

Utilitarianism and the Meaning of Life

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This article addresses the utilitarian theory of life's meaning according to which a person's existence is significant just in so far as she makes those in the world better off. One aim is to explore the extent to which the utilitarian theory has counter-intuitive implications about which lives count as meaningful. A second aim is to develop a new, broadly Kantian theory of what makes a life meaningful, a theory that retains much of what makes the utilitarian view attractive, while avoiding the most important objections facing it and providing a principled explanation of their force.

I have been very much puzzled as to the meaning of the question 'What is the meaning or purpose of life?' ... But at last it occurred to me that perhaps the vague words of this question are often used to mean no more than 'What is the use of a man's life?' ... A man's life is of some use, if and only if the *intrinsic* value of the Universe as a whole (including past, present, and future) is greater, owing to the existence of his actions and experiences, than it would have been if, other things being equal, those actions and experiences had never existed.

G. E. Moore¹

I. INTRODUCTION

Moore is correct that the question of life's meaning is somewhat vague. However, as Moore also notes, the question is sufficiently intelligible for us to seek to answer it. Somewhat in contrast to Moore, I take central facets of the question of what would make a life meaningful to be expressed by these kinds of questions: How can one connect with something greater than oneself? Which aspects of a life are worthy of substantial esteem? What can a person do to make a venerable mark on the world?² Such questions are obviously worth addressing, but they have received little attention from normative theorists, compared to the attention given to questions about right action and well-being.³ I intend to help rectify this situation by examining one initially attractive conception of what makes a life meaningful. Specifically, I address the utilitarian theory of meaningfulness (UTM) according to which a person's existence is significant just for making those in the world better off.

¹ Moore is quoted in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. H. Moorhead, Chicago, 1988, pp. 128 f.

² In this article I must rely on an intuitive sense of the question of what makes a life meaningful. For a recent analysis of its sense, see Thaddeus Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, xxxviii (2001).

³ For a survey of contemporary analytic reflection on life's meaning, see Thaddeus Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life', *Ethics*, cxii (2002).

Moore's consequentialist statement is the earliest I have found of something resembling UTM (Moore does not strictly speaking hold UTM since he thinks that meaning in life can come from promoting non-welfarist intrinsic goods). It is only recently that anyone has expressly articulated UTM, with Peter Singer being one of the few who can be read as committed to it.⁴ I suspect this is due more to the general lack of consideration paid to the question of life's meaning than to any *prima facie* implausibility in the utilitarian answer. In this article, I explore the advantages and disadvantages of UTM. My central goals are to consider to what extent UTM coheres with firm intuitions about meaningful lives and, in so far as it fails, to develop an alternative theory that does better. Hence, my aim does not really include setting forth some conclusive judgement about whether UTM should be rejected or not. I leave it open to defenders of UTM, say, to challenge the force of intuitions or to develop arguments in favour of UTM that outweigh any counter-intuitiveness.

I begin by analysing UTM in some detail (II). In particular, I differentiate UTM from utilitarian morality and from rival theories of life's meaning. I also survey the major arguments for the view, many of which should seem plausible even to those who reject utilitarian morality. Next, I present objections to UTM in a dialectical fashion (III). I start with the most basic version of UTM, examine intuitive objections to it, refine UTM in response to these objections, examine objections to the refined version, and so on. In the following section I spell out a new, broadly Kantian theory of life's meaning that is not vulnerable to the two problems that are most troublesome for UTM (IV). 'Transcending the animal self theory', as I call it, provides a principled foundation for the two strongest objections to UTM and also retains several of its advantages. I conclude the article by pointing to issues that need to be discussed elsewhere in order fully to resolve the debate between UTM and the alternative theory I propose (V).

II. AN OVERVIEW OF UTM AND ITS ADVANTAGES

UTM is a naturalist theory of what makes a life matter, holding that a person's life is meaningful just in so far as it promotes welfare. Supernatural elements such as the eternal redemption of a soul or the fulfilment of God's purpose play no basic role in the theory. In addition, UTM is an objective theory, for it denies that what makes one's life significant fundamentally depends on fulfilling whatever strongest desires or highest-order ends one happens to have. UTM *qua* objective

⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn., New York, 1993, ch. 12, and *How Are We to Live?*, Amherst, 1995, chs. 10 f.

naturalism fills a similar logical space in meaning of life theory as it does in moral theory.

Utilitarian meaning might appear to differ from utilitarian morality in terms of the bearer of value on which it focuses. That is, utilitarian theories of morality are accounts of right *action*, whereas utilitarian theories of meaning are conceptions of significant *lives*. I believe, though, that this is merely a difference in emphasis, and does not indicate any fundamental theoretical contrast. Utilitarians about morality can and do speak of ‘moral lives’; such lives are composed of moral actions. Utilitarians about meaning will likewise find it natural to say that meaningful lives are constituted (in part) by meaningful actions, i.e. actions that produce happiness and reduce misery.

However, any attractive version of UTM will in fact differ from contemporary moral utilitarianism in at least two respects. First, UTM will not require agents to produce the maximum amount of welfare available. Apparently unlike moral rightness,⁵ meaningfulness comes in degrees. Hence, it is not plausible to suggest that an action is meaningful only if it maximizes (or even satisfices) available interest satisfaction. It is more sensible to maintain that an action is meaningful to the extent that it satisfies interests.

