life meaningful if we think that it did not pass the threshold of worthiness, and it is difficult to think of a life that is considered meaningful that is not also considered of much worth. The close relation between meaningfulness and worth or value is also reflected in much of the literature on the meaning of life. Many philosophers, including David Wiggins, Charles Taylor, Thaddeus Metz, Susan Wolf, Kai Nielsen, R. W. Hepburn, and Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith suggest, using a variety of terms and formulations, that judging a life meaningful makes the life, or central aspects of the life, out to be of considerable worth or value.<sup>12</sup>

For a life to be considered of sufficient worth, not all aspects of the life need be of the same worth or of any worth. We may judge a life to have reached the threshold of worth because the person has a great love, even if other aspects of the life have not reached such heights. Likewise, we may recognize a person to have suffered many setbacks in different areas of life, yet judge his life meaningful due to his spiritual advancement. 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.

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<sup>12</sup> See David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 62 (1976), pp. 348–349; see also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 4, 17–20; Thaddeus Metz, "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 38 (2001), pp. 150–151; Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 14 (1997), pp. 208–213; Kai Nielsen, "Linguistic Philosophy and the 'Meaning of Life,'" in Klemke, op. cit., pp. 237, 242–50. R. W. Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," in Klemke, op. cit., p. 262. Brogaard and Smith, op. cit., p. 457.

For this reason, the suggestion that a person's life can be meaningful just as it can be, for example, moral, knowledgeable, or creative, and that all these aspects of life are of the same order and largely independent of each other, does not hold. If a sufficient degree of worth is a necessary condition for meaningfulness, then morality, creativity, and knowledgeable-ness are not independent of meaningfulness since they affect, for better or worse, the overall value of a person's life, and thus affect its meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is not of the same order as morality, creativity, or knowledgeable-ness, but of a higher order. If we judge the lives of Hitler or Frank to have a very low value overall because of their extreme immorality, they cannot at the same time be meaningful lives.

Although refraining from behaving in highly immoral ways is a necessary condition for having a meaningful life, behaving in highly positive moral ways is not. We can take not only Mother Teresa, but also Mozart, Leonardo, Shakespeare, or Meister Eckhart to have had meaningful lives, although the meaningfulness of their lives had little or nothing to do with moral achievement. As Thaddeus Metz points out, creating artwork or making scientific advances can be meaningful activities even if they have no moral import.<sup>13</sup> Mozart, for example, did not do much moral good, but many people would see his life as meaningful because of his artistic contribution. Although a meaningful life has to be evaluated positively, then, it need not be evaluated positively in terms of a person's moral contribution or achievement. As well, although avoidance of a high degree of negative moral behavior is a necessary condition for a meaningful life, it is not a sufficient condition. We do not see the life of a person who merely avoids highly immoral behavior as meaningful just in virtue of his avoidance. More has to be shown in the life in order for it to be considered meaningful.

In addition, although a meaningful life cannot include highly immoral behavior, it may include some immoral behavior; a meaningful life need not be impeccable. **A generally worthy life can include, to some extent, behavior that we evaluate negatively, including behavior that we evaluate negatively from a moral point of view. Different kinds of behavior can balance each other, to a degree, and we may deem a life that encompasses a limited degree of certain negative elements to be, overall, meaningful.** Once a person crosses a certain threshold, however, we cannot regard the life as having sufficient value and, therefore, as meaningful. There will be some borderline cases. For example, many people believe that Gauguin's life was meaningful even though he left his family in order to pursue his art. Other people are more hesitant, noting that he forsook his wife and five children with no means of subsistence. The indecision issues from uncertainty as to whether Gauguin passed the threshold of negative behavior. A painter who had to commit murders in the style of Jack-the-Ripper in order to find inspiration, or who sold his children into slavery in order to finance his artistic work, would not be considered to have led a meaningful life even by people who believe that Gauguin's life was meaningful.

<sup>13</sup> See Thaddeus Metz, "Utilitarianism and the Meaning of Life," *Utilitas*, vol. 15 (2003), pp. 60–61.

### 3 Objections

Kekes criticizes the suggestion that immoral lives cannot be meaningful by arguing that people who hold such views “will have great difficulty with explaining ... why so many people live lives in which immoral ... satisfactions dominate moral ones.”<sup>14</sup> But it is not difficult to explain such phenomena. People may lead immoral and pleasurable lives because they prefer satisfaction to meaningfulness, or because they do not prefer it but are weak-willed, or because they wrongly believe that their behaviors are meaningful. Kekes also argues that taking immoral lives not to be meaningful is based on the assumption that immoral lives or behaviors cannot provide satisfaction. However, Kekes claims, many immoral behaviors do in fact provide satisfaction, and hence can be meaningful.<sup>15</sup> But taking immoral lives not to be meaningful is frequently based not on the view that immoral behaviors do not provide satisfaction but on the view that immoral behaviors are unworthy.

Contrary to his conclusion, some components of Kekes’s own theory may entail that immoral lives are not meaningful. According to Kekes, lives dominated by worthless and misdirected activities, or whose goals are destructive, cannot be meaningful.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, life cannot be meaningful, if it is irrational to accept what is taken to endow it with meaning. For this reason, Kekes argues, it is wrong to accept the religious answer to the meaning of life.<sup>17</sup> However, leaving the question of religion aside, goals and activities such as Hitler had could be straightforwardly described as destructive, worthless, misdirected and irrational, in Kekes’s sense of these terms, and therefore, even according to Kekes’s theory, as not meaningful.

