Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.4

Selected Papers from the Pretoria Conference

Edited by

Masahiro Morioka

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Preface

This book is a collection of all the papers published in the special issue "Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.4: Selected Papers from the Pretoria Conference," *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.12, No.1, 2022, pp.1-115.

We held the Fourth International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life online at the University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, on January 17–19, 2022. This conference was hosted by the University of Pretoria and supported by the Waseda Institute of Life and Death Studies. We accepted about 50 presentations from around the world. Professor Cheshire Calhoun, Professor Guy Kahane, and Professor Berit Brogaard gave keynote lectures.

After the conference, we called for papers for publication from the speakers, and we accepted six papers for the special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life*. We would like to give special thanks to the anonymous referees who kindly reviewed the submitted manuscripts. The accepted papers deal with a variety of topics, such as the methodology of ethics, the meaning of affirmation, Simone de Beauvoir, and subjectivism, and they are all discussed from the perspective of the philosophy of life's meaning.

In January 2022, we were still in the midst of the Covid19 pandemic. Professor Thaddeus Metz, the chair of the conference, and supporting staff members decided to hold the conference online, and with the help of their devotion we were able to hold the three–day meeting successfully. We had many participants from around the world and we had lively discussions online. I would like to sincerely thank them for their contributions.

As the editor-in-chief, I hope that readers will enjoy the stimulating papers in this volume.

Masahiro Morioka
Professor, Waseda University
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November, 1, 2022.

Theorizing About Meaning in Life

Cheshire Calhoun[*]

Abstract

Theories of meaning in life surprisingly often provoke deep dissatisfaction. Deep dissatisfaction is not a matter of finding a theory merely inadequate but of thinking that it has altogether missed the target and is, really, a theory of something else such as excellent, admirable, significant, authentic, worthwhile, or happy lives. My main projects are to explain why deep dissatisfactions are likely to arise in this domain of theorizing. I explore the question of whether 'meaningfulness' is an essentially contested concept, the absence of success conditions for theories of meaningfulness that ethical theories have, what makes conceptions of meaningfulness conceptions of the same concept, and the importance of attending to the underlying justificatory concerns that motivate our interest in making correct judgments about what lives and activities are meaningful.

It is surprisingly difficult to construct a theory of meaning in life that a significant portion of theorists *don't* find deeply unsatisfying. It may be useful, then, to step back from theory construction and advocacy and ask why such deep dissatisfactions arise and whether there is a way of thinking about the concept of meaningfulness that makes deep dissatisfactions misplaced. I'll begin by explaining, in Section 1, what I mean by 'deep dissatisfaction.' In sections 2, 3, and 4, I'll use a comparison with theorizing in normative ethics to illuminate why deep dissatisfactions are likely to arise in theorizing about meaningfulness. That discussion will bring to the fore the importance of determining what, if anything, unifies different conceptions of meaningfulness as conceptions of the same thing. In Sections 5 and 6, I propose a way of thinking about both the concept 'meaningful' and its apparent polysemy, and in Section 7 spell out the implications of that proposal. One implication is that deep dissatisfactions are misplaced.

1. Dissatisfaction: Deep and Not

Any account of that in virtue of which something counts as an X invariably offers opportunities for *some* dissatisfaction and thus the thought that there is a better account to be had. But there is a difference between, on the one hand,

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recognizing that an account is an account of X, just an inadequate one, and, on the other hand, thinking that an account has simply missed the target and isn't, really, an account of X at all despite being put forward as one. For example, while recognizing that an account of democracy solely in terms of citizen voting is an account of democracy, many might think this an inadequate, because too simplistic, account. Or, for example, while recognizing that biological accounts of the difference between being a man and being a woman are accounts of this distinction, one might think biological accounts are inadequate for the purpose of addressing the subordination of women to men. For that, we need an account of what makes an individual belong to the social category man or woman within gender-hierarchical societies. By contrast, now discredited biological essentialist accounts of race are not merely inadequate or inadequate for the purpose for which we need an account of race but seem to have missed the target altogether by focusing on a biological fiction. Or, for example, Nozick's objection to Rawls's distributive conception of justice might be read as expressing deep dissatisfaction with a theory that simply misses the target by treating the social product as something to which no one has legitimate entitlement prior to agreement on distributive principles. In short, when a theory is thought to be deeply dissatisfying, the thought will be that the theory has missed the target, perhaps instead hitting a fiction or perhaps hitting a completely different target—not X, but Y—for which it might be a perfectly respectable account.

The charge that a theory is not simply inadequate (perhaps seriously so) but misses the target altogether is relatively uncommon. An interesting feature of debates about meaning in life is that this charge *is* made and takes the form, "This is not a theory of meaning in life, but a theory of something else," or more delicately put, "This theory fails to distinguish the evaluative notion 'meaningful' from closely related evaluative notions." Objectivists may be charged with giving us instead a theory of excellent or significant lives, hybrid theorists with giving us instead a theory of well-being or worthwhile lives, and subjectivists with giving us a theory of happy or authentic lives.

As examples, consider: Stephen Kershnar critically asks how meaningfulness differs, on Thaddeus Metz's fundamentality theory, from intrinsic value or an objective good list.[1] I have raised worries that objectivist theories reduce to

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[1] http://researcherslinks.com/current-issues/thad-metzs-fundamentality-theory-of-meaning-in-life-a-critical-review/9/11/24/html.

theories of excellent or significant lives. [2] Antti Kauppinen critiques my subjectivist account for failing to capture a distinctive meaning-dimension of evaluation and for coming close to capturing just life-satisfaction or value-fulfillment. [3] Frank Martela charges G.E. Moore with in fact "talking about worthwhileness, not the narrow concept of meaningfulness"[4]; he also rejects more subjectivist theories on the grounds "that when people are talking about integrity, autonomy, and being true to oneself, they are actually not talking about sources of meaningfulness, but about sources of authenticity."[5] Thaddeus Metz identifies Wai-hung Wong's hybrid account as an example of a view that mistakenly sympathizes with the idea that meaningful lives are worthwhile lives. Given Metz's view that 'meaningful' and 'worthwhile' are distinct notions, the implication is that theories like Wong's are theories of something else—the worthwhile. [6]

As I hope is clear from these examples, what I find unsettling is meaningfulness theories' *vulnerability* to this charge being credibly made and thus needing to be rebutted. I'm not interested in establishing that some theories really are deeply dissatisfying and should be rejected by everyone. Rather, I'm interested in understanding what makes it possible to use expressed deep dissatisfaction as an *argument strategy*.

Now, one might think that rivaling allegiances to different conceptions of meaning in life are simply to be expected; and we shouldn't be surprised if disputes seem intractable or worried if the criticisms that different groups of theorists launch at each other express deep dissatisfactions. At first glance, 'meaningful life' fits W. B. Gallie's criteria for *essentially* contested concepts—concepts which necessarily admit of rivalling conceptions and which "inevitably [involve] endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users."[7] An essentially contested concept, he proposed, is an appraisive concept of some achievement—such as democracy, a Christian life, or work of art—where the

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[2] *Doing Valuable Time: The Present, The Future, and Meaningful Living* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), ch. 2.

[3] The point is made in his review of *Doing Valuable Time, Philosophical Review* 130, no. 1 (2021):154-158, 156.

[4] "Meaningfulness as Contribution," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 55, no.2 (2017): 232-256, 242.

[5] Ibid., 247.

[6] "The Meaningful and the Worthwhile: Clarifying the Relationships," *The Philosophical Forum* 43, no. 4 (2012): 435-448, 439.

[7] W.B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955-1956): 167-198, 169.

complexity of the achievement makes it possible for different theorists to single out and differently weight its various components and thus to propose rivaling conceptions.[8] Given this, theorists of an essentially contested concept should abandon the idea that "their own use of it is the only one that can command honest and informed approval" in favor of recognizing "rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly 'likely,' but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question" since the debate provides resources for improving one's own conception.[9]

While the internal complexity of the phenomenon permits plural conceptions of an essentially contested concept, a different feature makes rivalling conceptions conceptions of the same concept. Gallie claimed that rivaling conceptions of the same concept trace their derivation "from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept."[10] Agreement on the authority of an exemplar distinguishes disputes over the proper use of a single concept from merely confused discussions of what are in fact different concepts.[11]

Unfortunately, disputes about meaningfulness arise partly from disagreement over both exemplars and the general kinds of activities that contribute to meaning. The absence of exemplars whose authority all parties recognize creates a problem in need of a solution: What makes an account one of meaningfulness rather than an account of something else, if not that it captures some authoritative exemplar? How do we tell when deep dissatisfaction is appropriate and when it is not? And most worrisomely, why think that 'meaningfulness' is a single concept rather than a plurality of distinct concepts?

We can begin to answer these questions by noting that Gallie was likely wrong to think that rivaling conceptions of the *same* essentially contested concept must be grounded in some shared, authoritative exemplar(s). Jeremy Waldron, for example, suggests that disputes over what the rule of law consists in are unified as disputes about a single concept—'rule of law'—in virtue of addressing a common problem: How can we make the law, rather than men rule? Some

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[8] There is now a sizable literature that focuses on the essentially contested nature of a wide variety of "appraisive" concepts. Some non-appraisive concepts, for example, 'gender', 'money', and 'species', also exhibit the distinctive features of an essentially contested concept (Pekka Vayrynen, "Essential Contestability and Evaluation," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 3 (2014): 471-488).

[9] Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 193.

[10] Ibid., 180. He cites the French Revolution as an exemplar in the case of the essentially contested concept of democracy.

[11] Ibid., 175-178.

essentially contested concepts are thus "solution-concepts" rather than "achievement-concepts."[12] In addressing themselves to solving the same problem that 'rule of law' picks out, disputing theorists are on the same page with respect to what an account of the rule of law should be doing even if they disagree about exemplars of the rule of law; thus, even sharp disagreements will be unlikely to descend into deep dissatisfaction that some accounts are not even on the page at all. The challenge for theorists of meaning in life is to explain what makes their disputes about a single concept—meaningfulness—rather than a confused discussion of what are in fact different concepts.

2. The Problem of Success Conditions

Fitting exemplars, solving a concept-defining problem, and serving the purpose for which we need a concept are different kinds of *success conditions* that a minimally successful theory of X might be required to meet. The problem I am drawing attention to is the absence of clear success conditions for theorizing about meaning in life. To see the problem, it's instructive to compare theorizing in normative ethics with theorizing about meaning in life.

Normative ethics has its own longstanding and seemingly intractable disagreements—notably between consequentialists and deontologists—as to the *best* account of what makes a right act right. Ethicists who reject a theory for being overly demanding, or permitting harvesting one person's organs to save many, or wrongly prioritizing moral demands over all other evaluative considerations, or not making room for special obligations or direct duties to non-persons, point to a *bull's eye* that has been missed. Nevertheless, those disagreements rarely rise to the level of deep dissatisfaction and charges that a purported ethical theory has missed the entire target and is not an ethical theory at all.[13] Why not? A crucial difference between theorizing in ethics and theorizing about meaning in life is the

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[12] Jeremy Waldron, "Is the Rule of Law an Essentially Contested Concept (In Florida)? *Law and Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2002): 137-164, 158.
[13] Deep disagreement does *sometimes* arise in ethics, for example, with respect to ethical egoism. My earlier examples of the charge being made was intended to bring out the extensive vulnerability of theories of meaning to deep dissatisfactions, and the way even major contenders are vulnerable. Charging Thaddeus Metz's theory of meaning with having failed to pick out a distinctive evaluative domain strikes me as more like charging some consequentialist theory in ethics with missing the target than like charging ethical egoism with missing the target. Thanks to one of the journal reviewers for pointing out that deep disagreement is sometimes expressed toward ethical egoism, instrumentalism, noncognitivism, and certain kinds of perfectionism.

presence of clear, agreed upon success conditions in ethics and their absence in theorizing about meaning in life.

Normative ethicists share *a large body of settled intuitions* about which acts are right and which acts are wrong against which to test the success of proposed theories. Seeking reflective equilibrium in constructing a theory and posing counterexamples to critique opponent theories are thus useful methods in normative ethics. We test the acceptability of an ethical theory by applying it and seeing if it generates verdicts that conflict with the settled intuitions that we, collectively, share. A central success condition for any ethical theory is that it deliver roughly the same verdicts as any other ethical theory with respect to a broad range of cases.

In addition to a shared "data set," clarity about the general nature of the moral enterprise also helps define the success conditions for ethical theories.

First, it's clear *to whom* judgments about morally correct or forbidden conduct must be justifiable (or more modestly, if one thinks of sentimentalists and emotivists, *with whom* we aim to share moral judgments): other people. An ethical theory that proposed that actions need only be justified to oneself, and thus endorsed individual relativism about the obligatory, permitted and forbidden would not qualify as an ethical theory.[14]

Second, it's clear what core *values* underlie the enterprise of morality and give it its point: the moral equality of persons and the regulation of social life via shareable standards. While there might be moralities in the descriptive or sociological sense aimed at preserving social hierarchies among differently valued groups of persons, a *normative* ethical theory proposing this as the point of morality would, once again, be open to the charge of not being an ethical theory at all.

Third, it's clear what underlying *justificatory concern* besides just making correct judgments ethical theories serve. We care about making correct judgments because we want to make demands on others, hold them to account, and levy punitive sanctions; and we want to be justified in doing so. Relatedly, we care about defending ourselves against mistaken charges of having failed to meet legitimate demands, and we want to be justified in rejecting those demands. A theory that did not address this pressing justificatory concern by establishing

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[14] The demands made on persons, that must be justified to them, may of course include demands to fulfill obligations to non-persons (e.g., animals or the environment) or to persons incapable of making demands on their own behalf (e.g., young children).

criteria for sorting legitimate from illegitimate demands would not look like an ethical theory at all.

Because these success conditions are clear, it's also clear when one is providing an account of rightness and when one is not (but possibly doing something else instead). By contrast, theorizing about meaning in life appears to lack the very things necessary to clearly determine when a theory of meaningful living is or is not successful:

1.   There is no large and settled body of intuitions about which activities are instances of meaningful ones. Are pastimes like working jigsaw puzzles, self-improvement activities like reading the classics of English literature, admiring the cloud-crowned mountains, friendships, traveling to foreign lands, achieving something in one's chosen occupation, public service activities done only out of duty meaningful activities, and if so, just how meaningful are they? No doubt, everyone has some intuitions about these cases. But we're likely to feel we need a theory of meaning in life to determine what we *should* think about these examples, rather than taking firm pre-theoretical intuitions about them as constraints on theory. Thus, methods of reflective equilibrium and critique by counterexample have limited utility.