The second way that utilitarian meaning will differ from utilitarian morality concerns the act/rule distinction. Rule-utilitarianism is an appealing moral theory to the extent that it fleshes out a certain impartial perspective associated with the question ‘What if everyone did that?’ Impartiality is an essential aspect of the moral point of view. While various utilitarian moral theories are different conceptions of even-handed behaviour, theories of life’s meaning are not. Hence, there is no reason to think that the forms of impartiality relevant to utilitarian morality are relevant to utilitarian meaning. The standpoint from which one asks ‘What if everyone did that?’ has little purchase with regard to lives that are worthy of great esteem or make a venerable mark on the world. At first glance, the actual effects of one’s life on the world are more relevant to its significance than are counter-factual considerations about what the world would be like if everyone acted as one does.

Having clarified UTM, let us consider why one might want to hold it. UTM does a nice job of providing a specific and principled interpretation of several inchoate maxims about meaning in life that people commonly hold. First, people often say that a meaningful life is one that leaves the world in better shape than it was in when one entered it. UTM refines this claim as follows: a life is meaningful in so far as

⁵ Of course, some classical utilitarians, e.g. Bentham and Mill, do think in terms of degrees of rightness.

it makes those in the world better off than they would have been had it not existed.

Second, people tend to identify meaning in life with fulfilling a purpose. UTM reasonably construes a purposeful life in terms of one that is useful, i.e. that produces good states of affairs.

Third, people typically deem life's meaning to involve identifying with something greater than oneself. UTM says that the relevant way to transcend the limits of one's individual perspective is to adopt the standpoint of an objective spectator, imaginatively identifying with the well-being of others, wherever they might be in the world. For UTM, acting from the 'point of view of the universe' (or something close to it) is the right way to move beyond a narrow focus on the self.

Fourth, people commonly think that suffering can be made meaningful by making something good come of it. UTM provides a rational elucidation of this view: pain can be compensated by preventing a greater pain or producing a greater pleasure.

In addition to providing a theoretical articulation of the above rudimentary judgements about meaningful lives, UTM *prima facie* does better than major rivals at accounting for several intuitive cases of meaningful and meaningless actions. Consider that many find the following actions to be uncontroversially meaningful: curing cancer, liberating a people without violence, educating students, rearing children with love. And many firmly believe that these actions lack meaning: spreading nuclear waste, killing one's spouse for the insurance money, playing video games, trimming one's toenails. Supernaturalist theories of life's meaning arguably have a difficult time accommodating these intuitions, since they do not seem fundamentally to turn on whether there exists a God or a soul. Familiar Euthyphro problems beset any view holding that God's will grounds any of the above intuitions. And the idea that people have an immortal, spiritual substance does not seem necessary to explain why meaning in life comes from curing people and does not come from polluting them. In addition, the subjective theory has trouble accounting for the above cases. The view that what makes a person's life meaningful is constituted by certain of her pro-attitudes entails that a person's life would be meaningful if she wanted or chose to be destructive.

UTM, in contrast, easily entails the above intuitions and plausibly explains them, too. UTM says that the conditions typically deemed to confer meaning on life do so in virtue of promoting people's well-being and that the other conditions fail to confer meaning because they fail to have substantial and beneficial effects. The idea that a life is significant just to the extent that it promotes the welfare of mortal, sentient beings seems to be doing the work.

Another major argument for UTM is grounded on its theories of

value and practical reason. Some people think that intrinsic goods are always things that are good *for* a being. If one believes that interest satisfaction is the only sort of thing that is good for its own sake, UTM's welfarism will be attractive. Furthermore, considerations of practical rationality would seem to dictate that one's conduct is rational just to the degree that it improves the world. Is there not more reason to perform an action, the better the state of affairs that will result? The conception of rationality expressed by this question supports UTM's consequentialism.

My goals in this section have been to spell out UTM and to note some major respects in which it is attractive. In order to appraise UTM fully, one would have to weigh the arguments for UTM against the arguments opposing it and then compare the net justificatory force of UTM with that of rival theories. I cannot undertake a complete evaluation of UTM here. What I do in section III is work to find the most important problems with UTM and then in section IV sketch an alternative theory that does not face these problems. In the course of objecting to UTM, I also implicitly question the major arguments for UTM canvassed in this section. Although welfarism and consequentialism are reasonable views, I point out that they face appealing theoretical competitors. Despite UTM's ability to account for some commonsensical cases of meaningfulness and meaninglessness, I spell out many cases that it cannot easily accommodate. And while UTM plausibly elaborates several rudimentary maxims associated with life's meaning, the alternative I develop arguably does so equally well.

III. CRITICAL EVALUATION OF UTM

In this section I evaluate UTM in light of firm intuitions many of us hold about what makes a life meaningful. I take failure to cohere with considered judgements about significant lives to be some reason to reject a version of UTM and to seek a different account.⁶

Let us start with the most straightforward version of UTM:

UTM1: A person's life is meaningful just to the extent that she makes those in the world better off.

UTM1 says that meaningfulness is constituted by, and proportional to, the amount of overall well-being contributed, taking into consideration all places where the agent could promote well-being. Degrees of the significance of a life track degrees of net welfare produced in the

⁶ Some utilitarians have challenged this type of appraisal on the ground that commonsensical beliefs are likely to be conservative, cultural biases. I do not address this challenge here, taking for granted the critical method predominantly employed in normative philosophy.

universe. UTM1 is inspired by some remarks of Peter Singer on the meaning of life:

(E)thics comes into the problem of living a meaningful life. If we are looking for a purpose broader than our own interests, 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 ... the standpoint of the impartial spectator. Thus looking at things ethically is a way of transcending our inward-looking concerns and identifying ourselves with the most objective point of view possible—with, as Sidgwick put it, 'the point of view of the universe'.⁷

From the standpoint of the universe, according to Singer, everyone's interests have equal weight. The more one acts from this standpoint, working to promote the most amount of interest satisfaction wherever one may find it, the more meaningful one's life.