Some people may also argue for subjectivist theories of the meaning of life, according to which a person’s believing that his life has passed the threshold of worth is a sufficient condition for passing the threshold and, thus, for the meaningfulness of his life. Such a view implies that highly immoral lives are meaningful, if they are believed to be meaningful. But as Charles Taylor and Erik J. Wielenberg have argued, such a subjectivist notion of the meaning of life is highly problematic. It entails that a person who believes that his life is meaningful because, for example, he has exactly 3,732 hairs on his head would indeed have a meaningful life.<sup>18</sup> We think that people can be wrong in their evaluations, including in their self-evaluations. For example, a person may believe that she plays the violin well even though she does not or that she does not play the violin well even though she does. A person may also wrongly think that he behaves morally when in fact he does not or that he is knowledgeable when he is not. But if we can be wrong in the evaluation of specific aspects of our lives, there is no reason to believe that we cannot be wrong in our estimation of the overall worth of all the aspects.

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<sup>14</sup> Kekes, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 20 & 32.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 36; see also Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 2005), pp. 18–23.

Yet another option for people who hold that highly immoral lives may be meaningful is to claim that moral stature is irrelevant to the evaluation of the worth of lives. But this too seems wrong. The moral dimension is an important parameter of evaluation of lives. This is why we disrespect liars, thieves, thugs, blackmailers, and rapists and admire people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Teresa. Perhaps moral behavior is in itself insufficient for meaningfulness, and we need also a subjective component. Susan Wolf, for example, has argued that meaningful lives must include both objective and subjective components. According to Wolf, “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, as Metz explains, in Wolf’s view, a person like Mother Teresa who hates what she does or is bored with her life would not have a meaningful life.<sup>20</sup> Metz correctly replies, however, that “working full-time for charity makes one’s life matter, even if one neither embraces nor enjoys the work. Promoting others’ well-being (subject to moral constraints) is sufficient for meaning in life.”<sup>21</sup> But even people who side with Wolf, holding that moral behavior is insufficient in itself, take it to be, in combination with the subjective component, of much relevance to evaluation of lives.

#### 4 The Negative Values Meaningfulness

Highly immoral lives cannot be meaningful. People who have acted in sufficiently cruel and hateful ways, propagating harm, pain and sadness, do not have meaningful lives. But it does not follow that it would be correct to characterize such people as having led merely meaningless lives. Lives such as the life Hitler had differ radically from many lives we commonly think of as meaningless. As an example of such a life, let us consider the life of Bill, a sixty-five-year-old beach bum who has spent most of his life at the beach, not doing much harm to anyone but also not doing any good. He has done little and has had little on his mind aside from seeking casual sexual encounters with women who come to the beach, drinking large amounts of beer, and occasionally reading the gossip columns in television guides. He has had some shallow, sporadic friendships with several drinking buddies, but otherwise has not socialized much. He is indifferent to the beauty of the sea and is not interested in learning anything, does not help anyone and does not commit himself to any person or issue. Bill’s life may seem to us not to be meaningful because we may think that it does not have sufficient value. But Hitler’s life seems not to be meaningful in a different way. His life not only failed to have sufficient positive value, but also had great negative value. It seems awkward to put Hitler and Bill in the same category, unless we use this category in a very general manner. Since the ways in which their lives are not meaningful are so different, putting Bill and Hitler in the same category would misrepresent something important in their

<sup>19</sup> Wolf, “Happiness and Meaning,” p. 211.

<sup>20</sup> See Metz, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

lives. Bill's life is not worthy, while Hitler's life, because it was so immoral, was unworthy. They require different categories.

Highly immoral lives should be seen not only as not meaningful, but, because of their immense immorality, as the inverse of meaningful. Hitler's life is not merely meaningless, a life in which meaning is absent, but instead is a life in which the converse of meaning is present. To use an arithmetic analogy, the meaningfulness of lives such as Hitler had should not be evaluated at around zero or even as simply zero, but in negative numbers. The scale of the meaning of life should be conceived as stretching into that negative sphere as well.

It should come as no surprise that there is not only the absence of meaningfulness but also the inverse or opposite of meaningfulness, as most values have inverse values. We consider some unusual individuals to be heroes and other good, but ordinary individuals who have simply not behaved heroically, to be non-heroes. Even so, we distinguish them from villains. Although non-heroes and villains are both not heroes, they fail to be heroes in very different ways, and it is awkward to treat them as belonging to the same category. Just as the notion of being a hero is imbued with a positive value, so the notion of being a villain is imbued with a negative value of villainy. Much the same can be said with respect beauty, love, happiness, generosity, tastiness, and almost all other values, almost all of which also have inverse values. Scenery may be not only not beautiful but also ugly. We may simply not love another person, but we may also hate a person we do not love. Much the same may be said with respect to the meaningfulness of a life. We may recognize beside meaningfulness and lack of meaningfulness, or meaningfulness, also the inverse of meaningfulness. As a negative element in an emotional relationship, a trip, a meal, or a book can render such things non-pleasant but in a higher intensity can make them unpleasant, so an immorality of a certain degree can render a life non-meaningful, but in a higher intensity can make it the inverse of meaningful.<sup>22</sup>

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