2.   It isn't clear *to whom* it is most important that claims about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of particular activities be justifiable. Is it meaningfulness to others or to ourselves that matters most? Division on this question characterizes the dispute between objectivist and subjectivist approaches to meaning.

3.   It isn't clear what, if any, underlying *justificatory concern* besides making correct evaluations of the meaningfulness of particular activities a theory of meaning in life is supposed to address. Why does living meaningfully matter?

In the absence of clear, widely agreed upon success conditions, it's not surprising that there would be widespread lack of consensus about when a theory is a theory of meaningful living and when it is, really, a theory of something else.

I now take up each of these three items, starting in Section 3 with the absence

of a large, settled, and shared body of intuitions, then, in Section 4, unclarity about to whom evaluative judgments must be justifiable, and in section 5, the question of what justificatory concerns underlie our interest in making correct judgments about meaningfulness.

3. Intuitive Data for a Theory

It doesn't take a great deal of reading around in the meaning in life literature to a get a sense that our intuitions about *meaningful* activities are widely divergent. There are lots of activities we would agree are worthy of *positive evaluation.* But 'meaningful' is thought to pick out a distinctive form of value, different not only from moral and prudential value, but also from the worthwhile, the authentic, the excellent, the contributor to flourishing, and so on. A theory's picking out a distinctive value—'meaningful'—is precisely what makes it a theory of meaningfulness rather than a theory of something else. It is with respect to intuitions about what bears the distinctive value 'meaningful' as opposed to some other positive value that intuitions widely diverge.

Absent consensus on a large data set, theories of meaning in life must employ a different resource for theory construction and critique. One option is to appeal to a small set of *exemplary*—in the sense of extreme—cases of meaningful and meaningless lives. Exceptional individuals like Albert Einstein and Mother Teresa exemplify notably meaningful lives. Fictional grass blade counters and total couch-potatoes exemplify notably meaningless lives.

Appealing to exemplary exemplars from both ends of the meaning spectrum might seem an excellent substitute for a large, settled, and shared body of intuitions. Exemplary exemplars can provide test cases for any minimally adequate account of meaning in life and thus a clear success condition. Given this, examining what in exemplary lives contributes to their meaningfulness or meaninglessness, can help us identify that in virtue of which any life is meaningful.

But do exemplary exemplars provide an indisputable success condition? Notice that in taking compatibility with a set of exemplary exemplars as a success condition, one must be assuming that 'meaningful' is, at the very least, an essentially contested concept. 'Meaningful life' and 'meaningful activity' refer to some *unified phenomenon*—or to use Gallie's term, some *achievement*—that could be exemplified. But recall my earlier observation that not all concepts are like this, nor are successful concepts all assessed in relation to "authoritative"

exemplars. Some concepts, like 'rule of law,' are solution-concepts for which successful conceptions are ones that address the relevant problem. Other concepts, like 'gender' and 'power,' are purpose-concepts for which successful conceptions are adequate for a specified purpose.[15] In cases of solution- and purpose-concepts, there need not be shared, authoritative, theory-independent exemplars. The identification of exemplars instead typically depends on prior agreement on a particular *way* of solving a problem or a particular *purpose*, and thus is not theory neutral. In short, without first establishing the *kind* of success condition a conception must meet—exemplar-derived, problem-solving, purpose-serving, or something else—the use of exemplary exemplars to test accounts of meaning in life is ungrounded. The broad intuitive appeal of exemplars like Albert Einstein and Mother Teresa may result from their exemplifying, for example, *one* way of addressing a solution-concept or *one* purpose of a purpose-concept, rather than exemplifying *the phenomenon*.

In addition to resting on an undefended assumption about the kind of concept, and thus appropriate kind of success condition, an appeal to exemplary exemplars is likely to strike some as biased from the outset toward a particular conception of meaningfulness rather than being theory neutral. Exemplary exemplars strongly suggest that meaningfulness is a matter of *significance*, or *importance*, or *contribution* for or to something other than ourselves, whether that be to particular other persons, as in contribution to others' welfare, or to some sphere of human activity that could be advanced by individuals' achievements or the development of their abilities.[16] It will seem obvious to those *already* inclined toward this conception of meaningfulness that to deny that exemplarily significant lives like Mother Teresa or Albert Einstein "had substantial meaning in their lives" and that "to deny that these are good candidates for meaning in life is to misuse the term 'meaning,' or to elect to use it in a way that differs radically from the way most present-day philosophers and other thinkers do in the Euro-American literature."[17]

To those not already so inclined, Mother Teresa's and Albert Einstein's status as exemplary exemplars will seem less obvious. One's intuition might be that

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[15] See, for example, Mark Haugaard, "Power: A 'Family Resemblance' Concept," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 419-438.

[16] For an interesting discussion of why equating meaningfulness with significance or good social impact is biased, see James Tartaglia, "Metz's Quest for the Holy Grail," *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5, no. 3 (2015): 90-111.

[17] Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaningful and the Worthwhile: Clarifying the Relationships," *The Philosophical Forum* 43, no. 4 (2012): 435-448, 437.

unremarkable but mutually satisfying personal relationships are an important source of meaning.[18] In response to a Pew Research Center survey of where people find meaning in life, the number one thing that people cited as contributing to the meaningfulness of their lives was family.[19] Or one's intuition might be that Mother Teresa's long-term depression over Christ's silence about her work in India should knock her from exemplary exemplar status. Or one's intuition might be that it's just a mistake to start from such exceptional lives rather than from averagely meaningful lives.

The alternative, and more evidently theory-neutral approach, is to proceed from a list of intuitively plausible *contributors* to meaning in life (where a contributor is a *kind of activity* that meaningful lives may include, not that *in virtue of which* the activity counts as meaningful). Such a list might include both activities of high achievement and social contribution as well as personal relationships and achieving personal goals. It might, if we're trying not to presuppose any particular theory from the get-go, also include forms of self-improvement, solitary or social pastimes, involvement in cultural or political life, certain kinds of experiences, and so on.

Mentioning possible members on the list immediately suggests what the central problems with this procedure are likely to be. One is disagreement about what belongs on the list of contributors. Personal relationships may make the list because of sufficient pre-theoretical consensus that they contribute to meaningful living. But what about self-improvement activities? Or what about, as Robert Audi proposes, activities that are pleasing to God?[20] Absent settled and widely shared intuitions about the contributors to meaningful living, there's a genuine

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[18] The meaningfulness of personal relationships ends up oddly described if their meaningfulness is located solely in their *significance* to, *importance for*, or *contribution* to someone other than us. It's true that there's a kind of self-transcendence involved in relationships: we care about someone else and not just ourselves.   It's also true that in caring about another, we typically make contributions to how their lives fare. But one would think that personal relationships are meaningful also in virtue of what one gets out of those relationships for oneself, and perhaps especially because of their mutuality and thus mutual benefit. *Shared* trust, physical and emotional intimacy, and support of one another's projects, as well as *shared* history, memories, and ends such as raising a family seem to have some relevance to the meaningfulness of personal relationships. Thus, someone convinced that personal relationships contribute to meaning in life is likely to feel that a theory derived from exemplars of achievement and social contribution is a theory, not of meaningfulness, but of something else.
[19] https://www.pewforum.org/2018/11/20/where-americans-find-meaning-in-life/
[20] Robert Audi lists activities pleasing to God as one of only four items sufficient for meaningfulness—along with creativity/virtuosity, contributing to others' welfare, and loving relationships ("Intrinsic Value and Meaningful Life," *Philosophical Papers* 34, no. 3 (2005): 331-355). He hypothesizes that "any other sufficient condition will imply at least a significant degree of partial satisfaction of at least one of these criteria" (351).

risk that one's preferred list will be theory-driven rather than theory-neutral, and the doors will be open to deep dissatisfactions between theorists who begin from different lists of intuitively plausible contributors.

A second problem with proceeding from lists of contributors is that it introduces considerable *heterogeneity* into the "data" for theory construction. Having a significant impact, achieving personal goals, contributing to others' welfare, improving oneself, pursuing pastimes, and having personal relationships—all items that might appear on an intuitive list of contributors— seem valuable for very different reasons and meaningful in different ways.

Of course, heterogeneity is not a problem if the various contributors share some basic feature. After all, the sorts of acts that are morally right exhibit similar heterogeneity. Keeping promises, refraining from assaulting people, and rescuing those in life-threatening situations seem quite heterogeneous at first glance. But those seemingly heterogeneous actions share a basic feature, such as respecting persons as ends or generally maximizing utility. It might be thought that the heterogeneous contributors to meaning also share a basic feature. There is strong consensus that meaningfulness consists in part in the valuableness of life activities, and in particular, with the activity being aimed at ends that are worth pursuing for their own sake. That relative consensus, however, is not as useful in preventing deep disagreements as it might seem, because theorizing about meaning in life lacks a second success condition that theorizing in ethics has: agreement on to whom evaluative judgments must be justifiable.

4. Justifiable to Whom?

Despite consensus that meaningful activities must be valuable ones, there's considerable disagreement about *to whom* judgments of valuableness need to be justifiable. In normative ethics, consensus on to whom moral judgments must be justifiable is fixed by the underlying justificatory concern with making and subjecting ourselves to legitimate demands, as well as the value of social regulation. It's not fixed by consensus on a metaethical view about the kind of value moral value is. By contrast, absent a clear underlying justificatory concern or a value like social regulation, views about to whom judgments about meaningfulness need to be justifiable appear simply to track intuitions about the kind of value meaningful activities must have. Some theorists' intuition is that, to be meaningful, activities must be objectively valuable. Judgments of

meaningfulness must be justifiable to those (possibly merely hypothetical) others capable of making objectively correct value judgments. Given socio-historical failures to achieve correct value judgments of various activities, this option allows that activities might be meaningful even if *no one* at a socio-historical moment appreciates their being so. More commonly, individuals may lead meaningful lives while mistakenly believing they are not and fail to lead meaningful lives while mistakenly believing they are.

Others may have the intuition that meaningful activities are ones a social or cultural group considers valuable, such that given cultural changes over time, activities that were once meaningful may cease to be so. [21] Here too the individual's own assessment of their life as meaningful is not relevant to its actual meaningfulness. What matters is that judgments about the value of some activity be justifiable to some social or cultural group.

Yet other theorists have the intuition that the valuableness of an activity is determined by the subject. Individuals may value certain activities because they *take* them to be objectively or intersubjectively valuable, and thus take them to be justifiable to others. But even so, it is the individual's assessment of value that matters. Thus, meaningful lives must be justifiable as meaningful to the person who leads that life. If mistaken judgments are possible, it will only be due to the subject's mistaken assessment of what they in fact value.

Finally, yet others have the intuition that judgments of meaningfulness must be justifiable both to others and to the person whose life it is. Here, one might think the person engaged in meaningful activities must appreciate the objective or intersubjective value of what they are doing. In that case, judgments of meaningfulness would be like judgments of moral worth: in order to redound to the agent's credit, morally worthy actions must be both right actions (thus objectively or intersubjectively valuable) and done from the very reasons that make them right (thus connected with subject's perspective). So, too, for meaningfulness. If this seems too restrictive, since people may find themselves subjectively engaged with and non-alienated from what they do for reasons other than the activity's objective or intersubjective value, one might allow that justifying claims about meaningfulness to others and justifying them to oneself may not appeal to exactly the same reasons.

Because answers to the "Justifiable to whom?" question track intuitions which

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[21] Vincenzo Politi, "Would My Life Still be Meaningful: Intersubjectivism and Changing Meaning in Life," *Human Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2019): 462-479.

are not settled and widely shared, any answer will render the theory vulnerable to deep dissatisfactions. Advocates of meaningfulness-to-others, whether objectivists or intersubjectivists, may well think that subjectivists have simply missed the target by mistaking seeming meaningfulness for real meaningfulness. No account that dignifies objectively or intersubjectively worthless or trivial activities with the label "meaningful" is a plausible account of meaning. Advocates of meaningfulness-to-self may well think that objectivists and intersubjectivists have missed the target by mistaking third-personal value judgments for what is essentially a first-personal phenomenon. No account that dignifies lives that an individual doesn't care about or feels alienated from with the label "meaningful" is a plausible account of meaning.

Hybrid theorists that require both justifiability to others and justifiability to self are vulnerable from both directions: they may be charged with missing the first-personal nature of meaningfulness by requiring, in addition, justifiability to others; or with having missed the third-personal nature of meaningfulness by requiring, in addition, justifiability to self.

5. Identifying the Unifying Concept

Reflection on the range and depth of disagreements between meaning in life theorists invites a particular diagnosis—not that we have not yet hit on the one correct account, but that 'meaningful' is polysemous. 'Meaningful life' and 'meaningful activity' are used in a wide variety of senses by both theorists and ordinary persons. Being polysemous, 'meaningful life' and 'meaningful activity' naturally evoke different and competing intuitions, different views of the relevance of exemplary exemplars, different lists of contributors, and different claims about to whom evaluative judgments must be justifiable.

There's at least some recognition of this possibility in the meaning in life literature. For example, Frank Martela, after charging some accounts of meaningfulness with instead being theories of authenticity, admits the reasonableness of dividing theories of meaningfulness into accounts of authenticity-meaningfulness and contribution-meaningfulness.[22] Thaddeus Metz, after equating meaningfulness with significance, allows in a footnote that the reader may take him to be spelling out a "major swathe of talk about 'meaning in

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[22] Martela, "Meaningfulness and Contribution," 247-248.

life'" rather than the only possible reasonable interpretation of meaningfulness.[23] I myself have argued that objectivist theories collapse into theories of something else, but also registered doubts that a decisive case for this claim could be made.[24] Taking up a related question—"What is the meaning *of* life?"—Timothy J. Mawson argues that dissatisfaction with answers to that question are partially explained by failure to interpret this question as "polyvalent" and thus as in fact asking a set of different questions.[25]

If 'meaningful' is polysemous, then deep disagreements are likely misplaced. Different theories simply aim to capture different senses of 'meaningful.' But we now need some justifying explanation of *why* 'meaningful' is, or at least appears to be, polysemous. And since theorists of meaning in life take themselves to be offering conceptions of the *same concept*, we need to know what unifies different conceptions as conceptions of the same concept. Absent that, the polysemy of 'meaningful' amounts to a grab bag of different concepts.

