

**ON THE COMMON CLAIM THAT ONE MUST FULFIL ONE'S
POTENTIAL AND DO ONE'S BEST TO HAVE A
MEANINGFUL LIFE**

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The article examines whether fulfilling one's potential and doing one's best are sufficient or necessary conditions for having a meaningful life. It concludes that they are just contributing factors and can sometimes even diminish life's meaning.

For if a man does his best, what else is there?

George Paton

It is often heard that fulfilling one's potential or doing one's best are necessary for having a meaningful life. But are they? Doing one's best is usually understood as making one's greatest effort, trying the hardest one can, to achieve one's goals. The same is largely true of fulfilling one's potential. The notion presupposes that we have a potential that can be fully realized, partly realized, or not realized at all. When one fulfils one's potential, one realizes this potential to a very large extent or to its very end.

Those who hold that doing one's best or fulfilling one's potential make life meaningful do not mean by that, of course, that doing one's best to achieve *any* end, or fulfilling *any* aspect of one's potential, makes life meaningful. Drug dealers who do their best to expand their 'territory' would not normally be considered as leading meaningful lives due to these hard efforts. Those who hold that doing one's best makes life meaningful suppose that one would

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do one's best to achieve some positive, worthy end. Likewise, people have the potential not only to help others but also to treat others cruelly. Those who hold that fulfilling one's potential makes life meaningful presume that aspects of one's positive rather than negative potential will be realized. In what follows, then, 'doing one's best' should be understood as 'doing one's best to achieve positive, worthy ends', and 'fulfilling one's potential' should be understood as 'fulfilling one's positive, worthy potential'.

Further, those who hold that fulfilling one's potential makes life meaningful usually do not mean that people need to fulfil *all* positive aspects of their potential, but only one or two of the more significant positive aspects, in order to have meaningful lives. For example, suppose someone has the potential to become both a very good musician and a very good poet. She chooses, however, to focus on poetry rather than music and fulfils her potential in that sphere. We would probably still take her life to be meaningful, even though she did not fulfil her musical potential. Those who consider doing one's best to be what makes life meaningful may believe that people have meaningful lives when they do their best in all positive spheres of their lives or, alternatively, that they must do their best in only one or two positive spheres, while in other spheres it suffices simply to make sure that their efforts meet a certain minimum threshold.

The notion of fulfilling one's potential should be distinguished from the notion of self-fulfilment as discussed by, for example, Alan Gewirth and Joel Feinberg. Both Gewirth and Feinberg understand self-fulfilment as more than merely fulfilling one's (positive) potential. For Gewirth, a self-fulfilled life must demonstrate self-esteem, self-acceptance, the organization of one's life according to some general plan, and standards that 'logically commit the self to an acceptance of the requirements of universalist morality'.¹ For Feinberg, self-fulfilled lives have to include planning and designing, show self-love, be filled with vigorous activity, and be long.² Thus, for both Gewirth and Feinberg, if, because

of nature or nurture, a person has only limited potential, which prevents him from, say, organizing his life according to some plan, he will not attain self-fulfilment even if he does succeed at fulfilling his own limited potential. This article focuses on fulfilling one's potential, as opposed to either Gewirth's or Feinberg's notion of self-fulfilment.

Note also that although doing one's best and fulfilling one's potential are frequently mentioned together, they are distinct: doing one's best may or may not coincide with fulfilling one's potential. Assume that a person has the potential to become a poet of a certain quality (say, a seven on a scale of one to ten). Suppose also that she tries as hard as she can – that is, does her best – to fulfil that potential. However, due to various factors, she does not fulfil that potential. For example, perhaps she takes a creative writing course with an instructor who happens not to be very good and thus receives poor guidance that diverts her from the path that would have allowed her to fulfil her poetic potential. This would be a case in which, although one does one's best, one does not fulfil one's potential.