Since UTM is motivated partly by the intuition that helping others is central to a meaningful life, it is worth considering whether UTM1 truly captures the significance of help. On the face of it, one problem with UTM1 is that it implies that one's life would acquire no meaning for attempting to aid but failing due to unforeseeable considerations. For example, imagine that one helps to dig a drainage ditch for a community. Suppose further that digging the ditch turns out not to do any good because of an unpredictable flood. Granted, the ditch-digging would have been particularly meaningful if it had actually benefited the community. However, it might be that, in the absence of such a result, the ditch-digging would be meaningful to some degree. Perhaps one's life can acquire some significance just for trying to confer a benefit (at least where one justifiably believes that one's action would be useful and one does not ultimately intend to contribute to an evil end).

Some utilitarians will flatly deny this intuition, holding that meaning is utterly lost when bad luck prevents good outcomes. However, since it would be interesting if there were a utilitarian theory that accommodated the intuition, I pursue this possibility. Now, there are many utilitarians who are inclined to think of other-regarding sentiments as themselves enhancing the well-being of the individual who has them. J. S. Mill is a classic example. For him, taking pleasure in acting for the sake of others is itself a higher element of the agent's own welfare. In fact, according to Mill, the mental satisfaction of trying to help others has a value that is lexically superior to whatever physical well-being may result.⁸ If other-regarding sentiments themselves (partly) constituted well-being, then UTM1 could account for

⁷ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, pp. 333 f.

⁸ See also William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, repr., New York, 1976, pp. 169 f., 176, 395 f.

the intuition that trying to benefit another and failing can itself be a meaningful condition.

This response faces two serious problems. One problem is that attempting to aid someone and failing might confer meaning on a life even when the person takes no pleasure in doing so. Some believe that being motivated merely by the idea of having a duty to aid others (or the idea of going beyond one's duty), without any consequent satisfaction, would make a life more meaningful. In short, perhaps what matters is a good will, not good feelings.

A second, deeper problem with the present suggestion is that, if the gratification of acting for the sake of others were part of an individual's well-being, then UTM1 could oddly instruct agents to endanger others so that the pleasures of rescuing them would be promoted. Imagine that an individual goes around setting fires to houses so that fire fighters can take pleasure in trying to help people. Suppose that the arsonist drugs people so that they feel no anxiety from the fire, that he is wealthy and anonymously donates money to repair the houses, and that he gives the fire department plenty of notice about the fire. Given such conditions, UTM1 entails that the arsonist's life gains significance for promoting other-regarding sentiments in others. But it is implausible to suggest that someone's life would be meaningful for acting in this way. The problem is not that UTM1 entails that destructive behaviour can confer meaning on a life; it is that UTM1 entails that the arsonist's life would be more meaningful for wreaking havoc in order to produce the pleasure of trying to rescue people. That seems particularly twisted.

I think the utilitarian's most promising strategy would be to reject outright the intuition to which the Millian considerations are a response. It is fair to deny the intuition that trying to help and failing due to bad luck would confer some significance on a life. However, there is a second intuition that I do not believe the utilitarian can as easily question. UTM1 allows the agent's own welfare to count as enhancing the meaning of his life, but that seems counter-intuitive. Singer emphasizes that action from the perspective of the impartial spectator transcends narrow self-interest, but it does not do so enough. Consider that there are times when one can contribute more to the well-being of oneself than to that of others. Under such conditions, UTM1 entails that one's life could be meaningful for benefiting oneself, but this seems absurd.

For a clear illustration of the problem, consider Bear, a case in which you and a friend are unexpectedly exposed to a hungry grizzly. Suppose that you and your friend's influences upon other people's well-being would be equal, that you are capable of marginally more long-term well-being than your friend, that the bear will catch at least one

of you, and, to be complete, that the bear would find no difference in taste or nutrition between you and your friend. The present utilitarian theory would say that, of the actions available, escaping would confer the *most* meaning on your life, even if this required throwing your friend to the bear. However, I submit that your life would not be made *any* more meaningful for so acting. The case shows that the promotion of your own welfare, even when this constitutes promoting the most welfare available, cannot enhance the significance of your life. Indeed, if there is a meaningful course of action in this case, it would be to make a great sacrifice for the sake of your friend.

An interesting way for the defender of UTM1 to respond to Bear would be to note cases that apparently point to the opposite conclusion. Consider, for example, Auschwitz. It seems that one's life would be meaningful for fighting to stay alive and to obtain as much comfort as possible in a Nazi concentration camp.⁹ Auschwitz suggests that promoting one's own welfare can in fact make one's life matter.

One could question whether Auschwitz is truly a case where meaning is conferred on a life. Perhaps surviving under such conditions is a matter of preserving some necessary conditions for meaningful activity, but is not itself meaningful. Suppose, though, that it would be meaningful to uphold a tolerable existence in the face of such challenges. I question whether it is *qua* benefiting oneself that the meaning arises. In Auschwitz the meaning is arguably instead a function of demonstrating courage and maintaining self-respect. Here it takes substantial strength of will to maintain a decent existence, and staying alive is needed to stand up for one's dignity. I suggest that it is such *excellences*, and not any welfare produced, that are guiding intuitions about Auschwitz.¹⁰ This hypothesis would also explain why one would have different intuitions about Bear; it neither takes courage nor maintains self-respect to outrun a bear or trip your friend so that the bear catches him. I am therefore inclined to think that the Auschwitz case backfires against the utilitarian.