What might unify a plurality of conceptions of 'meaningful' as conceptions of the same concept? I've argued against employing the strategy Gallie proposed for essentially contested concepts, namely, that competing conceptions are derived from one (or set of) authoritative exemplar(s), where the plurality of conceptions results from selecting different features of the complex phenomenon exemplified and differently weighing various features. Without agreement on exemplars of meaningfulness, or on the list of activities that contribute to meaning, this strategy for specifying the concept of meaningfulness is unlikely to be theory neutral or to avoid deep disagreement. For the same reason, explicating the concept of meaningfulness by means of a cluster of properties, such as purposiveness, self-transcendence, and meriting esteem and admiration—properties which different conceptions might differentially take up, yielding conceptions that bear a family resemblance to each other—also is unpromising.[26]

There is an alternative. Recall the earlier observation that some concepts are solution-concepts, where the problem can be posed as a question. 'Rule of law' is

[23] Metz, "The Meaningful and the Worthwhile," 437.
[24] Calhoun, *Doing Valuable Time,* 20.
[25] Timothy J. Mawson, "Sources of Dissatisfaction with Answers to the Question of the Meaning of Life," *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2010): 19-40. See also his *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make Our Lives More Meaningful* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
[26] Thaddeus Metz recommends this "cluster" or "family resemblance" approach to the concept of meaningfulness and proposes these three properties (*Meaning in Life* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013], ch. 2).

the concept of whatever answers the question 'How can the law rather than humans rule?' *Conceptions* specify different ways of addressing that question. Perhaps 'meaningfulness' is a solution-concept.

But how might the problem be specified without invoking meaningfulness itself? (We don't want to say that the concept of meaningfulness is the concept of whatever addresses the problem of meaning.) Talk about a addressing a 'problem' of meaning sounds very close to talk about addressing what I've called an 'underlying justificatory concern.' Recall my observation that underlying normative ethical theorizing is the concern with justifying making demands on others and being subject to their demands.

So, what justificatory concerns underlie our interest in making judgments about meaningfulness? You might think those concerns are just those expressed in the kinds of questions people ask when they start worrying about the meaningfulness of their lives, questions like: "Am I pursuing anything worth pursuing for its own sake?" "Does my life merit esteem or admiration?" "Does my life make a difference to anyone?" "Have I accomplished anything of lasting value?"[27] The concept of meaningfulness would then be the concept of whatever addresses these concerns. But notice that starting with these quite specific concerns is no better, in terms of theory neutrality, than starting with authoritative exemplars or a cluster of properties. We need a more generic specification.

Here is what I suggest: the underlying concern is with having something to say on behalf of our having a life at all or having a life that, over time, has the contents it does, where *to whom* something needs to be sayable might be ourselves, an ideal observer, fellow cultural members, or God. 'Meaningful' is the concept of whatever addresses that justificatory concern.

6. Explaining Polysemy

That generic concern, however, is an umbrella for a set of more specific concerns that reflecting on the fact of having a life and reflecting on the content of a life provoke. Some of those are existential concerns, some are concerns with the intelligibility of a life. As I describe them, keep in mind that the goal is not to precisely state these concerns or create an exhaustive list, but to get into view their

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[27] Thaddeus Metz suggests that "to ask about meaning… is to pose questions such as: which ends, besides one's own pleasure as such, are most worth pursuing for their own sake; how to transcend one's animal nature; and what in life merits great esteem or admiration" (*Meaning in Life*, ch. 2).

plurality.[28] (You may wish to express them differently, to delete some, or to add others. Just keep in mind that *properties* proposed to solve the problem of meaningfulness—i.e., a *conception* of meaningfulness—shouldn't appear in a theory-neutral statement of the justifying concern.)

Three existential concerns center, in different ways, on the contingency and finitude of our own lives. One concern arises from reflecting on the fact that it is entirely contingent that we exist. Just a tiny difference in timing on your parents' part, for example, would have meant someone else, not you, would have been born. How long you have managed to live is also contingent. You, unlike many others, have survived infancy and childhood and thus have been able lead an adult life of chosen activities. In reflecting on these contingencies, the fact that you have a life to lead at all might seem a matter of great and unearned good fortune— something you've fortuitously been able to have but potential people and those who die very young have not. Given this, an existential concern with justifying having this unearned gift of life naturally arises: What can you say on behalf of your having a life?

A second existential concern arises from reflection on mortality. When you die, the world continues on without you and any memory of who you were will be progressively lost. Both threaten to erase the significance that your life had while you were a living participant in the world around you. It will be as though you had never lived. An existential concern thus arises with how you can live in a way that is sufficiently meaningful to future others that something of you will survive beyond your death. As Joshua Lewis Thomas observes, the desire for a meaningful life is not a selfless desire that significant goals *be* achieved but that *we be the ones* to achieve them. That self-oriented desire arises from reflection on the prospect of "a future universe that no longer includes any piece of us whatsoever and no evidence that we had ever existed at all."[29] What can you say on behalf of your life's continued significance post-death?

A third existential concern arises from reflection on the finitude of a life's time

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[28] I will not address the metaphysical justificatory concern with the meaning *of* human life generally or of individual human lives, but I think it's unwise to dismiss it and the theories of meaning that address it. James Tartaglia criticizes what he calls the "new paradigm" in analytic philosophical work on meaningfulness for sidelining questions about the meaning *of* life ("Metz's Quest for the Holy Grail," *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5, no. 3 (2015): 90-111). Joshua Lewis Thomas proposes a theory that tries to address our concern with both meaning-of and meaning-in life ("Meaningfulness as Sensefulness," *Philosophia* 47 (2019): 1555-1577).
[29] Joshua Lewis Thomas, "Is the Desire for a Meaningful Life a Selfless Desire?" *Human Affairs* 29 (2019): 445-452, 451.

and the way that any activity uses up some of that time and thus uses up a bit of oneself. Thus, a concern naturally arises with how you are using your life's time. Wasting or frittering away time and expending time on less rather than more valued activities raise the worry that, looking back, you will not have much to say in answer to "What can you say on behalf of how you have spent your time?"

Not all concerns with meaningful living are existential. Some have more to do with meaning in the ordinary sense of being intelligible and making sense. Because average humans live a long time, their lives will be full of many things, some unchosen, but many chosen. This raises an intelligibility concern with how to make sense of the plurality a life contains; and since lives are lived temporally, the concern will also be with how to make sense of the temporal relation between a life's contents. What can you say on behalf of your life containing what it has, does, and will have?

Finally, as social beings, we lead our lives among and with others, and within a specific socio-cultural meaning system and set of traditions. This raises an intelligibility concern with whether your life's contents make sense to others. What can you say on behalf of the social intelligibility of what you are doing?— where that might include your activities simply making sense, or deserving social recognition, or having a place within an extended socio-cultural tradition?[30] This 'saying on behalf' might be a matter of actually saying or imagining what you might say to others or simply privately reflecting on what others might make of what you are doing; but it can also be a matter of what you might say to yourself, as a being who grasps your socio-cultural-historical world, about the intelligibility of your life's contents.

Because the problem of meaning arises in different ways—five of which I've just sketched—'meaningful' is polysemous: There are a plurality of problems of meaning, thus a plurality of sub-concepts. But 'meaningful' may or may not turn out to be *interestingly* polysemous. It's theoretically possible that a particular *conception* of meaningfulness would address all the justificatory concerns. That is, the properties the conception picks out would be relevant to cite no matter which justificatory concern with meaning we have in mind. Thus, such a

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[30] One sociological study of stone masons, academics, and refuse works discovered that special moments of recognition (such as the unveiling of the mason's renovation work on a cathedral, or graduation ceremonies) were important to a sense of meaningfulness of work, as was being able to locate their work in a centuries long tradition where skills had been transferred from one generation to the next. Catherine Bailey and Adrian Madden, "Time Reclaimed: Temporality and the Experience of Meaningful Work," *Work, Employment and Society* 31, no. 3 (2017): 3-18.

conception would not treat 'meaningful' as interestingly polysemous. And if we thought this was the *best* conception of 'meaningful,' we'd conclude that 'meaningful' isn't interestingly polysemous *tout court*.

A theory of meaningfulness, however, need not aim to address all the justificatory concerns. It might proffer a conception of what can be said on behalf of the plurality of a life's contents without aiming to elucidate what can be said on behalf of having a life at all. Indeed, insofar as many contemporary theories claim to be addressing meaning *in* life, not the meaning *of* life, they appear to be setting aside the question of what can be said on behalf of one's having a life at all. A theory that only addresses one justificatory concern or a subset of justificatory concerns would treat 'meaningful' as interestingly polysemous: differences among the justificatory concerns warrant developing different conceptions.

7. Concluding Remarks about Theoretical Implications

I set out to explain why theories of meaning in life are vulnerable to a particular argument strategy—expression of deep disagreement—and to determine whether there is a way of thinking about the concept 'meaningful' that makes deep dissatisfactions misplaced.

The picture I've developed—of the relation between the *concept* of meaningfulness, the plurality of *justificatory concerns*, and *conceptions* (that pick out meaning-relevant properties of a life or its contents)—has some useful implications. The first is cautionary. The solution-concept 'meaningful' is not narrowly tied to a single problem (as, say, 'rule of law' is), but rather to a set of problems connected with having a life with various contents across time. Thus, it is a mistake to simply *assume* that an adequate theory of meaningfulness must address all our justificatory concerns about meaningfulness. Indeed, the plurality of justificatory concerns might suggest the likelihood that any conception claiming to be *the* account of meaningfulness will seem ad hoc because it tries to address too many different problems of meaning in a single theory or because, in the attempt to avoid appearing ad hoc, it excises from the domain of meaningfulness things that seem to belong there. But in any case, whether it would be better to have a single conception of meaningfulness or different conceptions that solve different problems of meaning is something to be debated.

The more hopeful implication is that deep dissatisfaction with particular

theories is likely misplaced, and this for two reasons. Recall, to be deeply dissatisfied with a proffered conception is to think it is not a theory of meaningfulness, but a theory of something else—or more delicately put, it fails to distinguish the evaluative notion 'meaningful' from closely related evaluative notions. It's certainly appropriate to critique a theory for not having the *scope* it *purports* to have: for example, it claims to account for meaningfulness *tout court*, but in fact fits only one or some sub-concepts. But that's very different from charging the conception with not being a theory of meaningfulness *at all*. So long as the conception addresses, however partially, the problem of having something to say on behalf of our having a life at all or having a life that, over time, has the contents it does, it counts as a conception of meaningfulness. You just might think it's not a particularly good conception because it doesn't do all the work it claims to or that you think a good conception should.

The second reason deep dissatisfactions are misplaced is that the *content* of a conception of meaningfulness need not differ from the *content* of a conception of something else, say, excellent or worthwhile lives. Recall that we identify solution-concepts not by listing defining properties, but by specifying the problem: the concept is a concept of whatever addresses the specified problem. A conception is a conception of meaningfulness not because it specifies concept-identifying *properties* of meaningfulness (whether necessary and sufficient conditions or some cluster of properties), but because it addresses the problem of meaning. It could conceivably turn out that a conception of, say, excellent lives and a conception of meaningful lives specify the same properties. They will, nevertheless, be conceptions of different concepts. What makes a property set a conception of the concept 'meaningful' is not that it identifies a unique property set, but that it addresses the problem(s) of meaning.

Another implication is that we shouldn't be surprised that theorizing about meaningfulness differs from theorizing in normative ethics in the ways I suggested in the beginning: lack of a large and settled body of intuitions and unclarity about to whom something on behalf of our lives is to be offered (ourselves? God? an ideal judge? other members of our social world?). Nor should we be surprised to find disagreement both about the relevance of exemplary exemplars and about what activities, experiences, and so on belong on a list of contributors to meaningful lives. Equally, we shouldn't be surprised at disagreement about whether the value borne by meaningful activities is objective, subjective, or intersubjective; nor surprised if narrative coherence or subjective

engagement figures prominently in some conceptions but not others. Different justificatory concerns may pump different intuitions on these matters.

Finally, the account has implications for defending and critiquing theories of meaning in life. The method of reflective equilibrium, so useful in normative ethics, is not equally useful in theorizing about meaningfulness. This is not to say that appeals to intuition are useless, only that their use is less decisive, in part because more likely to be theory dependent. We may, however, be able to make appeals to intuition more useful by first specifying the problems of meaning—the justificatory concerns—a conception is designed to solve, since this may narrow the field of possible, relevant intuitions. One strategy for critiquing a theory—charging it with being, really, a theory of something else and failing to identify the distinctive value, meaningful—also turns out not to be useful. This, I trust, is a welcome result.

Is It Possible to Say 'Yes' to Traumatic Experiences?
A Philosophical Approach to Human Suffering

Masahiro Morioka[*]

Abstract

People who have encountered a tragic event and suffered from traumatic experiences can sometimes achieve, in their later lives, an affirmation of having been born to such devastating lives. But what does this "affirmation" exactly mean in such cases? In this paper, I investigate this problem from the viewpoint of philosophy of life's meaning. Firstly, I distinguish among three types of affirmations: the affirmation of survival, the affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, and the affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event. Secondly, I discuss the differences between the event that affects only one person and the event that affects many people, and which of the three aforementioned affirmations is the most important to victims. I would like to contribute to the discussion of this topic by analyzing some basic concepts concerning human suffering and despair.

1. Introduction

Some of us must have wished at least once in our lives that we had never been born into such a painful life. For example, when our loved ones are killed, or when we encounter a serious accident and become severely disabled, we must be drawn into such an idea, which can be summarized as: "If I had been decided to be born into such a life, I would have preferred not to be born in the first place."[1]

This is a life of despair. But some of us who have experienced such tragic events succeed in escaping from this despair and reach a state of mind in which we can truly think that "I am glad to have been born into this life, even though it contains a devastating, tragic event in it." Viktor Frankl, who went through unimaginable experiences in concentration camps during World War II, published the masterpiece *Man's Search for Meaning* in 1946. The original German title of that book was "*...trozdem Ja zum Leben sagen,*" which can be translated as "*Nevertheless Say(ing) Yes to One's Life*." It eloquently expresses our heartfelt

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[1] If this proposition is purified and universalized, it becomes the thesis of antinatalism, which argues that someone's having been born is always worse than their not having been born. David Benatar claims that the correctness of this argument can be demonstrated by appealing to the idea of asymmetry between pleasure and pain. I do not discuss antinatalism here because it does not play a crucial role in this paper. See Benatar (2006) and Zandbergen (2021).

craving for the affirmation we may have when we are thrust into the depths of despair.

However, "life (*Leben*)" is an ambiguous word. It has several meanings such as the state of being alive, the period between birth and death, and one's having been born. In this paper, I want to narrow our focus to the last one, one's having been born, and philosophically clarify what it exactly means to say "Yes" to one's having been born into a life that contains traumatic experiences as one of the core constituents of that life. I believe this is an important issue that today's philosophy of life's meaning must tackle with utmost urgency.

