

OBJECTIVISM, HYBRIDISM, AND MEANING IN LIFE: REPLY TO EVERS AND VAN SMEDEN

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ABSTRACT: In a recent article in this journal, Daan Evers and Gerlinde Emma van Smeden (2016) defend Wolf's hybridism against objectivist counterexamples advanced by Metz, Smuts, and Bramble. They also offer their own new hybridism, which they take to be even less vulnerable to such counterexamples. In this paper, I argue that Evers and van Smeden's defense of their and Wolf's hybridizing from objectivist counterexamples is problematic and that they do not, in fact, succeed in meeting the challenge the objectivist counterexamples pose. Evers and van Smeden do not read the counterexamples charitably and, hence, are not coping with the strongest challenges the counterexamples have to offer. I conclude that Metz's, Smuts's and Bramble's objectivist counterexamples continue to pose serious challenges to hybridism, both in Wolf's and in Evers and van Smeden's versions.

Recent discussions on meaning in life have dedicated much attention to the hybridism/objectivism debate. Hybridists hold that for any life to be meaningful, it must be both objectively valuable *and* subjectively fulfilling. For hybridists, an objectively valuable life that is not also subjectively fulfilling should not be considered meaningful. "Objectivists" in this debate deny that subjective fulfillment is a necessary condition for meaning in life; they hold that at least some lives could be considered meaningful even if they are not subjectively fulfilling. Some objectivists, such as Metz (2013, 196–98), emphasize that subjective fulfillment is relevant, since it enhances life's meaningfulness. However, at least in cases in which the objective value in lives is very high, this enhancement is not necessary for meaningfulness.

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The debate is usually understood as relating to the correct understanding and proper use of the concept “meaning in life” (or “a meaningful life”). But these conceptual deliberations also have implications for decisions on ways of enhancing meaning in our and other people’s lives, and on judgments regarding the degree of meaningfulness in our and other people’s lives. Put differently, in terms of the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics, the hybridism/objectivism debate is a metaethical issue with strong implications for normative ethics. Thus, hybridists hold that objectivists, who consider highly valuable but subjectively unfulfilled lives to be meaningful, are misunderstanding the term “meaningful life” or not using it correctly. Objectivists, of course, hold a similar view of hybridist uses of the term. But these differences in view about what “meaning in life” is also imply differences in decisions about what we ought to do in order to make our lives more meaningful. For example, hybridists would tell us that in order to enhance life’s meaningfulness we should also invest in its subjective aspect that has to do with our sense of fulfillment and refrain from activities that completely undermine fulfillment, even if they are extremely valuable from the objective point of view. Objectivists, on the other hand, would hold that to enhance life’s meaningfulness we can opt for activities that lead to high value even if they undermine fulfillment.¹

The hybridist and objectivist positions, then, seem to be based mostly on intuitions about what meaningful lives (as distinct from saintly lives, eudemonic lives, subjectively happy lives, etc.) are, but also on intuitions regarding what courses of actions would make life more meaningful. Unlike objectivists, but like pure subjectivists such as Ayer (1990, 196) and Huxley (1936, 80–81), hybridists attribute great importance to the subjective aspects of life. Hence, like subjectivists, they, too, hold that sensing fulfillment is vital for meaningfulness in life. For hybridists, too, it would be odd to say of a depressed person that she had a meaningful life, even if she accomplished great things. But unlike subjectivists, hybridists do not hold that a sense of fulfillment is sufficient for having a meaningful life; if it were, then, to take Cottingham’s example (2003, 21), even a person who becomes subjectively fulfilled whenever he organizes balls of torn newspaper in rows should be seen as having a meaningful life. For hybridists, then, the subjective component is highly important, but is only a necessary rather than a sufficient condition for meaningfulness; objective worth is necessary, too. Objectivists, on

¹ For an important recent analysis of ways in which metaethical positions have strong implications for normative ethics see Parfit 2011, 263–510. Parfit, however, focuses on the implications of noncognitivism and two types of naturalism. He does not deal with the hybridist and objectivist theories of the meaning of life as is done here.

the other hand, deny that subjective fulfillment is always necessary. They point out that people can be mistaken about the value of what they do, but that does not undermine its value. For example, perfectionists may wrongly hold that they are worthless as scientists, pianists, or moral agents while, in fact, they are very good ones.