Just as one can do one's best but not fulfil one's potential, one can also fulfil one's potential without doing one's best. Suppose a poet is a little lazy and does not work as hard as she can, does not do her best to receive good guidance, does not read other people's best poetry and think about it, etc. Yet, by lucky coincidence, she happens to participate in a creative writing workshop led by an excellent instructor or to become friends with a group of people who discuss good poetry in depth, so that her laziness is compensated for and she becomes a poet of as high a quality as she has the potential to be. Again, doing one's best and fulfilling one's potential emerge as distinct. We have, then, not one but two theses: (1) fulfilling one's potential makes life meaningful and (2) doing one's best makes life meaningful. The two theses are independent and can be considered separately. However, since much of what is true about the former is true also about the latter, in what follows I will consider them mostly together.

Are doing one's best or fulfilling one's potential necessary conditions for having a meaningful life? Under some views of meaningful lives, according to which the common and simple lives of quite ordinary people can be meaningful, the answer is no. From such perspectives, a person who is, say, decent, a good friend and family member (if she has a family), and can appreciate the beauty of the trees she sees from the bus she rides every day to work, may very well lead a meaningful life.³ But although such people have meaningful lives, they typically do not do their best, nor do they fulfil their potential.

Yet some take non-demanding approaches to meaning in life to be too lax and over-inclusive and adopt, instead, demanding approaches to meaningfulness. Under the latter views, only high achievers, perhaps of the stature of Freud, Einstein, or Mozart, can have meaningful lives; all others have meaningless lives. Does holding that only such luminaries can have meaningful lives entail that doing one's best or fulfilling one's potential are necessary conditions for meaningfulness? The answer still seems to be no. Consider Shakespeare: suppose we were to learn that he had not done his best and had not fulfilled his potential. Suppose that documents were discovered in some attic revealing that Shakespeare had, in fact, been quite lazy: he wrote for only two or three hours a day and spent most of his waking hours at the pub drinking beer and chatting with his mates. Suppose we also knew that had he done his best or fulfilled his potential, he would have written even more and better plays and sonnets. Perhaps our hypothetical Shakespeare – call him Shakespeare* – was also aware of this fact, but did not care enough to try to change things or even that he did care but, being somewhat weak-willed, failed to change his habits. I suggest that even if we were to discover all of this, most of us would still take Shakespeare*'s life to have been meaningful. We would

think that had he done his best or fulfilled his potential, his life would have been even *more* meaningful, because he would have produced more or better art. But we would still consider his life to be quite meaningful as it was. Thus, doing one's best or fulfilling one's potential are not necessary conditions for a meaningful life.

The same is true of lives that we view as meaningful because of their moral distinction. Suppose that we were to learn that Albert Schweitzer could have worked harder than he did to help the sick and suffering in Africa. Our imaginary Schweitzer (henceforth Schweitzer*) was somewhat lazy and liked to read light, sentimental novellas. We can also suppose that reading those sentimental novellas was *not* a necessary means of relaxation to enable Schweitzer* to work even better in helping the sick and that he knew this and even felt a little guilty about his habit. Hence, although he of course did great and noble things, far more than many others have ever done, he did not do his best and did not realize his full potential. Still, Schweitzer* believed that he was doing much worthy and good work and that his life was meaningful, even if he was not doing the best he could but only 75 per cent of his best and was not fulfilling his potential but rather, again, only 75 per cent of it. I suggest that we would see Schweitzer*'s life as meaningful under these circumstances.

But if doing one's best or fulfilling one's potential are not necessary conditions for a meaningful life, are they perhaps sufficient conditions for meaningfulness? The response to this question, too, is no. Take, first, doing one's best. Suppose that due to nature or nurture, a person tends to be irritable and bitter, experiencing anger, frustration, and even slight depression much of the time, although he is doing his best. We may well think that, although this person is doing his best, his life is not meaningful. Note that some people's lives may not be meaningful also *because* they are doing their best. Writing poetry,

dancing, or spending time with one's child can be stifled rather than enhanced by too much effort; one frequently has to 'let go' a bit in order to attain better, or acceptable, results. Doing one's best, then, may in some cases not only fail to make one's life meaningful, but even obstruct meaningfulness.