But, first of all, is it actually possible for us to affirm our having been born to lives in which a devastatingly tragic event inevitably occurs, such as a life that contains the sudden killing of our family members in traffic accidents, natural disasters, or violent crimes? At first glance, it seems almost impossible for us to accomplish that.

I remember a tragic train accident, which occurred at Amagasaki, Japan, in 2005, in which more than 100 passengers were instantly killed upon being crushed by flattened train carriages. After the event, I read a newspaper article on a young woman whose fiancé was killed in the accident in question. She fell into despair but tried her best to survive the accident. She put a photo of her fiancé on her desk and commuted to the workplace; however, a year later, she committed suicide.

Was it really possible for someone to encourage her while she was alive that someday she would be able to affirm her having been born to a life in which her fiancé was to be ruthlessly killed? I personally do not think that I could accomplish such a mission. However, I believe that it should be philosophers' task to clarify the meaning of "affirmation" in this context if there had been even the slightest chance for her to affirm her having been born to such a life. I have called this type of affirmation "birth affirmation."[2] This is the subject I tackle in this paper. In the following chapters, I would like to examine, from a philosophical point of view, how affirmations function in harsh situations such as mentioned above.

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[2] With regard to the concept of "birth affirmation," see Morioka (2021a), (2021b), (2021c), and (2022). It goes without saying that the founder of the philosophy of affirmation is Friedrich Nietzsche. I do not discuss his philosophy in this paper.

2. Literature relating to the topic

Within the field of the philosophy of life's meaning, there have been many discussions about how a negative event during one's life can be transformed positively, being influenced by the events that occur afterwards. Such discussions are helpful when investigating the possibility of an affirmation of one's having been born. In this chapter, I take up three philosophical arguments concerning this issue and briefly examine them.

The first is J. David Velleman's discussion of redemption in life.[3] He urges us to compare two lives: The first is a life in which your first ten years of marriage are unhappy and end in divorce, but you soon remarry and become happy. The second is a life in which your first ten years of marriage are unhappy, but as the relationship matures, you become happy in the end. Velleman argues that in the second case, the unhappy first ten years become "the foundation of your happiness" because that decade is "given a meaningful place in one's progress through life."[4] What happens here is that the later events "alter the meaning of earlier events, thereby altering their contribution to the value of one's life."[5] He says that in this case a previous negative event is "redeemed" narratively.[6] Likewise, Johan Brännmark expresses it concisely in such a manner that "later events and developments can change the meaning and relative importance of previous events and situations."[7] We can also find a similar discussion in Pedro Alexis Tabensky's paper (2003).

The second philosophical argument is Elizabeth Harman's discussion on preferences for loved ones.[8] Imagine your baby girl was deaf. You were able to choose a cochlear implant operation for the child, but you did not choose it for some reason. And imagine, after she has grown up, the girl being asked whether she wishes she had been cured as a child, she replies "No." In this case, Harman argues, "[i]t can be reasonable to prefer that someone one loves has come to be the person she is [without a cochlear implant], … although one recognizes that there is an alternative in which things would have been *better* [with a cochlear

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[3] Velleman (1991).
[4] Velleman (1991), p.55.
[5] Velleman (1991), p.53.
[6] Velleman (1991), p.55.
[7] Brännmark (2003), p.333. He also poses the question of whether "Primo Levi's success as an author somehow lessened the tragedy of his time spent in Auschwitz" (p.327). See also Metz (2013), pp.42-47, for Brännmark and Tabensky's arguments.
[8] Harman (2009).

implant]."[9] The reason is that if she had had a cochlear implant, she would have become a different person, with a different personality and character, from the person you love in the here and now. Harman's argument can be further generalized as this: Even if you made a bad decision about your loved one's life in the past, if it has led to a positive outcome for the both of you, it is reasonable for you to prefer the actual world that has been brought about by a bad decision to a better hypothetical world that would have been brought about by not making that bad decision. However, Harman argues, this does not necessarily mean that her bad decision that was *made at that time* was also reasonable. Even if the outcome turns out to be reasonable, it does not automatically make the original decision reasonable. R. Jay Wallace summarizes this point in such a way that a past decision is not justified by its eventual success.[10]

If we apply her discussion to a life that contains traumatic experiences, we could state the following. Firstly, if a life after a tragic event should end in a positive outcome, then it would become reasonable to prefer that life to another possible life which would have been brought about by not encountering the tragic event. This argument seems to support the idea that it should be possible for us to say "Yes" to our having been born to a life that contains traumatic experiences caused by a tragic event. Secondly, however, it does not necessarily mean that it is reasonable to justify that tragic event which has caused traumatic experiences. Here, the phrase "justify that tragic event" sounds a little strange; this is because it does not make sense to apply it, for example, to a tragic event caused by a natural disaster. We cannot say that we "justify the destruction of buildings" caused by a huge earthquake. We thus have to reinterpret the meaning of "justification" in the context of a tragic event that was not caused by a personal decision. I will discuss this point again from a different perspective in Chapter Three.

The third is Camil Golub's discussion of biographical identity. He criticizes Velleman and Harman, and progresses their discussions one step further by shifting his perspective from "preference" to "affirmation." He questions why we sometimes prefer to affirm our actual lives despite the fact that there might have been possible alternative lives which would be considered better. Golub writes,

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[9] Harman (2009), p.186. [   ] was added by Morioka.
[10]   Wallace (2013), p.127 note 51 and p.157. As Wallace clearly points out in his book, Harman's argument is a corollary of Bernard Williams's "moral luck" theory. See Chapter 4 of Wallace (2013), and Williams and Nagel (1976).

"Sometimes, however, we judge that certain lives would have been better for us, all things considered, and yet do not regret having missed out on those lives. Indeed, we affirm our actual lives when comparing them to those better alternatives."[11] The reason why such things happen, Golub argues, is because the important experiences, relationships, and projects that have occurred in our lives "have become part of who we are"[12]; in other words, they have already become part of our "biographical identity."[13]

The concept of biographical identity appears to be helpful in explaining the affirmation structure of a life that contains traumatic experiences; however, Golub does not discuss them. In his paper, he mentions a person who committed a murder in his youth, but he does not provide a detailed analysis for the case.[14] We need to create a new discussion framework that is able to provide an analytic explanation of the affirmation structure of a life that contains traumatic experiences caused by a tragic event.

3. Three types of affirmations

In this chapter, I would like to demonstrate that there are three types of affirmations for a life that contains traumatic experiences. While there have been plenty of studies on traumatic experiences in psychiatry and psychology, there are not quite as many in the field of philosophy. As Hanna Meretoja writes in her 2020 paper, this topic "is rarely discussed" in philosophy.[15] In the following discussion, I want to shed new philosophical light on the relationship between traumatic experiences and affirmation.

In preparation, let me distinguish among the following concepts: a tragic event, traumatic experiences, and a life one lives. This distinction is crucial to our discussion.

1) A tragic event that caused traumatic experiences
This is an *objectively observable event*, for example, a traffic accident or a natural disaster that caused the death of one's family member. This event occurs instantly (in the case of a traffic accident), over a short period of time

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[11] Golub (2019), p.72.
[12] Golub (2019), p.81.
[13] Golub (2019), p.82.
[14] Golub (2019), p.82.
[15] Meretoja (2020), p.23.

(in the case of a huge earthquake), or over a long period of time (in the case of repeated child abuse). I use the word "a tragic event" in a singular form in this paper with the implication that the elapsed time of the event varies from a single moment to a long period of time.[16] The effects of a tragic event usually continue to exist long after the event in question, and may even be irreversible. If a family member is killed, he or she disappears and will never come back to our world.

2) Traumatic experiences

These are *subjective experiences* caused by a tragic event. A trauma means a negative and long-lasting psychological impact that was caused by a tragic event, which includes PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome). This torments victims for a long period of time repeatedly in the forms of flashbacks, severe anxieties, and various physical symptoms. Cathy Caruth writes that it takes "the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event…."[17] I would like to use the words "traumatic experiences" in their plural form because they continuously threaten victims again and again throughout their lives. Sometimes, it feels like a truly realistic experience as if it were occurring in the here and now. Traumatic experiences do not easily go away. Some survivors say the flow of time has been frozen from the moment the event occurred; it is still out there in the midst of frozen time.[18] We can also rephrase this frozen point in time as a "traumatic rupture" or a "traumatic breaking."[19] Their life is split in half at that moment, just like when a branch of a tree suddenly breaks. The phrase "a traumatic event" is frequently used in psychological texts, but I do not use it in this paper because the word "trauma" should be used for something *subjective*, not for something *objective* such as "an event."[20] To rephrase correctly, it should be "a tragic event that has caused traumatic experiences."

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[16] Of course, it goes without saying that in cases like child abuse tragic events occur many times repeatedly. With regard to the problem of the elapsed time of a tragic event, see Meretoja (2020), p.27.
[17] Caruth (1995), p.4.
[18] van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995) uses the phrase "[h]ow the mind comes to freeze some memories." P.172.
[19] These two terms were mine. See Herman (1992, 1997), pp.89-90.
[20] For example, the DSM-5 uses the phrase "traumatic event(s)" for their PTSD criteria. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/box/part1_ch3.box16/ (Visited on March 6th, 2022).

3) One's life in which a tragic event occurs

This is *the life someone has been born into* and this is the life in which that person encountered a tragic event. This is also the life in which that person survives the tragic event. The affirmation of having been born means to be able to say "Yes" to one's having been born to this particular life that contains the tragic event. To clearly separate the concept of "one's life" both from that of "traumatic experiences" and that of "a tragic" event is fundamental to the following discussion.

Now, let us imagine a hypothetical story of an affirmation like this. First, a tragic event occurs to me, for example, one of my family members is brutally killed. I have traumatic experiences caused by that event. I am tormented by trauma. I try hard to survive. Supported by specialists and friends, I gradually come to be able to affirm my survival. The threatening force of traumatic experiences decreases, and looking back on my past experience I feel I can affirm my having had traumatic experiences. And then, looking back on the tragic event, I feel I can finally affirm the occurrence of the event.

Of course, everyone knows that such a simple affirmation process rarely occurs. In most cases, the reality is too harsh and unbearable to affirm. Keeping that in mind, let us closely examine the aforementioned process. Here, we can find three types of affirmations there: the affirmation of survival, the affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, and the affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event. Let us take a close look at those three affirmations one by one. (Hereafter, I will sometimes use a first person perspective to describe the situations.)

Affirmation One: The affirmation of survival

This is an affirmation of the fact that I have survived the tragic event I encountered in my life. Victims of a tragic event are likely to confuse the tragic event itself with their having survived their lives, and think that because they cannot affirm the tragic event, their survival does not have any positive values at all. But this judgment is wrong. It is vital to separate the value of survival from that of a tragic event and realize that the survival of a tragic event has its own positive value and dignity. This is the reason why we call victims "survivors" and try to support their endeavors to live their life after a tragic event. It is widely

known that it takes a long time to achieve this type of affirmation, sometimes up to the rest of their life.

The important thing we have to keep in mind is that an affirmation of survival does not *automatically* lead to an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences. In many cases, even after I succeed in achieving an affirmation of survival, traumatic experiences repeatedly come to me in a variety of forms, and it is very hard for me to accept those severe experiences. For the same reason, an affirmation of survival does not *automatically* lead to an affirmation of the occurrence of the tragic event that caused these traumatic experiences.

Affirmation Two: The affirmation of having had traumatic experiences

Nevertheless, reaching an affirmation of survival *facilitates the possibility* of achieving an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences. This is the affirmation that I can say "Yes" to having had traumatic experiences that were caused by a tragic event. Imagine the case where I have survived a devastating event, but one day, looking back from the here and now, I find that the very existence of the traumatic experiences I have desperately been coping with are already integrated into my life as an indispensable and irreplaceable piece that does not threaten the core of my existence. In such a case, most of us would think that I have achieved a kind of affirmation of my having had traumatic experiences.

Please pay attention to the point that what I am saying here is the "affirmation of having had traumatic experiences" rather than the "affirmation of traumatic experiences." My point is that while affirming traumatic experiences themselves is very hard, or almost impossible, to achieve, affirming "having had" traumatic experiences is not impossibly hard for us to accomplish. (Of course, this does not mean that it is easy.) This distinction is important in Affirmation Two.

In order for such an affirmation to occur, it is necessary for my recovery to have made significant progress as the result of support from specialists and intimate friends and family, and that I have finally reached the stage where I am no longer overwhelmed when encountering reminders of the traumatic experiences.

Judith Herman, a feminist psychotherapist, makes a detailed analysis of the recovery process of PTSD survivors of sexual abuses in her well known book

Trauma and Recovery.[21] Herman argues that in the final stage of recovery from trauma, although the trauma does not disappear from a survivor's life, she begins to think that "the trauma no longer commands the central place in her life."[22] And as a result, the sense that "one's own troubles are 'as a drop of rain in the sea'" comes to her. Here, "[h]er recovery is accomplished; all that remains before her is her life."[23] This is the situation that I have in mind when I talk about the affirmation of "having had" traumatic experiences. It is a long journey to get to this stage, but it is not impossible.

I think that there must be some positive aspect in having had traumatic experiences that could contribute to survivors' recovery. For example, by interacting with supporters and intimate friends and family, survivors may come to be able, for the first time, to believe the power of compassion, realize the meaning of human dignity, and better understand the pain and suffering of other people. These discoveries will create in their minds the idea that even having had traumatic experiences can have positive aspects, which are considered necessary for them to affirm having had trauma. Psychologists have called these types of positive transformation of personality after experiencing trauma "post traumatic growth."[24] Of course, philosophically speaking, the question of "What is growth?" remains a crucial point for their psychological research, but it seems apparent that post traumatic growth shares certain crucial aspects of survivor recovery with the affirmation of having had traumatic experiences.

Golub's concept of "biographical identity," as discussed in the previous chapter, might also be helpful to understand this sort of affirmation dynamics. Past negative experiences can constitute an important and positive element of a survivor's biographical identity when she tries to cope with traumatic experiences in the final stage of her recovery.

Affirmation Three: The affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event

Achieving an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences subsequently *facilitates the possibility* of achieving an affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event. This is the affirmation that I can say "Yes" to the fact that a tragic event

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[21] Herman (1992, 1997)
[22] Herman (1992, 1997), p.195.
[23] Herman (1992, 1997), p.236.
[24] Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004).

occurred to me in the past. It also means that I can say I am glad I encountered that tragic event.