Even if I am correct that UTM1 counter-intuitively entails that benefiting oneself can make one's life significant, some utilitarians will claim that UTM1 has other attractions that make it nonetheless

⁹ For discussion of meaning in such a context, see Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, New York, 1959.

¹⁰ A plausible response to make on behalf of UTM1 here is that this point assumes a subjective account of welfare. If welfare were construed in more objective terms, then the notion that meaning can come from benefiting oneself might be more attractive. However, one must remember that the Bear case also applies to objective theories of welfare. That case suggests that it is incorrect to think that your life would be more meaningful for promoting your own welfare, however the welfare is conceived. I make several additional replies to the objective welfare line of argument later in this section.

reasonable to hold. I do not consider this line here, since I am interested in seeing to what degree utilitarianism can square with firm intuitions about meaningful lives. Therefore, I propose an alternative utilitarian theory that does not entail that making oneself well off confers meaning on one's life.

UTM2: A person's life is meaningful just to the extent that she makes others in the world better off.

Whereas an egoistic theory gives the agent's interests alone any weight, and *UTM1* gives everyone's interests equal weight, *UTM2* gives the agent's interests no weight. If I were constructing a moral theory, the strict impartiality of *UTM1* might be preferable. However, I am instead searching in the utilitarian tradition for a theory of what makes a life meaningful that coheres with considered judgements about the subject. Such intuitions have driven me to *UTM2*. *UTM2* obviously solves the problem facing *UTM1*, for it denies that benefiting oneself can ever be what makes one's life matter. Instead, benefiting others is alone what counts. Irving Singer approximates *UTM2* when he says:

A significant life ... requires dedication to ends that we choose because they exceed the goal of personal well-being. 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. ... Since we depend extensively on other people, our sympathetic awareness of them readily turns into concern about their welfare. When this element in our nature combines with our faculty of idealization, there results the kind of behavior that seeks to preserve and to improve life beyond ourselves. This mode of response ... makes our life significant.¹¹

Singer speaks of performing actions 'because' they will help others, but one's life could plausibly be more meaningful for unintentionally benefiting others. Imagine that a scientist makes a discovery that unexpectedly turns out to help cure a disease. This case suggests that a person's life might be significant for being part of a beneficial causal chain that she did not have in mind when acting (at least if the probabilities are fairly strong that one link will follow another). *UTM2* may be understood to accommodate such a case.

The major problem facing *UTM2* is that it counter-intuitively entails that whenever one confers a benefit on another person, one's life is more significant. For a counter-example, consider Humiliation, a case in which a person lets others denigrate him for the fun of it. He associates with people who make him the butt of racist or otherwise

¹¹ Irving Singer, *Meaning in Life*, vol. 1, *The Creation of Value*, Baltimore, 1996, pp. 115, 120. Despite these remarks, other passages (pp. 117, 127 f.) suggest that Singer holds *UTM1*.

derogatory jokes (and there is no urgent reason to be in their company). Here, a fellow makes others happier, which UTM2 says confers meaning on his life, but his life seems no more meaningful for this. For another example, consider Prostitution. Selling sex for money could bring pleasure to many people, but, contra UTM2, would arguably fail to confer any significance on a life.

Exactly what fundamental problem with UTM2 is suggested by Humiliation and Prostitution? One possibility is that immorality (conceived in non-utilitarian terms¹²) pollutes the benefits produced. Immoral types of welfare such as sadistic or racist pleasures do not seem to count. And immoral ways of producing (what might be the right type of) welfare, e.g. by treating oneself like a commodity, fail to confer meaning on a life.

In response, the defender of UTM2 can point to cases in which it seems as though the beneficial results of an immoral action do make one's life meaningful. For example, consider the classic case of Broken Promise, where instead of keeping one's promise to a dying man to bequeath his money to his undeserving son, one uses it to start up a shelter for homeless youth. Here it appears that meaning is indeed possible despite immorality.

What, then, is the difference between Broken Promise, on the one hand, and Prostitution and Humiliation, on the other? Although in the former case there is an infringement of moral rules, the infringement is not a *violation* since it is justified on moral grounds. This is, I think, the most important difference between the two groups of cases. All things considered moral reasons prescribe breaking a promise to help the poor, whereas (supposing non-emergency circumstances) they do not recommend letting others humiliate oneself or hiring out one's sexual organs. Hence, one might be inclined to draw this conclusion about the relationship between immorality and utilitarian meaning: benefiting others confers meaning on a life if and only if done in a way that does not violate moral restrictions.

However, this suggestion, too, is vulnerable to counter-example. There are apparently cases in which a life is meaningful for having performed an all things considered immoral action. Consider the oft discussed case of Gauguin, who abandoned his family in order to develop his painting. Usually this case is raised with a view to ascertaining whether Gauguin had sufficient reason to do what he did, i.e. whether non-moral considerations can outweigh moral ones. I use this

¹² One could try to invoke a utilitarian account of morality here to buttress the utilitarian account of meaning. However, Humiliation and Prostitution arguably apply equally well to utilitarian morality; even if one thought that these actions are morally permissible, it would be implausible to hold that they are morally required.

case to make a different point, namely, that meaningful action seems possible despite moral violation. It appears as though Gaugin's life was meaningful for having stimulated people's aesthetic sensibilities,¹³ even though he did so by failing to live up to responsibilities he had assumed.