Much of what has been said here about doing one's best holds also with regard to fulfilling one's potential. A person such as the one described above, with such troubling emotional tendencies, may well be realizing the limited positive potential he has, yet will seem not to have a meaningful life. It is tragic, of course, and may well not be that person's fault. However, the world is sometimes unfair, and just as people can live unhealthy, non-affluent, or unhappy lives through no fault of their own, so too can they live non-meaningful ones; as argued by Brogaard and Smith, luck does affect, both positively and negatively, meaning in life.⁴ Note also that as with doing one's best, in some cases fulfilling one's potential may even obstruct meaningfulness. For example, in Stalin's Russia many found it wiser *not* to realize their potential since excelling in poetry, literature, journalism, or the military significantly increased one's chances of being purged and, thus, losing much of what was meaningful in one's and one's family's lives. Under such conditions, fulfilling one's potential decreased or even completely undermined meaning in life.

It might be objected that the arguments presented above presuppose objectivist views of meaning in life, and thus do not hold for subjectivists. Subjectivists, such as Brooke Alan Trisel and Richard Taylor, hold that people have meaningful lives if they take them to be meaningful; no objective measure for meaningfulness is necessary.⁵ Thus, for subjectivists, a person who thinks that her life is meaningful because she has succeeded in filling her house with towels does indeed have a meaningful life. Objectivists, such as John Cottingham and Susan Wolf, on the other

hand, believe that meaningfulness of lives is determined also by objective standards, and that people may be wrong in their views about the meaningfulness of their lives.⁶ However, although the argument above did presuppose objectivist understandings of meaningfulness, the conclusion holds also for subjectivists. Subjectivists believe that people's views on the meaningfulness of their lives determine whether their lives are meaningful. But many people do not see their lives as meaningful although they do their best and fulfil their potential, and others see their lives as meaningful even if they do not do their best and do not fulfil their potential. Thus, under subjectivist suppositions, too, doing one's best and fulfilling one's potential are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for meaningfulness.

It may also be argued that although doing one's best and fulfilling one's potential are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for meaningfulness, they are contributing factors for meaningfulness: they can make a non-meaningful life meaningful and an already meaningful life more meaningful. I agree. However, these claims are significantly more modest than those examined above. As mere contributing factors for meaningfulness, doing one's best and fulfilling one's potential are not different in kind from many other factors that can contribute to life's meaningfulness, such as living in a culture that encourages meaningful behaviours, associating with people who lead meaningful lives, or doing only 80 per cent of one's best or realizing only 80 per cent of one's potential. In some cases, doing one's best and fulfilling one's potential will be a better means for attaining or increasing meaningfulness than other contributing factors, and in some other cases less. Like other contributing factors to meaningfulness, doing one's best and fulfilling one's potential will not always contribute to meaningfulness, and sometimes will diminish or even undermine it. Doing one's best and fulfilling one's potential have no special status; there is no reason to adhere to them more than to other contributing factors, and they should not be adhered to uncritically and in all circumstances.⁷

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Notes

¹ Alan Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 56.

² Joel Feinberg, 'Absurd Self-Fulfillment', in *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 322, 325.

³ Iddo Landau, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31–63.

⁴ Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, 'On Luck, Responsibility and Meaning of Life', *Philosophical Papers* 34.3 (2005): 453–6.

⁵ Brooke Alan Trisel, 'Human Extinction and the Value of our Efforts', *The Philosophical Forum* 35 (2004): 378–9; Richard Taylor, 'The Meaning of Life', in *Good and Evil* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 264–8.

⁶ John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), 20; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 32–3.

⁷ Thanks to Saul Smilansky, Daniel Statman, and Ariel Meirav for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.