The tragic event in question is *objectively observable* event, which is completely different from *subjective* traumatic experiences. Once I succeed in achieving an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, then it becomes logically and theoretically possible for me to proceed to an affirmation of the occurrence of the tragic event itself. Here, again, please keep in mind that I distinguish the affirmation of "the occurrence of the tragic event" from that of "the tragic event." What survivors can affirm is the *occurrence* of an event, not the *content* of an event.[25] This is because the focal point of survivors' concern is the fact that although there had been the possibility that the event did not come into being, in reality the event did come into being. In other words, survivors are tormented by the fact that it occurred and the opposite did not occur. The point is the event's coming into being.

An affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event is very hard to achieve. However, there are people who finally come to this type of affirmation. Imagine the case in which a man encountered a tragic event and fell into despair, but in his struggle to escape from it, he realized for the first time that he had been supported by the hidden goodwill of the people surrounding him, and he finally came to think that "I am glad I encountered the tragic event because it made me realize the truth that a human being is made alive by other people's love and compassion." I think that this is one of the typical examples of the affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event. You can easily recall similar stories and narratives in world literature and religious texts.[26]

It is worth noticing that if we have come to an affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event, then we have to be able to affirm a new state of affairs caused

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[25] This point holds true through three affirmations. In the affirmation of survival, what is affirmed is "survival," not my life itself. In the affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, what is affirmed is my "having had," not the "traumatic experiences" themselves. In the occurrence of a tragic event, what is affirmed is "the occurrence," not "a tragic event."

[26] A difficult problem arises from the relationship between my affirmation of a tragic event and the meaning of that affirmation for the deceased person. For example, imagine the case in which I affirm the occurrence of the death of my sister in a traffic accident. But what about the meaning of the occurrence for the deceased sister herself? Her life was brutally ended and she was never able to live after a certain point in her life. Even if I can affirm the occurrence of the event, can it be the same as the affirmation of the value of death that occurred to her? Is it really possible for me to affirm the occurrence of the death that directly occurred to her? Her death is an observable event for me, but is not an observable event for herself. The affirmation of the former should not be the same as that of the latter. This is a very difficult problem to answer, and future clarification is needed. I would like to thank Professor Robert Allinson (Soka University of America) for opening my eyes to this problem.

by the tragic event. For example, if I have come to an affirmation of the occurrence of having been hit by a car out of my own carelessness, then I have to be able to affirm my current life in a wheelchair caused by the accident.

In Affirmation Three, I affirm my survival, my having had traumatic experiences, and the occurrence of a tragic event, however, I strongly argue that events similar to the one that caused my traumatic experiences must never be repeated again in the future, in my life and any other lives, in any parts of the world. I can say "Yes" to the occurrence of a tragic event in the past, but this does not lead to the justification of future occurrences of the same kind. It must be stopped in the here and now.

Please remember Harman and Wallace's argument that a past decision is not justified by its eventual success. What I argued in the previous paragraph is almost the same as their discussion, although the direction of the inference is completely opposite. While they argue that a past decision is not justified by a future success, I argue that a future occurrence is not justified by the affirmation of the occurrence of a past event. This is the place where the philosophy of justification and that of affirmation sharply cross.

4. Some further discussions on affirmation

The distinction among the three types of affirmations leads us to the following two philosophical arguments. The first concerns the roles of experiences and the event. The second is the fundamentality of the affirmation of survival.

[Roles of experiences and the event]
The difference between Affirmation Two and Affirmation Three clearly stands out when we discuss the affirmation of a tragic event that involves multiple people.

Firstly, let us think about the case in which the victim of a tragic event is only me, that is, for example, the case in which I fell in a river out of my own carelessness and I was forced to live in a wheelchair as my legs were paralyzed.[27] In this case, just as I discussed in the previous chapter, it is possible for me to achieve Affirmation Three, thinking that "I am glad I encountered the tragic event because it made me realize the truth that a human being is made alive by other people's love and compassion."

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[27] This never means that a life in wheelchair is generally worse than a life without the need for a wheelchair.

Secondly, let us think about the case in which there are multiple victims of a single tragic event, for example, the case in which one of my family members (say, a sister) is brutally killed by a devastating traffic accident. Not only me, but other family members of mine fall into despair. In this case, it may be possible for me to achieve an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, but it may be almost impossible for me to affirm the occurrence of that event because while the former is a matter of my *subjective* affirmation, that is to say, the former primarily relates to me, the latter is a matter of a *shared* event among our family members.[28]

Imagine what would happen if I should say loud and clear, in front of my family members, "Now I have achieved an affirmation of the occurrence of the death of my sister." If other family members have not reached the same affirmation, they would probably be shocked to hear my statement. Although my affirmation is no more than one interpretation of the shared event, it may sound as if it were a universal interpretation other family members should follow, which might place a tremendous pressure on my family members' understandings of the event. Because we can easily foresee such dynamics, it becomes very difficult for us to achieve an affirmation of the occurrence of an event in case it is shared by our friends and family. However, on the other hand, with regard to my subjective affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, we can ontologically separate my affirmation from other intimate people's affirmations, and say "I have achieved an affirmation of my own experiences, but that is totally different from yours, so I fully understand and sympathize that you are suffering from your own traumatic experiences even today." Of course, an affirmation of the occurrence of my traumatic experiences can be directly connected to those of other family members, and there must be cases in which until their trauma heals, my trauma will never heal either. Nevertheless, even in such a case, traumatic experiences that occur to me are ontologically separate from those that occur to other persons.

Let us expand upon this point more broadly. What about the dropping of atomic bombs? Nearly 80 years have passed since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The majority of the direct victims are already deceased but there are still living survivors. Plus, there are their relatives and children who know the survivors' suffering and struggles. Among them, there are still many who cannot affirm the occurrence of the dropping of atomic bombs onto civilians and children. In such a circumstance, is it really possible for survivors who have achieved an

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[28] In conversations, we sometimes use the phrase "shared experiences," however, from the perspective of this paper, we should say "people's experiences caused by a shared event" instead.

affirmation of that tragic event to openly affirm it in front of other suffering survivors? If they make their voice public, it may further torment other victims who have not reached a state of affirmation. Taking this possibility seriously, those who near their affirmation might refrain from achieving it and intentionally suppress their own healing process. Survivors of a tragic event that involves a large number of people are placed in a highly complicated situation. In the cases of extremely devastating events such as atomic bombs, Holocaust, and a huge train accident, it is *psychologically* very difficult for survivors to affirm their occurrences.

I do not have any clear-cut answer to this complicated problem, but the concept of "collective victimhood" might be helpful in disentangling it. When a group of people become victims of violence, they are forced to experience severe suffering, trauma, and distress; however, according to Masi Noor et al., their experiences are not homogenous.[29] One person's psychological relation to a violent action is wholly different from that of another person. Some victimizations are made directly and others are made indirectly. It is interesting that Noor et al., too, distinguish the concept of *psychological* collective victimhood from that of *objective* collective victimization.[30] There are other scholars who use the term "collective trauma" to describe a psychological dimension of collective victimhood. For example, Saul Friedländer analyzes collective trauma that was shared by Holocaust (Shoah) survivors in Israel and argues that collective trauma is considered different from individual trauma.[31] This kind of approach in the field of social psychology may shed new light on our philosophical investigation into affirmation dynamics.[32]

[The fundamentality of the affirmation of survival]

Let us move on to another important question. That is the question of which type of affirmation is needed for a person who encountered a tragic event to achieve an affirmation of having been born (birth affirmation): Are all three types of affirmations required, or is just one type of affirmation sufficient? My answer is that Affirmation One suffices for that purpose. Even if I cannot affirm my having had traumatic experiences, and even if I cannot affirm the occurrence of a

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[29] Noor et al. (2017), p.122.
[30] Noor et al. (2017), p.121.
[31] Friedländer (2016), p.317.
[32] The term "the affirmation dynamic" is R. Jay Wallace's one. Wallace (2013), pp.97-98.

tragic event, if I can achieve an affirmation of my survival of a tragic event, it will certainly be able to lead to an affirmation of coming into existence to my life. The reason is that affirming my survival prepares a firm ground on which I can look back on the whole process of my life from my birth to the present day and evaluate it positively even if it contains traumatic experiences. And if I can positively evaluate the whole process of my life up until the present, then it can naturally bring me to an affirmation of my having been born to this particular life. Of course, logically speaking, an affirmation of survival does not directly entail an affirmation of one's coming into existence, but it is not strange to think that a person's having survived a tragic event and having come to positively evaluate their life up until the present prepares a firm ground on which that person can acquire an affirmation of having been born to her life. This is what I call the fundamentality of the affirmation of survival.

There is a common misunderstanding that in order to affirm our having been born, we have to affirm each and every event or subjective experience that happens in their lives, but this is wrong. If I am allowed to speak rhetorically, to affirm our having been born is to affirm our whole life that is filled with events and experiences that can never be affirmed at all. And if we can only affirm our survival, it will open the door to an affirmation of our having been born, even if our lives are full of regrettable events or repeated devastating experiences. The affirmation of survival is the most fundamental of the three. Our survival is great as it is, a survived life is full of dignity, and nothing has to be added to it.

Then, what about the value of Affirmations Two and Three? I think these two affirmations should be considered additional blessing that unexpectedly knock on survivors' doors during their struggles to heal their wounds and reconstruct their lives. I do not think that those two affirmations should be considered a goal for survivors because such a goal-setting might run the risk of excessively suppressing survivors' recovery.

Finally, let us think a little about the relationship between affirmation, meaning, and happiness.

Iddo Landau writes in his book *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* that many of his neighbors and relatives in Jerusalem were Holocaust survivors and they went through "very traumatic experiences." He says that "they never stopped feeling intense sorrow and having painful memories"; nevertheless, some of them led "meaningful (and sometimes even happy) lives." And some were "happy

overall." [33] Here, Landau discusses traumatic experiences in terms of meaningfulness and happiness. Although his discussion is moving and persuasive, I must say that leading a happy and meaningful life is completely different from affirming one's having been born. It might be possible for a person who has encountered a devastatingly tragic event to feel happiness or meaningfulness in their later life, but it cannot be easy for them to say "Yes" to their having been born into a life that is destined to contain such tragedy.

There seems to be a tremendous gap between "meaningfulness or happiness" and "affirmation." We can explain this gap as follows. In the case of meaningful life and happiness, all we need to do is stay inside our actual lives and concentrate on making our ongoing lives meaningful and happy. On the other hand, in the case of affirmation, we have to step outside of our actual lives, and compare our actual lives with other possible lives in which the tragic event had never occurred, and examine whether we can believe that we never would wish for our actual lives to be replaced by any other possible lives. This meta-analysis like process is crucial to an affirmation of having been born, and I believe that it makes the affirmation of having been born more difficult to achieve than a meaningful or happy life.[34] The hurdle for affirmation seems to be set higher than meaningfulness or happiness. This is the place where the philosophy of affirmation and the philosophy of happiness or meaning sharply clash.

5. Conclusion

With all of these discussions in mind, let us think again about how to talk to a person who is in a similar situation to the woman whose fiancé was brutally killed in the train accident I mentioned in the first chapter of this paper. One of the most important things we can do as philosophers would be to show her a way to separate her survival itself from her repeated traumatic experiences and the tragic event she encountered. Once she succeeds in separating them, she might be able to find that what she has to protect and cherish most is her survival, on which the dignity and irreplaceability of her life is concentrated.

However, after encountering the tragic death of her fiancé, achieving an affirmation of survival would be tremendously difficult for her because however hard she may try to affirm her survival, she would repeatedly be forced to face the

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[33] Landau (2017), p.172.
[34] Any theories of happiness or meaningful lives do not require this kind of process.

harsh reality that her fiancé was killed in the accident and will never come back to her. The despair she has to endure would be unimaginable.

What would happen if such a person were asked to imagine a situation in which the deceased fiancé was still alive in heaven and looked down on her. If he really loves her in heaven, what would he say to her? It would be, "Please do not cry every day, because I am living well here," and he might add to it, "Forget the event, affirm what happened, and lead a happy life from now!" To imagine what a deceased person would reply is not a strange action. For example, a conversation such as "What would our late father think if he knew?" is frequently exchanged among ordinary people in everyday life. Hence, by imagining what her fiancé would reply to her, she might be encouraged to continue living her life and might come one step closer to an affirmation of her survival.

But this is no more than speculation. The question, "How can we achieve an affirmation of survival?" cannot be fully answered by philosophical investigations only. We need a positive collaboration between philosophy and psychology to tackle the problems of affirmation.[35] In this paper, I have attempted to clarify, from a philosophical point of view, the affirmation structure of a life that contains traumatic experiences caused by a tragic event and I have examined the relationship between three types of affirmations and the affirmation of having been born (birth affirmation). This field is still in its infancy; I thus hope that my discussion in this paper will contribute to the development of future affirmation studies.[36]

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[35] For example, psychological research on the relationship between self-affirmation and resilience is also helpful. See Steele (1988) and Sherman and Cohen (2006).

[36] One of the philosophical problems I was not able to discuss in this paper is the problem of what it actually means to *affirm* something in the context of the philosophy of life's meaning. This is left to our future research. See Morioka (2021a).

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Why Beauvoir Is Not a Subjectivist about Meaning in Life

Kiki Berk*

Abstract

This paper answers the question of how Simone de Beauvoir's view on meaning in life ought to be categorized within the standard theoretical framework in contemporary analytic philosophy. According to this framework, theories of meaning divide into four main categories: supernaturalism, nihilism, subjective naturalism, and objective naturalism. Contemporary philosophers typically classify existentialists (including Beauvoir) as subjective naturalists, and some of Beauvoir's own writings seem to support this interpretation. A careful and systematic examination of Beauvoir's work, however, does not support this view. Morality and the value of freedom provide objective constraints on Beauvoir's view of meaning in life. Since Beauvoir's position combines both subjectivist and objectivist elements, it is best categorized as a "hybrid" position.

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir's views on meaning in life have received very little attention in the contemporary analytic debate. In a previous paper, I began addressing this oversight by offering a systematic account of Beauvoir's view on meaning in life based on various writings from her vast oeuvre.[1] This paper builds on this previous work. In particular, it answers the question of how Beauvoir's view on meaning in life ought to be categorized within the standard theoretical framework in analytic philosophy.

According to this framework, theories of meaning divide into four main categories: supernaturalism, nihilism, subjective naturalism, and objective naturalism. Contemporary philosophers typically classify existentialists (e.g., Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir) as subjective naturalists, and some of Beauvoir's own writings seem to support this interpretation. A careful and systematic examination of Beauvoir's works, however, does not support this view. In this paper I argue that Beauvoir's position combines both subjectivist and objectivist elements and so is best categorized as a "hybrid" position. However, as I explain in the paper, this position is significantly different from other views that have been

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[1] Kiki Berk, "Beauvoir's Philosophy of Meaning in Life," in *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (June 2021): 60-77.

classified in this way, such as that of Susan Wolf.