Now, why is there meaning in Gaugin but not in Prostitution or Humiliation, when in all these cases there is welfare produced by an all things considered immoral means? One plausible suggestion is that the *kind* of moral violation involved differs. In Prostitution and Humiliation, welfare results from a particularly degrading sacrifice, whereas the same is not true in Gaugin.¹⁴ Let us accept this rough account of the interplay between meaning and morality and reformulate UTM accordingly:

UTM3: A person's life is meaningful just to the extent that, without violating certain moral rules (against degrading sacrifice), she makes others in the world better off.

Unlike UTM1 and UTM2, UTM3 does not merely instruct agents to pursue states of affairs with more welfare than others; it additionally tells agents to pursue these states of affairs subject to certain deontological moral restrictions. Of the versions of UTM considered so far, this 'restricted' or 'constrained' utilitarianism fits best with commonsensical ideas about what makes a life matter.

However, there are two important objections even to UTM3. First, one might question whether meaning in life comes merely from making people better off. Besides satisfying other people's interests, developing perfections, virtues, or excellences in oneself or others arguably confers meaning on one's life.¹⁵ For instance, making great works of art seems to make a life meaningful, even if they are not widely appreciated. For another example, making substantial scientific advances plausibly confers significance on a life, even if these discoveries have no technical application and cannot be understood by laypeople. For a third case, a person who exhibits integrity or courage might thereby acquire significance, even if being overly deferential or wimpy would make everyone happier.

¹³ Later I will suggest that artistic activity can be meaningful apart from any benefits to others.

¹⁴ An alternative explanation might appeal to the directness of the causation involved. In Prostitution and Humiliation, violation of the moral rule is the proximate cause of the welfare produced, whereas in Gaugin, it is not. Perhaps violating a moral rule confers meaning on a life if it indirectly promotes others' welfare. However, this proposal counter-intuitively entails that one's life would be meaningful for letting others humiliate one, so long as people enjoyed hearing about it later.

¹⁵ For similar claims in the contemporary literature, see Richard Taylor, 'Time and Life's Meaning', *Review of Metaphysics*, xl (1987); and Alan Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, Princeton, 1998, ch. 5.

Utilitarians will of course suggest that welfare ultimately explains the force of these cases. Specifically, some will wonder whether a two-level hypothetical theory might not do the work here. If everyone routinely did things such as create artworks and maintain integrity, then welfare would be promoted more in the long run than if people did not commonly do such things. Rather than construct a counterexample to this proposal, I merely note that, even if welfare were maximized under such a condition, it would not be the beneficial consequences that entirely explain the meaningfulness of these activities. Creating artworks and maintaining integrity, I submit, can confer significance on a life apart from any results, actual or hypothetical.¹⁶

Granting that these activities in themselves can make a life meaningful, some utilitarians will argue that they are constitutive of welfare. That is, friends of UTM3 might contend that human well-being is not merely mental, but is also (or instead) an objective matter. An objective theory of well-being is the view that a person's welfare is constituted by certain ways of being, acting, or functioning, not merely experiencing pleasures or satisfying wants. If an objective account were correct, so that creativity, knowledge, and integrity were themselves part of a person's happiness, then UTM3 could entail that one's life is meaningful for promoting these conditions.

There are several problems with this manoeuvre. Most importantly, this understanding of UTM3 in fact cannot account for the intuitions mentioned above, since it excludes the possibility of any self-regarding element conferring meaning on a life. It strikes many that making a major scientific discovery confers meaning on the life of the person who made it. However, since UTM3 says that making *others* better off (subject to certain moral constraints) alone confers meaning on a life, it could at best entail that meaning comes from helping someone else to make such a discovery.¹⁷

Another problem with claiming that things such as creativity and knowledge are objective benefits is that doing so threatens to collapse the important distinction between what is good for a person and what a good person is. A person's self-interest or what makes her well off is one thing, while a person's self-realization or what she does well is another. Living a happy or rewarding life is different from living an

¹⁶ In addition, recall from section II that rule-utilitarianism is better motivated as a moral theory than as a theory of life's meaning.

¹⁷ At this point, some utilitarians will question whether UTM1 should have been given up so easily; reflection on cases of objective well-being might suggest that making oneself well off can in fact sometimes make one's life meaningful. Rather than reconsider the Bear case against UTM1 or the latter's overall plausibility, I instead note other serious problems facing the attempt to rescue any version of UTM with an objective theory of welfare.

admirable or excellent one. An objective theory of welfare collapses this distinction between welfare and virtue. Such a view makes it impossible to hold that an act could make one a better person but in no way make one better off, something many would be inclined to judge of sacrificing one's life or limb in order to save others.

Finally, it is implausible to hold that all the above counter-examples to UTM3 are cases where meaning arises from any objective *welfare* produced (whether in the agent or in others). Of any objective conditions, projects and relationships are most plausibly deemed to be constituents of people's welfare; so, I accept that creating artworks and advancing science might be intrinsically good for a person. However, it strikes me as less reasonable to hold that integrity and courage in themselves enhance a person's well-being. When Martin Luther King Jr civilly disobeyed segregation laws, he did not thereby make himself happier. It is plausible to hold that MLK benefited from subjective conditions that probably accompanied the act of publicly standing up for what he reflectively believed to be right, e.g. a feeling of pride; in contrast, while the civilly disobedient act conferred meaning on his life, it did not itself benefit him.