Much of the recent discussion focuses only on the debate between hybridists and objectivists (both of whom reject the purely subjectivist position). In a recent article in this journal, Daan Evers and Gerlinde Emma van Smeden (2016) defend Susan Wolf's hybridism (2010) against objectivist counterexamples advanced by Thaddeus Metz (2013), Aaron Smuts (2013), and Ben Bramble (2015). They also propose a new form of hybridism, which they take to be even less vulnerable to such counterexamples. In this paper, I argue that Evers and van Smeden's defense of their and Wolf's hybridisms from objectivist counterexamples is problematic and that they do not, in fact, succeed in meeting the challenge these counterexamples pose. More specifically, Evers and van Smeden do not present charitable readings of the objectivist counterexamples with which they cope.

The principle of charity requires interpreting a counterexample (or, more generally, an argument or a text) in its most forceful and persuasive form. In the context of this specific objectivist-hybridist debate, a charitable reading of Metz's, Smuts's and Bramble's counterexamples would render them as challenging as possible to Wolf's and to Evers and van Smeden's own views. This means that where it is possible to read the counterexamples in more than one way, Evers and van Smeden would need to read them in the way that offers the most serious challenges to their reply. Only then could Evers and van Smeden be confident that their response could not be refuted by just slightly modifying the counterexamples or specifying them a little more. It is then that the objectivist position can be said to be weakened and the hybridist position to be effectively defended.

I suggest that Evers and van Smeden's discussion often avoids charitable readings of objectivist counterexamples. Take, for instance, their discussion of the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. In the film, George Bailey wants to commit suicide, but his guardian angel, Clarence, saves him by showing him the immensely positive effect George had on the lives of many people. One possible (and plausible) way of understanding what happens in the film is this: George's life was valuable and meaningful even before Clarence showed this to George. This suggests that a person's life can be meaningful even if she is not aware of it and does not feel fulfilled. Such an understanding of *It's a Wonderful Life* suits the objectivism defended by Smuts and Bramble well, since according to this an objectivist life can be meaningful by virtue of the value of its objective achievements even if one does not feel fulfilled by, or is

even aware of, this value. Indeed, Smuts (2013, 546–47) and Bramble (2015, 9–10) present this example with the hope that readers will share the intuition that George led a meaningful life despite being unaware of its meaning and feeling unfulfilled. Those who share this intuition would see George's case as corroborating objectivism and as refuting Wolf's hybridism, since, according to Wolf, life is meaningful only if it includes subjective fulfillment, or some other similar subjective component, alongside objectively valuable projects.

In their reply, Evers and van Smeden interpret the film differently. They suggest that

However, whether Clarence was indeed trying to show that George's life was meaningful is not clear. Perhaps he was trying to show that George's life was valuable in respects he did not previously notice in order to persuade him to go on. But persuading a person to go on need not be a matter of persuading him that life was meaningful even prior to a sense of engagement or fulfillment. (2016, 360)

However, one need not debate here the correct interpretation of the film. If Smuts and Bramble did present a successful counterexample to hybridism based on an interpretation of the film that is not faithful to what actually happens on screen, then so be it. It is still an effective, successful counterexample. If their counterexample does not, in fact, represent the film accurately, Smuts and Bramble can still hold it to be only partly based on the film or to be a variation on the film. They can also call their counterexample *It's a Wonderful Life** rather than *It's a Wonderful Life*, and rename their protagonist George Gailey instead of George Bailey. If their counterexample is effective, it still presents a challenge to Wolf's hybridism.