This paper has six parts. I begin by explaining why Beauvoir is neither a supernaturalist nor a nihilist (section 1). Next, I offer reasons for thinking that Beauvoir is a subjective naturalist (section 2) and go on to identify and explain the lesser-known objectivist elements in her view (sections 3 and 4). I then discuss how Beauvoir's view has been mischaracterized in the literature and how it ought to be categorized instead—as a hybrid view (section 5). I finish the paper with a few concluding thoughts (section 6).

1. Why Beauvoir Is Neither a Supernaturalist Nor a Nihilist

Beauvoir is clearly not a supernaturalist. I here understand supernaturalism as Metz defines it, namely as "the general view that what constitutes, or is at least necessary for, meaning in life is a relationship with a spiritual realm."[2] As an atheist, Beauvoir does not believe in God, and there is no reason to think that she believes in anything supernatural or spiritual, either. Beauvoir therefore lacks the necessary beliefs for being a supernaturalist. In fact, her view is quite the opposite: Beauvoir thinks that God would not be able to give our lives meaning even if he did exist.

Beauvoir criticizes the idea that God can be a source of purpose and meaning in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. She considers that, if there is a God, then all we need to do is his will. This raises the question of what God's will is. Beauvoir considers two options. According to the first, there is no distance between God's "project" and his "reality," meaning that "what he wills is; he wills what is."[3] This would mean that human beings could do whatever they want, because God wills all that is.[4] In an example from Beauvoir, this led a heretical sect in the twelfth century to "[squander] their lives in joyous orgies."[5] If it is the case that God wills all that is, then there is no point in turning to God to make our actions or our lives meaningful: "If [man] wants to give meaning to his behavior, he should not address himself to this impersonal, indifferent, and complete God."[6]

According to the second option, the will of God is not what "is" but what "has to be." If this is the case, then the issue is that it is not clear what God wants. As

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[2] Metz 2013: 79.
[3] Beauvoir 2004: 102.
[4] That is, assuming that God does not want humans to do things they cannot do.
[5] Beauvoir 2004: 103.
[6] Beauvoir 2004: 103.

Beauvoir wonders: "Does God want the believer to massacre the unfaithful, burn the heretics, or tolerate their faith? Does he want him to go off to war or to make peace? Does he want capitalism or socialism?"[7] Beauvoir's worry is that, if there were a God, then he would always have to reveal his will to human beings, with all the complications this creates (in particular, how do we know this is really God?). God himself would not be able to give human beings any guidance directly: "God, if he existed, would therefore be powerless to guide human transcendence. Man is never in situation except before men, and this presence or this absence way up in heaven does not concern him." [8]

There is more to say about Beauvoir's views on God, but for our purposes this suffices to show that Beauvoir does not think that meaning in life depends on the existence of God, from which it follows that Beauvoir is not a supernaturalist.

It is less obvious that Beauvoir is not a nihilist, where nihilism is understood as the view that life is meaningless. In fact, atheist existentialists have sometimes been interpreted as nihilists. Sartre, for example, has often been interpreted (wrongly, I think) as a nihilist. But there are compelling reasons to think that Beauvoir is not a nihilist. The best evidence for this conclusion is that in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir rejects "the nihilistic attitude," as she calls it. Beauvoir defines the nihilistic attitude as follows: "Conscious of being unable to be anything, man then decides to be nothing. We shall call this attitude nihilistic."[9] At face value, the nihilistic attitude is different from the theory of nihilism as it is defined and understood in the contemporary debate about meaning in life. However, in her rejection of the nihilistic attitude, Beauvoir rejects nihilism as well. This is apparent from the following passages:

> The nihilist is right in thinking that the world possess no justification and that he himself is nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and to make himself exist validly.[10]

> The fundamental fault of the nihilist is that, challenging all given values, he does not find, beyond their ruin, the importance of that universal, absolute end which freedom itself is.[11]

[7] Beauvoir 2004: 104.
[8] Beauvoir 2004: 105.
[9] Beauvoir 1948: 52.
[10] Beauvoir 1948: 57.
[11] Beauvoir 1948: 57-8.

These quotations make it clear that Beauvoir is not a nihilist in the contemporary sense of the word. According to Beauvoir, the universe does not contain any essence, values, or meaning in itself; it is up to human beings to bring these things into the world.

Another important piece of evidence that Beauvoir is not a nihilist is that in several of her works she discusses ways in which our lives can be more or less meaningful, which implies that life is not necessarily devoid of meaning, and that it is possible to give life meaning. For example, in *The Coming of Age* Beauvoir explains how the lives of elderly people can be more or less meaningful depending on how privileged they are. She discusses how many uneducated laborers, who have been exploited by the system their whole lives, struggle to make their lives meaningful in old age because they don't have any projects of their own upon which to fall back after retirement. For example: "The reason that the retired man is rendered hopeless by the want of meaning in his present life is that the meaning of his existence has been stolen from him from the very beginning."[12] And: "Even if decent houses are built for them [retired laborers], they cannot be provided with the culture, the interests and the responsibilities that would give their life a meaning."[13] Beauvoir makes it very clear that she does not think the lives of the elderly are inherently less meaningful; this is merely the result of their situation. Living a meaningful life is very well possible, according to Beauvoir, also for the elderly: "There is only one solution if old age is not an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work."[14] This is why the lives of the privileged elderly do not necessarily decrease in meaning, and why Beauvoir thinks we ought to change society so that everyone can enjoy this privilege. Remarks such as these in *The Coming of Age* suggest that Beauvoir thinks that our lives are not altogether meaningless, from which it follows that she is not a nihilist.

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[12] Beauvoir 1972: 542.
[13] Beauvoir 1972: 542.
[14] Beauvoir 1972: 540.

2. Why Beauvoir Seems to Be a Subjectivist

There are much better reasons to think that Beauvoir is a subjective naturalist. Before we look at these reasons, let's define "subjective naturalism" (which I will sometimes refer to as "subjectivism") and distinguish it from "objective naturalism" (or simply "objectivism"). I am here understanding subjective naturalism, as Metz does, as the theory that "what makes a life meaningful depends on the subject."[15] Given that, on this theory, meaning depends on the subject, it follows that meaningful lives can vary greatly. Metz expresses this idea as follows: "subjectivism is the abstract idea that meaningful conditions vary, depending on the subject."[16] Subjectivism, therefore, seems to involve two closely connected components: (i) meaning depends on the subject, and (ii) meaningful lives can vary greatly between subjects. For example, a subjectivist might think that a person's life is meaningful just in case one thinks it is, from which it follows that two very different lives might be equally meaningful, and two very similar lives might vary greatly in meaningfulness.[17] For the objectivist, on the other hand, "certain states of affairs in the physical world are meaningful 'in themselves', apart from being the object of propositional attitudes."[18] This means that those states of affairs are meaningful independently of subjects in general and any subject in particular. According to the objectivist, "some conditions are such that they ought to be wanted, chosen, valued, and so on, even if people have not done so."[19] This means that certain projects and lives are inherently more meaningful than others, no matter how anyone experiences them or what anyone thinks about them.

Given these definitions of subjective and objective naturalism, Beauvoir appears to be a subjective naturalist. There are at least three reasons to think this. First, subjectivism about meaning meshes perfectly with the rest of Beauvoir's worldview. Beauvoir appears to be a subjective naturalist in virtue of being an existentialist. As an existentialist, Beauvoir thinks that nothing is inherently meaningful or valuable but rather human beings introduce values and meaning into the world through their actions. One of the defining features of existentialism

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[15] Metz 2013: 164.
[16] Metz 2013: 19.
[17] Metz also uses more fleshed-out and specific definitions of subjectivism, but I am here sticking to this more general definition of subjectivism.
[18] Metz 2013: 165.
[19] Metz 2013: 165.

is that it is up to individuals to shape their own lives, to "make" themselves, and to determine how to live. Since existence precedes essence, human beings are free to create their own meaning in life, and nothing—including human nature, the meaning of life, and values—is predetermined. Beauvoir herself attributes subjectivism to existentialism: "By affirming that the source of all values resides in the freedom of man, existentialism merely carries on the tradition of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel…"[20] Existentialism and subjective naturalism fit together, which explains why Metz mentions existentialism as a paradigmatic example of subjective naturalism about meaning in life.[21]

Second, Beauvoir seems to defend subjective naturalism in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* she claims that projects are not inherently meaningful but instead are given meaning by subjects. As she puts it: "A project is exactly what it decides to be. It has the meaning that it gives itself. One cannot define it from the outside."[22] And: "In truth, only the subject defines the meaning of his action."[23] Human beings are therefore the source of meaning and value in the world: "It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged."[24] And: "There exists no absolute value before the passion of man, outside of it."[25] In *Pyrrhus and Cineas,* Beauvoir makes the point repeatedly that things such as worth, utility, and progress don't have any meaning except from a particular point of view. In other words, nothing has inherent value or meaning. She writes, for example, "How does one decide what is worth the most in itself: the life of a cathedral builder or that of a pilot?"[26] And: "The words 'utility', 'progress', 'fear' have meaning only in a world where the project has made points of view and ends appear."[27] And in the conclusion of this book, Beauvoir writes about the negative power within her, which releases her of "the illusion of false objectivity."

Third, Beauvoir seems to oppose objective naturalism by rejecting the very notion of objective values in the first place. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir discusses different "attitudes," one of which is "the serious mind." Just as

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[20] Beauvoir 1948: 17.
[21] See Metz 2013: 169.
[22] Beauvoir 2004: 100.
[23] Beauvoir 2004: 114
[24] Beauvoir 1948: 15.
[25] Beauvoir 1948: 11.
[26] Beauvoir 2004: 127.
[27] Beauvoir 2004: 141.

Beauvoir rejects the nihilistic attitude, she also rejects "the serious attitude," which is to regard values as being objective. In her own words:

> The serious mind claims to separate the end from the project that defines it and to recognize in it an intrinsic value. He believes that values are in the world, before man, without him. Man would only have to pick them. But Spinoza and Hegel, more definitively, have already dissipated this illusion of false objectivity.[28]

> We must first turn away from the errors of false objectivity. The serious mind considers health, fortune, education, and comfort as indisputable goods whose worth is written in heaven. But he is duped by an illusion; ready-made values whose hierarchy is imposed upon my decisions do not exist without me. What's good for a man is what he wants as his own good.[29]

> The serious man gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned.[30]

It should not come as a surprise, then, that Beauvoir has often been interpreted as a subjectivist in the literature. For example, Shannon Mussett writes: "For Beauvoir, one's project is in no way predetermined or valuable in itself. What I choose to do takes on meaning and value by the very fact that I choose it."[31] Similarly, Gwendolyn Dolske says of Beauvoir that "she suggests that meaning must be pursued rather than provided from an external source."[32]

These three pieces of evidence (Beauvoir's existentialism, her pro-subjectivist comments, and her anti-objectivist comments) provide support for the position that Beauvoir is a subjective naturalist. Nevertheless, things are not as simple as they seem, as I will argue in the next two sections.

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[28] Beauvoir 2004: 99.
[29] Beauvoir 2004: 126-7.
[30] Beauvoir 1948: 46.
[31] Mussett 2006: 233.
[32] Dolske 2015: 112.

3. Why Beauvoir Is Not a Subjectivist I: Freedom

Although there are reasons to think that Beauvoir is a subjectivist about meaning, the status of freedom as a value complicates this interpretation. In order to understand why, we need to learn more about Beauvoir's views on values in general and on the value of freedom in particular.

For Beauvoir, a project is valuable to us as soon as we choose to pursue it and in virtue of our choosing to pursue it. According to Beauvoir, choosing to pursue something is valuable because doing so is an expression of our freedom, and freedom itself has value. The centrality of freedom in existentialist thought cannot be overstated. When describing existentialism, Beauvoir writes: "as for us, whatever the case may be, we believe in freedom."[33] Not only is freedom the central value, the expression of human freedom (namely, choosing) creates all other value and meaning in the world. Freedom is the "primary value," because it is the value that is the source of all other values. This is why Beauvoir calls freedom the "universal, absolute end from which all significations and all values spring."[34]

Beauvoir's position that freedom is the source of all other values highlights the special status of freedom in Beauvoir's philosophy. But what exactly is the nature of this special status? On the one hand, Beauvoir seems to suggest that freedom is *objectively valuable* when she writes, "The fundamental fault of the nihilist is that, challenging all given values, he does not find, beyond their ruin, the importance of that universal, absolute end which freedom itself is."[35] On the other hand, Beauvoir apparently resists this conclusion when in the same book she writes, "[Freedom] is not a ready-made value which offers itself from the outside." [36] The latter quotation suggests that freedom is only *subjectively valuable*, that is, has value because we choose to give it value. So, which is it?

There is a noteworthy parallel here with Sartre's philosophy, for Sartre finds himself in the same predicament when it comes to his own views on freedom. Like Beauvoir, Sartre seems to reject the view that there are any objective values, including freedom, and yet he describes freedom in the same way that Beauvoir does, namely as being the primary value which gives value to everything else.

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[33] Beauvoir 1948: 23.
[34] Beauvoir 1948: 24.
[35] Beauvoir 1948: 57-8.
[36] Beauvoir 1948: 24.

Sartre scholars have noticed this tension in Sartre and offered a number of different explanations for it. In *Freedom as a Value*, for example, David Detmer diagnoses this tension in Sartre's philosophy as a shift in thinking from an early to a later period. "We have seen … [that] the early Sartre defends an extreme form of ethical subjectivism. However, we have also seen… that there are objectivist strains running through Sartre's writings in all stages in his career, becoming increasingly prominent in his later writings."[37] Whereas Sartre in his early works is a subjectivist about all values, including freedom, he later admits that freedom must be objectively valuable. As Detmer writes: "In his later works, however, Sartre seems to mean by this claim [that freedom is the "highest" or most important value] that we are morally *obliged* to choose freedom, and to make our subsidiary choices on the basis of their tendency to promote or diminish freedom."[38] Whereas the early Sartre believes human beings *invent* all values, the later Sartre holds that some values (in particular, freedom) are *discovered*.