For the current objection to UTM3 to be particularly strong, it would help to have a general theory of the values other than well-being that are constitutive of life's meaning. I sketch such an account in the following section. I turn now to the second major objection to UTM3.

I question whether producing intrinsic value is the only response to it that would make one's life significant. Many people believe that for an aspect of a life to be meaningful, it has to be meaningful *to* the individual whose life it is. Relativists and subjectivists about life's meaning obviously hold such a view; for them, a person's existence is significant just in so far as she believes that it is or her preferences are realized. However, several contemporary objectivists also contend that for a person's life to matter, the life must matter to the person. Joseph Raz, for example, says that meaning in life requires 'being attached' to worthy objects.¹⁸ And Susan Wolf claims that it requires 'active engagement' in worthwhile projects.¹⁹ As she puts it,

(A) meaningful life must satisfy two criteria, suitably linked. First, there must be active engagement, and second, it must be engagement in (or with) projects of worth. A life is meaningless if it lacks active engagement with anything. A person who is bored or alienated from most of what she spends her life doing is one whose life can be said to lack meaning. Note that she may in fact be performing functions of worth. ... We may summarize my proposal in terms of

¹⁸ Joseph Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment*, Cambridge, 2001, ch. 1.

¹⁹ Susan Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, xiv (1997).

a slogan: 'Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness'.²⁰

If Wolf and Raz are correct, UTM3 is implausible since it does not acknowledge that, for a person to acquire meaning in her life, she must identify with others' well-being or find satisfaction in promoting it.

As the objection stands, the utilitarian has a reasonable response. The utilitarian may appeal to cases in which people's lives appear to be meaningful just for doing a good job of helping others, i.e. without being actively engaged in doing so. Imagine that Mother Teresa had been terribly bored by her work (at least in the stereotypical understanding of it). Would her life have acquired no significance for all her help to humanity? The utilitarian can fairly answer that Mother Teresa's life would still have been meaningful. 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; liking others or one's promotion of their well-being is not necessary.

However, the objection may be weakened and still pose a challenge to UTM3. Suppose we grant the utilitarian that attachment and engagement are not necessary for meaning to arise, but contend that they *do contribute* to meaning. If this weaker view were true, UTM3 would still be in trouble, since it fails to accord subjective attraction to intrinsic value any fundamental role in making a life significant. To test the force of this objection, we should return to the Mother Teresa case. On one hand, imagine Mother Teresa as above, alienated from her charity work. Suppose that she hates her work, takes no pleasure in it, and does not get absorbed in it. On the other, imagine that Mother Teresa does the same amount of good for other people and also identifies with them or is stimulated by helping them. So, imagine that she loves her work, is fulfilled by it, and gets consumed by it. Is Mother Teresa's life more meaningful in the latter case? If so, the objection to UTM3 is sound.

How might the friend of UTM3 respond at this point? There is certainly something to be preferred about a Mother Teresa who is not alienated from her work as opposed to one who is. However, the utilitarian may question the claim that what is preferable about the former life is that it would be more meaningful than the latter. It would clearly be a *happier* life. Recall that an objection to UTM1 contended that promoting an agent's own well-being cannot make her life more meaningful. Accepting this claim, the defender of UTM3 might respond that Mother Teresa's subjective attraction, i.e. her happiness, would not make her life any more meaningful.

²⁰ Wolf, 211.

Against this response, the objector to UTM3 can plausibly maintain that being subjectively attracted to doing good is not exhausted by being happy doing it. It is not a matter of welfare to identify closely with a project, strongly want to do it, or concentrate intently on it. And even if it were, the objector can claim that these subjective conditions have an additional, non-welfarist property that is the factor conferring meaning on the agent's life. Both of these replies would be more compelling if substantiated with an attractive principle explaining why attachment to and engagement with value (beyond the mere promotion of it) makes life meaningful. In the following section, I sketch such a theory.

The two objections I have raised against UTM3 go to the heart of the general utilitarian view that life's meaning lies in making those in the world better off.²¹ The first objection denies that *welfare* is the sole intrinsic value relevant to life's meaning, while the second denies that *promotion* is the only way to respond to value so as to confer meaning on a life. In the next section of this article, I sketch an alternative theory of life's meaning that grounds these two objections.

IV. A NON-UTILITARIAN ALTERNATIVE: TRANSCENDING THE ANIMAL SELF THEORY

Here I present a theoretical underpinning for the two major problems with UTM discussed in section III. My goal is to develop a theory that not only avoids the central objections to UTM, but also provides a principled basis for them. This new theory also aims to save many of the major advantages of the utilitarian theory noted in section II; like UTM, it is an objective naturalist theory and can account for the intuitive meaningfulness of helping others (in the right ways).