Evers and van Smeden may also be interpreted as taking a view not on what the film actually aims to show, but on the example itself. They may be interpreted as claiming that the example in itself is compatible with both objectivist and hybridist readings, since before Bailey felt fulfilled upon learning of the beneficial effects of his life he might have had a meaningful life (as objectivists hold), but he might have also had a meaningless life (as hybridists hold). However, under this interpretation of Evers and van Smeden, too, they would still be reading the objectivist counterexample uncharitably, that is, not in its strongest form that challenges hybridism most powerfully. Objectivists want, of course, to present a counterexample that suits objectivist rather than hybridist intuitions. And under this interpretation of Evers and van Smeden, too, objectivists could still reply that if their counterexample to hybridism is insufficiently specific and could be read in more than one way, they only need to specify it more, so it would be clear that it is a counterexample to hybridism. Objectivists would specify that they are referring to a situation in which George Bailey (or Gailey) feels fulfilled because he sees that,

although he did not realize it earlier, his life has been meaningful all along. Those who would find this counterexample plausible and intuitive will opt for objectivism.

The same holds for Thaddeus Metz's counterexample of a person who "volunteers to be bored so that many others do not suffer boredom" (2013, 183). Let us call this person Bill. Metz's intuition is that Bill's life may well be meaningful thanks to the important objective contribution he makes to the well-being of others. But this, Metz suggests, shows that one's life can be meaningful due to one's objectively valuable projects even if one does not feel any fulfillment. And this undermines Wolf's hybridism, according to which meaningfulness requires not only objectively valuable projects but also fulfillment or other subjective components. But Evers and van Smeden reply that since feelings of fulfillment "can result not just from doing something one loves doing, but also from knowing that one contributes to something of great personal value" (2016, 363), it is not obvious to them that Bill does not feel fulfillment.

However, this again is an uncharitable reading that renders Metz's counterexample unchallenging. Evers and van Smeden are right, of course, that it is also possible to imagine Bill feeling a sense of fulfillment. But we can just as easily imagine him as *not* ever feeling fulfillment, and it is with this latter possibility that they should engage, since it is the one that challenges their view. As Metz (2013, 183) points out, we can imagine such a case. This is in itself sufficient for making *Bill* a successful counterexample to Wolf's hybridism.²

In contrast to their discussion of *It's a Wonderful Life*, Evers and van Smeden note that it is possible simply to stipulate that Bill, who suffers from boredom so that others will avoid suffering in the same way, does not feel fulfilled. But Evers and van Smeden suggest that this stipulation may be incoherent (2016, 363). Perhaps it is. However, it is not sufficient just to point out that there is such a possibility. Evers and van Smeden need to present an argument that demonstrates that the example *is* incoherent. Since one can easily imagine Bill doing boring but valuable work without ever feeling fulfilled, the burden of proof here is on Evers and van Smeden.

This also holds for the way Evers and van Smeden cope with a counterexample to their own version of hybridism. While Wolf's hybridism (according to Evers and van Smeden's reading) emphasizes fulfillment as the necessary

² Evers and van Smeden realize that this defense of Wolf's hybridism depends on a (problematic) speculation about the psychology of value and feelings of fulfillment (2016, 363). This is part of what motivates them eventually to move away from Wolf's hybridism (which requires *feelings* of fulfillment) to their own version of hybridism.

subjective component besides objective value, in Evers and van Smeden's hybridism the subjective component is "active pursuit of projects that one values" (2016, 364). But Evers and van Smeden are not talking about just any value or valuing, but, rather, about what they call "*agential* values." For them, "the kinds of values that primarily matter to meaning in life are *wholehearted* commitments of the agent to pursuing various aims . . . the considerations in favor of a subjective requirement primarily point to a condition of pursuing *agential* values: *values one is happy to structure one's life around*" (2016, 366; emphases added). They argue that their hybridism copes better than Wolf's with a counterexample Bramble presents, that of *Alice the Master Economist*:

Alice spends her days managing the economy, something only she (given her talents) can do. She finds it utter drudgery, but knows she must continue because of all the good she is doing. (Bramble 2015, 4)

While Evers and van Smeden accept that *Alice* offers a strong counterexample to Wolf's hybridism (since they accept that Alice may feel no fulfillment), they believe that their hybridism is less vulnerable to it:

Insofar as Alice is wholeheartedly committed to managing the economy—if she has embraced it as one of her *agential* values—her life may well seem meaningful (even to those with subjectivist sympathies). But if Alice merely recognizes the importance of the economy without being wholeheartedly committed to its management, her condition is more troubling. (2016, 364)

Thus, Evers and van Smeden present only two possible readings of Bramble's *Alice* example. According to the first reading, Alice is wholeheartedly committed to managing the economy. We take Alice's life to be meaningful, but this is not problematic for Evers and van Smeden's hybridism, since Alice's life is meaningful within its parameters as well; their hybridism also holds that wholehearted commitment to objectively valuable projects makes life meaningful. Thus, the first reading of the *Alice* example does not refute their hybridism. According to the second reading, Alice merely recognizes the importance of the economy and is not wholeheartedly committed to its management. However, according to this reading, too, the *Alice* example does not refute Evers and van Smeden's hybridism. Admittedly, according to their hybridism, Alice's life is not meaningful. But this is not a problem for Evers and van Smeden because a life in which one merely recognizes the importance of the economy one manages does not seem to them to be meaningful.

However, this again seems to be an uncharitable reading of Bramble's counterexample. The charitable reading is that Bramble discusses neither wholehearted commitment nor just recognition of importance. A charitable

and plausible reading of the counterexample is that Alice does not merely recognize the importance of the economy but is committed to managing it. Otherwise, she would not have managed the economy, finding this work to be, as Bramble specifies, “utter drudgery.” We can also plausibly suppose that she is committed to managing the economy because Bramble specifies that although she finds it drudgery, she “knows she must continue because of all the good she is doing.” But since it is “utter drudgery,” it is plausible and charitable in this context to interpret Bramble’s example as positing that Alice is not *wholeheartedly* committed to managing the economy and that she is not *happy to structure her life around* managing the economy (as Evers and van Smeden’s hybridism, based on agential values, requires). The counterexample can also be specified: Alice is committed to managing the economy. She manages it well and thus saves millions from the dire effects of an economic crisis. She accepts that it is important to help others, but she also believes that it is important to help oneself and live the life one likes and enjoys. After considering all the pros and cons, she concludes that, in those specific circumstances, the case for helping others is somewhat stronger. She decides to sacrifice herself for the sake of many and therefore dutifully continues to manage the economy. But she often feels hateful toward this work that she experiences as utter drudgery, and she continues to do it bitterly, not wholeheartedly, and certainly without feeling happiness about structuring her life around this duty, as Evers and van Smeden’s agential values hybridism requires. It is more inviting and intuitive to see Alice according to this reading (that is, Alice who is committed, even if unhappily and nonwholeheartedly, to sacrifice herself for the sake of many and manage the economy) than to see Alice according to Evers and van Smeden’s reading (that is, Alice who just recognizes the importance of managing the economy) as having a meaningful life. But if we follow this intuition, and take the unhappily and non-wholeheartedly committed Alice to have a meaningful life, then we have here a counterexample not only to Wolf’s hybridism but also Evers and van Smeden’s hybridism.

Of course, Evers and van Smeden can simply reject objectivist intuitions and claim that lives that objectivists see as meaningful, such as George’s, Bill’s or Alice’s, are not in fact meaningful. However, in many places in their paper, they choose not to do so but, rather, to show how objectivist counterexamples to hybridist theories are not really effective. I have argued in my paper that in order to do so, Evers and van Smeden have sometimes avoided the charitable readings that would represent these counterexamples in their strongest, most effective form. When read charitably, the objectivist counterexamples are still problematic for hybridism. If it is accepted that they describe meaningful lives (as many, I believe, would take them to), they still pose difficult challenges.

Clearly, this does not settle the hybridist-objectivist debate. There remains much to say both for and against the two positions. And my critique of some of Evers and van Smeden's discussions does not extend, of course, to everything they say in their paper (although their discussion of objectivist counterexamples is an important part of it). I do conclude, however, that objectivist counterexamples continue to pose serious challenges to hybridism, both in Wolf's and in Evers and van Smeden's versions.³

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