While it is not entirely clear whether Beauvoir undergoes a parallel shift in views from an early to a later period (more on which later), I do think that the position which, according to Detmer, Sartre ends up holding—namely, that freedom is an objective value—is best understood as Beauvoir's considered view. Certainly, Beauvoir suggests at times that all values are in some sense subjective, but she is also clearly committed to the view that freedom has objective value. The latter seems so indispensable to her overall philosophy, both in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that this must be what she thinks. It is clear from her writings that she thinks that a meaningful life is a free life. But to define a meaningful life as a free life is to reject pure subjectivism (whether we should call her view "objectivist" or something else instead is an issue to which I will return in section 5). When Beauvoir says that all values are in some sense subjective, either she doesn't realize that elsewhere she is committed to the existence of at least one objective value (namely, freedom), or else what she really means to say is that all values depend, in some sense, on the subject.[39]

Even though Beauvoir is virtually always regarded as a subjectivist in the literature, my view that freedom is an objective value for Beauvoir finds some support in the literature, including the work of Jonathan Webber. Webber uses the

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[37] Detmer 1986: 203.
[38] Detmer 1986: 203.
[39] Arguably the latter is true even if, strictly speaking, freedom is an objective value, for how freedom gets expressed varies greatly from individual to individual, and so is subjective in a loose sense of the word.

term "human agency" to refer to that which we have been referring to as "freedom." (Freedom should be understood as freedom of choice, which human beings exercise through their agency.) And Webber concludes that human agency has objective value for Beauvoir: "The value of human agency … cannot be a subjective value dependent on having some specific project. … you must accept the value of human agency regardless of which projects you in fact pursue. That is, you must accept that human agency is objectively valuable."[40]

4. Why Beauvoir Is Not a Subjectivist II: Morality

We have just established that Beauvoir is not a pure subjectivist because she thinks that a meaningful life is a free life. But it turns out that there is another objective constraint on the meaningfulness of our projects on Beauvoir's view. The constraint in question is that projects that infringe on other people's freedom are absurd and therefore meaningless. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, for example, Beauvoir argues that Pyrrhus's project of conquering the world is ultimately meaningless, not for the reasons Cineas gives (which Beauvoir rejects), but because this project infringes on other people's freedom. Likewise, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir gives oppression as an example of an absurd, and therefore meaningless, project. In her words: "A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied."[41] And also: "If the oppressor were aware of the demands of his own freedom, he himself should have to denounce his oppression."[42] For Beauvoir, then, there is an objective constraint on which kinds of projects can be meaningful: such projects cannot infringe on other people's freedom. Projects that infringe on other people's freedom are simply meaningless, no matter how freely they are chosen or how subjectively engaging they are..

What is Beauvoir's reason for adopting this objective constraint? In short, she thinks that morality matters, and she understands morality in terms of freedom. This makes sense, given that her aim in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is to develop an ethical theory based on existentialism, in which freedom is the central value. Beauvoir mentions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that existentialism is often seen as a "solipsistic" philosophy, which she aims to disprove by stressing the essential connection between our own freedom and that of other people. Morality and

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[40] Webber 2018: 227-8.
[41] Beauvoir 1948: 91.
[42] Beauvoir 1948: 96.

freedom are thus inextricably linked for Beauvoir: "To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision."[43] Beauvoir makes it very clear that she thinks that freedom comes with a certain "law" or "requirement," which we can understand as a moral law or requirement. In her own words:

> Man is free; but he finds his law in his very freedom. First, he must assume his freedom and not flee it; he assumed it by a constructive movement: one does not exist without doing something; and also by a negative movement which rejects oppression for oneself and others.[44]

> He can become conscious of the real requirements of his own freedom, which can will itself only by destining itself to an open future, by seeking to extend itself by means of the freedom of others. Therefore, in any case, the freedom of other men must be respected and they must be helped to free themselves.[45]

Oppressing others by infringing upon their freedom is thus the paradigm case of an immoral, absurd, and meaningless action.[46]

It is important to understand that for Beauvoir the recognition of the value of other people's freedom, and the moral imperative not to infringe upon it, has the further implication that one ought to promote other people's freedom, too. This means that social and political action are required to improve others' situations so that they can have more freedom. Karen Vintges captures this idea well when she writes:

> Willing ourselves free is wanting to *practice* our freedom. This means that we must accept the fact that we have to surpass ourselves and reach out for the world. To realize our freedom, we have to act as a body in the world. The attitude of willing oneself free thus implies that we, by way of a so-called "moral conversion," accept our bodily and emotional dimension and

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[43] Beauvoir 1948: 24.
[44] Beauvoir 1948: 156.
[45] Beauvoir 1948: 60.
[46] In the existentialist ethics that Beauvoir develops, moral and immoral actions are defined in an idiosyncratic, narrow way (namely, in terms of freedom). This means that certain cases that are standardly used in the literature about immoral, meaningless actions, may not be so on Beauvoir's view. For example, on Beauvoir's account Gauguin's leaving his family was not immoral because his actions did not infringe on anyone's freedom. Thanks to Masahiro Morioka for the example.

transform our pure freedom into a concrete commitment to the freedom of our fellow men; in other words, get involved.[47]

Webber makes a similar point when he writes about Beauvoir: "We are therefore obliged, she argues, to promote wealth, health, and education for all people."[48]

We have now identified a second objective element in Beauvoir's view on meaning. This raises the question of whether we should say the same of Beauvoir as Detmer said of Sartre, namely that "there is … a definite drift from the subjective to the objective."[49] It would be convenient if we could point to a development from an early, subjectivist Beauvoir to a late, objectivist Beauvoir, but it's not clear if that would be true to the facts. Both the subjective and objective elements of Beauvoir's view are contained in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, which was written in 1943 (published in 1944), and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which came out in 1948. Moreover, in *Becoming Beauvoir*, Kate Kirkpatrick describes how Beauvoir already raises the question of the self and the other in her early diaries. As Kirkpatrick writes: "Striving to be free, therefore, wasn't good enough – any person who valued freedom without hypocrisy had to value it in other people, to act in such a way that they exercised their freedom ethically."[50] Very early on, then, Beauvoir thought that the freedom to become an *ethical* self was more important than freedom itself. Even though the centrality of the radical freedom of the self cannot be denied in both the early Sartre and the early Beauvoir, it seems that Beauvoir realized much earlier than Sartre that it was wrong to stop there. Kirkpatrick argues that Beauvoir's ideas were the catalyst for Sartre to move away from his views about the primacy of a purely subjective, radical individual freedom to recognizing the value of others' freedom as well. It seems, then, that there was less of a shift in Beauvoir's thinking, and, insofar as there was one, it occurred much earlier than Sartre's. Thus, we cannot attribute the subjectivist and objectivist elements of her view to different periods in her thought.

According to Beauvoir, then, a meaningful life is not just a free life. In the end, a meaningful life is also a moral life: one that does not infringe on other people's freedom and even promotes it. This means that there are two objective elements in Beauvoir's view on meaning: freedom and morality. This leaves us with the

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[47] Vintges 2004: 226.
[48] Webber 2018: 230.
[49] Detmer 1988: 205.
[50] Kirkpatrick 2019: 201.

question of how to categorize Beauvoir's view. Can she still be said to be a subjectivist or should she be classified as an objectivist instead? Or is she neither?

5. Why Beauvoir Holds a Hybrid View

Given the conclusions of the previous two sections, one might wonder whether Beauvoir's position ought to be classified as a version of objective naturalism. After all, there is, on her view, at least one objective value and one objective constraint on the meaningfulness of our projects. All other values are derivative from the objective value of freedom. And, as we have established, Beauvoir thinks that a meaningful life is a free and a moral life. Beauvoir's view on meaning clearly has implications for how we ought to live our lives, as certain projects are more meaningful than others. For example, projects promoting the freedom of others are more meaningful than projects that don't or that do the opposite. All of this has an objective ring to it.

However, simply labeling Beauvoir as an objectivist doesn't really capture the spirit of her view. As discussed earlier, the intended conclusion of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is that values are subjective, and Beauvoir spends a large part of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* conveying this sentiment. She passionately argues against the "serious man," who thinks of values the way the objectivist does. To call Beauvoir an objective naturalist would therefore be diametrically opposed to her aims and intentions. In addition, this categorization would not mesh well with some of her other important beliefs, which we have already encountered in section 2. Beauvoir believes that meaning and value are first introduced in the world by people (subjects or consciousnesses) and—within the constraints just specified— whatever people choose to pursue is valuable to them.[51] This means that there is a very wide range of valuable projects; the only projects that are *not* valuable are those that infringe on other people's freedom. Value, therefore, depends on the subject and varies greatly between subjects, which is exactly how we defined subjectivism earlier. Calling Beauvoir an objectivist, then, would be misleading and not do justice to her position.

While it is not obvious how to classify Beauvoir's view, it is clear is that her position involves both objective and subjective elements. In this regard, Beauvoir's view is usefully compared to the Desire Satisfaction Theory, which

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[51] Note that on Beauvoir's view they do not even have to find their project valuable themselves, they just have to choose to pursue it.

also has objective and subjective elements: objective because desire satisfaction is a value independent of what anybody thinks about it, and subjective because what each of us desires varies greatly from person to person. Detmer reaches the same conclusion about Sartre's position:

> Understood this way, Sartre's freedom-ethic would appear to contain both objectivist and subjectivist elements. The claim that freedom is the highest value entails, under present circumstances, that we should do more than merely invent values freely. Rather, it calls for the recognition on our part of certain stringent duties toward others. Thus, from the claim that freedom is the highest value, it follows that, no matter, what I might think or feel about it, I am wrong if I do not act so as to help others fulfill their needs. This ethic is, therefore, objectivist in the sense which I have defined.[52]

One might think that Beauvoir (and Sartre, for that matter) is simply contradicting herself. However, this reading is uncharitable and fails to recognize that the subjectivist and objectivist strands in their thinking are, in fact, compatible. There is no logical contradiction in saying that all values are subjective, except for the value of freedom, and that all pursued projects are meaningful, except for those that infringe on people's freedom. In fact, Detmer makes the case that combining the subjectivist and objectivist elements is one of the most important contributions of Sartre's ethics: "The most important of these contributions consists, I believe, in the wealth of tools which he has provided us for resolving the conflict between subjectivism and objectivism."[53] He even says that: "it is the chief virtue of Sartre's ethical theory that it recognizes, and, with admirable clarity and insight articulates, both of them."[54]

In light of all of this, it seems best to call Beauvoir's position a hybrid one, which combines subjective and objective elements. It is important to note that this is not a "hybrid" position in the sense that this term is used in the literature—which is to say, a hybrid position à la Susan Wolf. According to Wolf, meaning arises from subjective engagement with objectively valuable projects. Even though Beauvoir's view has subjective and objective elements, it contains neither "subjective engagement" nor "objectively valuable projects." Objectively

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[52] Detmer 1986: 206-7.
[53] Detmer 1986: 207.
[54] Detmer 1986: 215.

valuable projects don't exist for Beauvoir, and subjective engagement isn't part of her theory, either. The subjective element for Beauvoir consists simply in my choice to pursue some project. Being engaged in this project is not necessary for it to be meaningful. If I am bored, checked out, or alienated, the project is still meaningful as long as I continue to pursue it. The only sense in which Beauvoir's view is a hybrid view, then, is that it is subjectivist in spirit and contains objective constraints. It has no further similarities to what we commonly call a "hybrid view" in the literature.

As discussed earlier, this is not how Beauvoir has been understood. In a break from this, Elena Popa agrees with me that Beauvoir holds a hybrid view that contains subjective and objective elements. According to her, the subjective element is "to decide meaning for oneself" and the objective element consists in "the constraints stemming from one's relation to others."[55] This seems right. However, Popa sees greater similarities between Beauvoir and Wolf than I do (although she does acknowledge some important differences). As she writes: "In an important sense Beauvoir's view fits the structure proposed by Wolf, not only in incorporating subjective and objective components, but also in capturing their interaction."[56] I disagree. In my view, the only similarity between these views is that both contain subjective and objective components.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Beauvoir is not a subjectivist about meaning in life, as she has often been interpreted to be in the literature. Even though her view on meaning in life contains subjective elements, it contains equally important objective elements. The essential tenet of Beauvoir's existentialist ethics, not to infringe on other people's freedom (and ideally to promote it), forms an objective constraint on the meaningfulness of our projects. Beauvoir should therefore be said to hold a hybrid view, which combines subjective and objective elements in a way that differs from the paradigm hybrid view in the contemporary literature, namely that of Susan Wolf. Although Beauvoir uses a narrow and idiosyncratic interpretation of morality, her position on the connection between meaningfulness and morality is one that can be found in the contemporary literature, too: there is a virtual consensus in the literature that immoral projects

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[55] Popa 2019: 428.
[56] Popa 2019: 428.

are not meaningful. There are thus a number of important points of agreement between Beauvoir's theory and those discussed in the contemporary debate, although these similarities remain limited to the broad strokes. This underscores both the relevance and the originality of Beauvoir's views on meaning in life.[57]

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Axiological Values Grounded in Basic Motivational Dispositions
How to Be a Subjectivist about Meaning in Life

Frank Martela[*]

Abstract

Subjectivism as regards meaningfulness has fallen out of fashion due to certain highly counterintuitive implications. The present account aims to revive subjectivism by proposing a distinction between consciously chosen axiological values such as meaningfulness and more implicit proto-values that are part of our human nature. As regards the latter, the present account focuses especially on evolved basic motivational dispositions to seek out certain psychosocial experiences, which have been the subject of much research within empirical psychology. Instead of being connected to fleeting desires, it is argued that meaningfulness should be grounded in one specific basic motivational disposition – the disposition to do good to others – that helps to explain why meaningfulness is typically seen as intuitively appealing and an independent basis of value. Meaningfulness, in this account, isn't *mind independent*, but it is still *conscious-mind independent*, which helps this version of subjectivism to avoid the typical counterarguments against subjectivism, while retaining many qualities typically only associated with objectivism.

1. Introduction

Given their encounter with the slow death of God in the last few centuries, Western philosophers have been facing the terrifyingly humanistic possibility: What if our values would be up to us? There is no God, and only God could ground objective values, so all values must be subjective, as Sartre (2007) famously formulated the issue. Along with existentialists, subjectivism about meaningfulness and values was embraced by philosophers of many stripes in the 20th century including pragmatists such as James (1899) and positivists like Ayer (1947). What made subjectivist theories attractive was the fact that they fit well together with a naturalistic worldview that doesn't have room for the divine or for objective values. Accordingly, many philosophers have adapted subjectivism for the simple reason that it has presented itself as the only possibility as regards meaningfulness and values, given one's broader metaphysical commitments.

More recently, however, many analytic philosophers have argued for various

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versions of naturalistic objectivism that claim to be compatible with the scientific and naturalistic worldview but still leave room for objective values. Subjectivism, in turn, has declined in popularity, and the mainstream view nowadays seems to be that it has certain highly counterintuitive implications that should be resolved before it could be accepted as a serious theory of meaningfulness (see Metz 2013).