Which account of life's meaning does the critical discussion of UTM support? My suggestion is this: one's life is meaningful just in so far as one is positively oriented toward intrinsic value beyond one's animal self. More specifically, the extent to which one's existence is significant varies solely in proportion to the degree of intrinsic value beyond one's animal nature to which one is positively oriented, the number of one's faculties that are positively oriented to it, and the intensity of

²¹ Readers will notice that I do not examine Bernard Williams's influential objection that utilitarianism requires one to forsake one's ground projects, realization of which is necessary for 'one's existence to have a point' or to 'give a meaning to one's life'. See Williams's 'Persons, Character, and Morality', repr. as the first chapter of his *Moral Luck*, New York, 1981. I do not examine this objection since it has already been extensively discussed and relies on a subjective account of reasons and meaning. I am more interested in criticisms of UTM that have received less attention and are grounded on an objective view of reasons and meaning.

their positive orientation to it. Call this 'transcending the animal self theory' (TAST).²²

There are two key facets of TAST, an account of value and an account of the way to respond to this value. Regarding value, TAST says that intrinsic value beyond one's animal self is central to meaning. The animal self amounts to those facets of a person's existence that do not involve the exercise of reason, e.g. the maintenance of life, the experience of pleasures, and the instantiation of a healthy body. The rational self, in contrast, is that part of a person involving the use of deliberative capacities. TAST says that one's own animal nature, even though it may be intrinsically valuable, cannot be a source of life's meaning. Instead, meaning in life comes from relating in the right way to one's own rational nature or to the animal and rational natures of others.

We naturally seek an explanation of the asymmetries here. Why can other people's animal selves provide one's life a meaning (if one responds to them in the right way) but not one's own animal self? And why can one's own rational self confer meaning on one's life (again, if one interacts with it properly), but not one's own animal self? One possibility is that the animal self is the locus of welfarist elements. People are well off primarily (even if not exclusively) in so far as they stay alive, maintain their health, and experience pleasure. And people uncontroversially can enhance their significance by sacrificing their lives, health, and pleasure. Given that well-being and life's meaning are distinct facets of the best life, it makes sense to think that meaning in life is a function of intrinsic value beyond one's own animal nature.

Regarding the proper way to relate to this value, TAST says that one's mental faculties must be contoured to it. Meaning arises in a person's life to the extent that her capacities such as volition, cognition, conation, and affection are constructively attuned to the relevant value. The more one's actions, thoughts, desires, and feelings positively engage value beyond one's animal nature – the more one 'lives and breathes' this value – the more meaning will be had. Note that the relevant actions here need not be ones that promote the intrinsic value; actions that are positively oriented toward it could be ones that honour it.

TAST's broadly Kantian emphasis should not be understood to imply that animal lives are meaningless. It might be that animals can transcend their *own* animal nature. Perhaps a dog that saves its master's life has a more meaningful life than one that simply lies around scratching itself. Also, it could be that TAST is best construed

²² I first sketched this view in 'Contributions Toward a Naturalist Theory of Life's Meaning', *Dialogue and Universalism*, viii (1998).

as a theory of what makes a person's life meaningful, leaving open the possibility of an alternative account of what, if anything, makes an animal's life matter.

I want to clarify TAST some more by contrasting it with those accounts in the literature that are closest to it. TAST differs from similar Kantian views, first, in terms of the location of value that confers meaning on a person's life. Other theories indicating that life's meaning consists in developing rational nature focus exclusively on the agent's own deliberative powers. Richard Taylor holds that being creative alone constitutes life's meaning, and Alan Gewirth maintains that developing one's best capacities alone does so.²³ I, however, do not think that meaning in life comes only from self-regarding conditions. TAST says that being positively oriented toward the rational nature in others can also make one's life meaningful. So, in contrast to TAST, the theories of Taylor and Gewirth would have trouble accounting for the intuitions that, say, people's lives could be meaningful for being a coach or a philanthropist. Even if their views can entail that such lives are meaningful, the explanation Taylor and Gewirth give will be cramped, focusing solely on the way these people exercise their own rational faculties and ignoring the fact that they help others to do so.

Unlike Taylor and Gewirth, and like me, Thomas Hurka suggests that helping to realize the rational essence of others can make one's existence significant.²⁴ Specifically, Hurka can be read as saying that actions are meaningful just in so far as they maximally promote rational nature in all humans and at all times. Although Hurka differs from Taylor and Gewirth regarding the location of the value relevant to meaning, he agrees with them on the content of the value. All three hold that rational nature is the sole value relevant to life's meaning. In contrast, I believe that promoting other people's health and pleasures can also be a source of meaning in one's life. This is the kernel of truth in utilitarianism that TAST retains. We have encountered no reason to doubt that enhancing others' welfare (subject to moral constraints) can make one's life meaningful. By holding that constructively relating to other people's animal selves can make one's life meaningful, TAST accounts well for the intuitions that giving gifts and playing music to an audience can confer meaning on a life. In contrast, Hurka's theory must say, implausibly, that such activities are meaningful only if they lead others to exercise their rational capacities; I submit that

²³ Taylor, esp. 680–3; Gewirth, esp. pp. 182–6.

²⁴ Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, New York, 1993, esp. ch. 5. Hurka is professedly putting forth what he takes to be an attractive moral theory, but one could fairly read his view as an account of meaning in life.

the happiness they bring to other people is what partially explains the meaningfulness of these actions.

This sketch of TAST should be enough to show that the two most important objections to UTM do not apply to it and, further, that it provides a plausible basis for these objections. Recall that one deep problem with UTM is its exclusive focus on welfare as the value relevant to life's meaning. Recall the examples of artists, scientists, and the upright, whose lives seem to be meaningful but not for promoting welfare (either in themselves or in others). TAST provides a principled ground for these counter-examples to UTM. One value these people realize in themselves is the superior exercise of their rational capacities in the forms of imagination, intellect, and will. And TAST implies that the exercise of one's rational capacities is a value that makes one's life meaningful.

The second major problem with UTM is that it holds that meaning arises only by promoting value. The utilitarian maintains that (a certain kind of) volition is the only response to intrinsic value relevant to meaning. The discussion of Mother Teresa, however, suggested that life can be meaningful to the extent that other capacities such as cognition, perception, conation, and affection are also attuned to a certain value. Suppose that one judges that one's actions are connected with goodness, that one attends without distraction to what one is doing, that one strongly wants to improve the world, and that one feels excitement when doing so. These non-volitional but positive responses to value appear to enhance the meaning of one's life. And TAST nicely accounts for such an intuition. According to TAST, the fundamental problem with UTM's account of the way to respond to value is that it focuses on only one capacity of the self, namely, the will. Promotion is just one form of volition, and volition is merely one capacity that a person has with which to respond to value. It is plausible to think that the more faculties of one's self that are contoured toward the relevant value, the more meaningful one's life. Note that this claim provides a general and unified ground for the sundry subjective conditions that Raz, Wolf, and others classify under the headings of 'attachment', 'engagement', and mattering 'to'; for TAST, they all contribute to life's meaning in that they are all ways of positively orienting one's faculties toward the right kind of value.

In this section I have sketched a new theory of life's meaning, TAST, and contended that it grounds the two most serious problems facing any version of UTM. I have also suggested that TAST retains many advantages of UTM and is for this reason, among others, better than related Kantian accounts in the literature. While I find TAST compelling, this is not the place to defend it thoroughly. My aims in this article are to ascertain the most defensible version of UTM,

present the most important problems with it, and sketch a promising alternative account that must be addressed for belief in it to be plausible.

V. CONCLUSION: DEVELOPING THEORIES OF LIFE'S MEANING

I have sought to advance inquiry into the meaning of life by critically examining UTM, the *prima facie* attractive view that a life is meaningful just for making those in the world better off. I have argued that UTM is too narrow; there are additional values besides welfare and responses to them besides promotion that can confer meaning on a life. I have also proposed a new account of what makes a life meaningful, transcending the animal self theory, and argued that it provides a principled way to capture these other routes to meaning while covering the routes that UTM does. I now conclude by suggesting a few ways that the debate between UTM and TAST may be taken further elsewhere.

One issue that needs to be addressed in more detail is TAST's alternative to a consequentialist conception of rationality. There are cases where TAST prescribes favouring non-volitional responses to value over volitional ones (or prescribes the volitional response of honouring instead of promoting). That is, assuming that meaning in life provides a basic normative reason, sometimes TAST tells people that they have most reason not to promote as much well-being as they can, so as to manifest certain cognitive, affective, or conative responses to it. For example, if one has a choice between feeding two hungry people from whom one is alienated or feeding one hungry person about whom one cares, TAST could prescribe the latter option. The utilitarian deems such a choice to be irrational. Why think otherwise? The fan of TAST owes the utilitarian an answer.

When explaining why non-volitional responses to intrinsic value can outweigh volitional responses, the friend of TAST has the difficult task of simultaneously explaining why volitional responses should nonetheless be considered central to making a life meaningful. Imagine that a person has strong non-volitional responses to intrinsic value, but no volitional ones. That is, suppose that he likes other people, believes their interests should be satisfied, feels good when he sees them flourish, but that he never goes out of his way to help them. On the face of it, TAST counter-intuitively entails that his life could be meaningful. In order to avoid this problem, the fan of TAST must explain why actions are a particularly crucial response for a person to make to intrinsic value, while still holding that the other, non-volitional responses not only make a life more meaningful, but also

sometimes confer more meaning than volitional ones. How might this be done?

On behalf of TAST here, note that once one accepts UTM3, admitting the rationality of deontological constraints on welfare promotion, there is little reason to suppose that promotion will turn out to be the only rational response to value subject to those constraints. Still, TAST would be more compelling if its non-consequentialist account of normativity were buttressed. While there are many intuitions that promotion is not the sole rational response to intrinsic value, few theoretical alternatives have been suggested and thoroughly defended.²⁵ The notion that any positive exercise of one's mental faculties is a rational response to intrinsic value is a beginning, but this principle would need to be refined and examined in more depth for it to be particularly compelling. For instance, it would help to answer the questions of whether some mental faculties are more central than others, and, if so, which ones and under what conditions.

In addition, there needs to be more careful discussion of non-welfarist final goods. Here, too, there are many intuitions (e.g. regarding the experience machine) that point toward a realm of intrinsic value that is not welfarist. These thought-experiments tend to show that creativity, knowledge, and autonomous decision-making have inherent worth apart from any well-being involved. However, it would be nice to have a principle explaining in virtue of what such conditions are good for their own sake (and thereby make life meaningful when we are positively oriented toward them). TAST suggests that the exercise of reason is the common denominator among them, but in exactly which respect is this true? For example, I suppose that many readers will agree that doing philosophy could make a person's life meaningful. The field has not (self-)reflected much at all on the question of what it is about philosophy that makes it a meaningful enterprise. Is philosophy meaningful because of the intrinsic good of, say, trying to get closer to the facts, trying to get closer to 'important' facts, getting closer to important facts, reflecting on important facts, discovering important facts, discovering important facts that are difficult to discover, discovering important facts that are difficult to discover by developing complex theories, or teaching others the complex theories used to discover important facts that were difficult to discover?

Answering the kinds of questions posed here not only would develop our understanding of what makes a life meaningful, but also would likely shed light on other domains of philosophy. Questions about life's

²⁵ Two of the most developed discussions can be found in Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, Cambridge, 1993; and T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, 1998, pt. 1.

meaning seem no less manageable than questions often raised in other normative contexts. Hence, I submit that they are worth much more attention than they have received from analytic philosophers.²⁶

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