My aim is here to demonstrate that the reports of the death of subjectivism as regards meaningfulness have been greatly exaggerated. More particularly, I aim to build a subjectivist theory of axiological value and meaningfulness that depends crucially on two distinctions: First, as regards human values, we need to distinguish between, on the one hand, *explicitly held values* that we are consciously aware of and committed to, and, on the other hand, *implicitly held proto-values* or preferences that guide our behavior and thinking even when we are not aware of them (Haidt 2001; Street 2006). When I talk about *values* in this paper, I am thus referring to values that one is consciously aware of and reflectively endorses. Beyond these explicit values, however, human behavior is to a significant degree guided by implicit preferences, which I refer to as *proto-values*, to keep the distinction clear.

As regards these implicit preferences, I come to argue that there is also a distinction to be made between preferences that we have come to acquire through our idiosyncratic life experiences and those preferences that evolution has shaped us to have. As regards the latter, I focus especially on *basic motivational dispositions* that psychological research has investigated (e.g. Baumeister and Leary 1995; Deci and Ryan 2000; Martela & Sheldon, 2019; Sheldon 2011). They are defined by the fact that human beings have a natural motivational tendency to seek certain psychosocial experiences, especially when such experiences are lacking in their lives. Just as lack of nutrition leads us to seek food, loneliness leads us to seek human contact, as an example. Both nutrition and collaboration with others have been necessary for human survival, and thus we have evolved to have natural motivational dispositions to seek them. Importantly, as compared to explicitly held values, there is a significant difference in the degree of voluntary control: Explicitly held values are relatively easily changed through argumentation and conscious effort, while it might be practically impossible to change one's basic motivational dispositions as they are so deeply rooted in human basic psychological make-up. This means that while basic motivational dispositions are subjective in the sense of not being *mind independent,* they are still more or less *conscious-mind independent,* out of reach of conscious control.

Axiological values, in turn, refer to those explicitly held values that are not derivative of or dependent on other values, but 'provide their own justification', and thus are valuable for their own sake. This quality of being good "as an end" and "in virtue of its own nature" (Feldman 2000, p. 320) is sometimes called intrinsic value, but given the many separate definitions of that label (see e.g., Bradley 2006), I see axiological value as more exact label for this aim to identify the separate ways in which a life can be judged as valuable (Hart 1971; Feldman 2000). They are thus values we both consciously endorse and see as valuable as such. Along with others (e.g. Wolf 2016) I take meaningfulness to be one type of axiological value separate from other commonly accepted axiological values such as well-being or morality (Martela 2017). In other words, we seem to value well-being, morality, and meaningfulness each out of their own accord. A life that is full of pleasure might be morally base, or lack in meaningfulness, while a meaningful life might still be low on well-being and moral praiseworthiness. That meaningfulness is separate from well-being and morality has been argued for elsewhere (see Martela 2017; Williams 1981; Wolf 1997a, b)[1], is quite generally accepted, and in the present context well-being and morality serve only as examples of other types of axiological values. Thus, I will not argue for this separation here. In general, then, I take it that meaningfulness and other axiological values serve as separate bases of value that can all be independently used to evaluate the overall goodness of a life (Metz 2013; Wolf 2016; Martela 2017).

The version of subjectivism I develop here argues that even if values are not objective and instead depend on the subject, one can still ground them in something more stable than fleeting desires. More particularly, meaningfulness can be grounded in a specific implicit basic motivational disposition that can ensure and explain why meaningfulness as an axiological value has such a strong intuitive appeal. If there were a basic motivational disposition that makes certain behaviors or goals intuitively appealing, then an axiological value endorsing the same behaviors or goals would be especially attractive as an axiological value. The connection to a basic motivational disposition namely ensures that the corresponding explicit value has a strong intuitive appeal, appearing exactly as something that doesn't need further justification as it feels like valuable as such.

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[1] For example, a rock star whose music provides uplifting experiences for millions of people, but whose narcissistic behavior makes life miserable for people close to him, might make a meaningful contribution to the world but still not be seen as highly moral person (May 2015).

Subjectivism about meaningfulness is often criticized for making meaningfulness dependent on any kind of fleeting pro-attitudes or preferences that a person might have (Metz 2013). The present proposal is more particular, connecting meaningfulness to a specific basic motivational disposition of the individual in question.

What basic motivational disposition could meaningfulness then be connected to? To answer that question, we first need an analysis of what we mean by meaningfulness in the first place. Thus, in the context of the present article, I take the recently advanced *contribution analysis of meaningfulness* (Levy 2005; Bramble 2015; Martela 2017) to be roughly correct about what meaningfulness is about. According to it, meaningfulness of a life is about "the positive contribution beyond itself that this particular life is able to make" (Martela 2017, 232). Many accounts of what meaningfulness means include this idea of making a difference to something that "transcend the limitations of individuals" (Levy 2005, 79; see also Smuts 2013; Audi 2005; James 2010). Furthermore, the prototypical examples of meaningful lives usually cited in Western philosophy – Gandhi, Mandela, Lincoln, Mother Theresa – and prototypical examples of especially meaningful occupations – firefighters, nurses, doctors – are united by the fact that the positive contribution beyond oneself is exceptionally strong in these individuals and occupations. Thus, our intuitions about what is meaningful often overlap with the idea of making a positive contribution, and many accounts of meaningfulness seem to include contribution as at least partially what makes life meaningful (e.g. Audi 2005; Wolf 2010; Smuts 2013). However, my aim is here not to defend this *contribution analysis of meaningfulness* as that has been done elsewhere (Levy 2005; Martela 2017). The question I am interested here is that *if* the contribution analysis of meaningfulness would be roughly correct about what meaningfulness is at least partially about, *then* would there be a corresponding basic motivational disposition that could explain its appeal to us. The general subjectivist theory of meaningfulness proposed here is not dependent on the contribution analysis of meaningfulness. If another analysis of the definition of meaningfulness is preferred, one could equally well examine whether that way of understanding meaningfulness is connected to some corresponding basic motivational disposition.

Given the contribution analysis of meaningfulness, there seems to be a basic motivational disposition that is closely connected to it: benevolence as a human tendency to care about and want to positively impact the lives of others (Aknin et

al. 2013; Schroeder and Graziano 2015; Martela and Ryan 2016a). As I will review later, a relatively robust body of empirical research seems to support the idea that humans indeed have a disposition that makes them want to help and positively contribute to the lives of other. Thus, I argue that meaningfulness as an axiological value is well anchored to a basic motivational disposition that has a reasonably good empirical support.

In brief, my argument is thus that meaningfulness is an axiological value, according to which our ability to make a positive impact to the lives of other people is valuable as such, and this value is connected to a basic motivational disposition we humans have, which makes us have a strong intuitive motivation to help other people. Given that this motivational disposition is by and large beyond our conscious control, it provides a stable and conscious-mind independent intuitive justification and basis for the axiological value.

Through this proposal, the present article aims to offer a new version of subjectivism about meaningfulness that avoids the usual counterarguments against subjectivism while retaining certain attractive qualities typically only associated with objectivist accounts of meaningfulness. Most importantly, unlike most previous versions of subjectivism, the present version doesn't lead to the counterintuitive conclusions where anything that the subject happens to prefer or value is considered meaningful, as meaningfulness is not connected to one's fleeting preferences but to one specific implicit and stable basic motivational disposition. Besides, the present account of subjectivism can offer an explanation for why we have certain intuitions about meaningfulness in the first place. Thus, the present suggestion could help to revive subjectivism as a serious option in debates about meaningfulness and axiological values.

2. The Standard Argument against Current Versions of Subjectivism

Subjectivism about meaningfulness, in the most general sense, means that what makes a life meaningful "depends on the subject" in the sense that the subject having certain propositional attitudes (mental states such as desires, emotions, goals and the like) is sufficient for making that particular subject's life meaningful (Metz 2013, 164)[2]. Subjectivists thus deny the existence or necessity

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[2] This definition is more particularly about 'individual subjectivism' meaning that the subjects own attitudes determine the meaningfulness of the subject's life. This can be contrasted with 'intersubjective subjectivism' where the attitudes of some relevant group determine the

of standards independent of people's propositional attitudes as determinants of meaningfulness. For example, Richard Taylor attests that "meaning of life is from within us", and thus a Sisyphus condemned to push the same rock up the same hill could still find his life meaningful, if it so happened that "his one desire in life is to roll stones" (Taylor 2000, 175, 169). His is thus a desire-fulfillment theory of meaningfulness, where meaningfulness is a matter of being able to fulfill one's desires, whatever they happen to be.

Such subjective desire-fulfillment theory has been later refined by arguing that, instead of any kind of desire counting towards meaningfulness, only the fulfillment of certain specific kinds of desires or mental states matter. Harry Frankfurt (2002, 250, see also 1982) defends a position where meaningful life "need not be connected to anything that is objectively valuable." However, instead of being about any kind of desires, for him meaning is connected to love. Loving is for him an axiological value, by which he means "that loving as such is valuable to the lover" (p. 246). Accordingly, "devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved" (p. 250).

Bernard Williams (1981), in turn, argues that some desires and projects are categorical and grounded by constituting one's character and being closely related to one's existence. Such ground projects "to a significant degree give a meaning" to a person's life (Williams 1981, 12). This kind of subjective theory has been recently revived by Frans Svensson, who defends a view according to which, "your life is meaningful to the extent that your *categorical desires* – i.e. those desires that are partly constitutive of your practical identity, or of who you are as a practical agent – are fulfilled or satisfied" (Svensson 2017, 45).

As regards objections to subjectivism, Metz (2013, 175) argues that there is "only one standard argument" against subjectivism, that it has "seriously counterintuitive implications about which lives count as meaningful." For example, Frankfurt (2002) admits that while Hitler's love for Nazism might have led to horrible and immoral acts, from the subjective point of view of Hitler himself, it provided him with value and meaning. Against this, Wolf (2002) notes that there seems to be something wrong with a view that suggests that if one loves hurting and torturing people more than taking care of them, then one should pursue the first path as it brings more meaningfulness. Accordingly, she argues

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meaningfulness of the subject's life. (See Metz 2013, 167–68; Wong 2008.)

that some things seem to be objectively more worth loving than others.

More generally, if meaningfulness is only about subjective attitudes, then anything – lining up torn newspapers in neat rows (Cottingham 2003), maintaining 3732 hairs on one's head (Taylor 1991), counting the blades of grass on Harvard Yard, collecting rubber bands (Smuts 2013), and so forth – could make one's life meaningful, provided that this is what the subject desires. This goes so deeply against most philosophers' intuitions that many are willing to reject subjectivism right away.

While Taylor's desire-fulfillment view seems to be vulnerable to such counterintuitive implications, the refined theory where only categorical desires count (Williams 1981; Svensson 2017) might on the surface look to be better protected against such implications. However, this would require that one somehow restricts what can be a categorical desire for a person. In other words, one would need an argument for why maintaining a certain number of hairs on one's head can't never be a categorical desire for any person. However, Svensson (2017, 60)[3] doesn't provide such arguments or restrictions, and thus has to admit that if some of the activities listed above *"really are* objects of someone's categorical desires … such that the person would find that his or her life had diminished seriously in its worthwhileness if s/he were to lose them or had to give them up" then their satisfaction indeed would contribute to making the person's life meaningful. So if a person deeply and genuinely desires to collect rubber bands finding it a worthwhile pursuit, Svensson is willing to admit that for that person, life devoted to only collecting rubber bands indeed is meaningful. This sole anchoring of meaningfulness to categorical desires of course also implies that if a person's categorical desires included torturing babies or systematically killing people of another religion, then fulfilling these desires would make the life of such a person more meaningful.

So, while current defenders of subjectivism seem to be willing to 'bite the bullet' as regards the counterintuitive implications, many theorists see them as "far too permissive" as regards what kind of activities and lives can be counted as meaningful (Kauppinen 2012, 356). Accordingly, a version of subjectivism would be significantly more attractive if it were somehow able to avoid at least the most

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[3] Williams's (1981) article is mainly focused on offering a critique of impartial or Kantian morality, and thus doesn't engage much with the literature on meaning of life or with the specific counterarguments laid against subjective theories of meaningfulness. Thus I focus here on Svensson's (2017) contribution that offers a similar basic argument, but locates it within the context of contemporary debate about the merits and problems of subjective theories of meaningfulness.

seriously unattractive cases of what could make one's life meaningful. If such a version could be constructed, "subjectivism would become a bigger player in today's field," as Metz (2013, 179) notes. Constructing such a version of subjectivism is exactly what the present article aims to achieve.

3. Distinctions: Explicit Values, Implicit Idiosyncratic Preferences, and Basic Motivational Dispositions

The subjectivist and naturalistic view of values that the present thesis is built on sees values as something humans have culturally generated on top of biological foundations in order to navigate their lives to the best of their abilities. Following Sharon Street (2006, 118), I see that "the capacity for full-fledged evaluative judgments was a relatively late evolutionary add-on, superimposed on top of much more basic behavioral and motivational tendencies." There is thus nothing objective or mind-independent about values, they are generated by us and for us. We are born with certain rudimentary preferences – too hot or cold temperatures make us feel uncomfortable or painful, empty stomach feels bad, we fear being left alone, and so forth – and through constant daily interactions with our environment we evolve to have the more explicit and sophisticated reflectively endorsed values of a well-cultured adult. Thus the more instinctive preferences will be accompanied by more rationally chosen and generalized explicit values. There is no strict ontological or epistemological gap between mundane everyday preferences and wants, on the one hand, and more 'noble' values on the other hand. The difference is only in the degree of abstraction and in the degree of conscious commitment. Desires come and go while values are something we are more consistently committed to. While 'I want to be on time to meet my friend today at 4 PM' is a mundane preference, it is connected to the more abstract values of 'respecting friendships' and 'respecting one's commitments.' Values as objects of conscious reflection are thus generalizations about what we believe we have a strong motivational commitment to respect. They are tools for self-reflection and self-guidance that are ultimately cashed out in their ability to guide our actions (Dewey 1938; Martela 2015).

Most importantly for our present purposes, we need to make a distinction between *explicitly* held values and *implicitly* held proto-values (Street 2006). By explicit values I refer to the values we consciously have chosen to uphold, that we are aware of having. They are the values that we can verbally express if asked to

explain our values, they are the values we can have rational discussions about. And being something we value, they guide our behavior. However, modern human psychology has demonstrated in a myriad of ways that besides such explicitly held values, humans also have more implicit preferences that significantly influence thinking and behavior without the person in question having to be aware of these influences (Haidt 2001; see e.g. Cowell and Decety 2015). For example, we might yearn for parental approval and make several life choices to appeal to that yearning, even though on a conscious level we might rationalize these choices using other reasons. Or we might state that we are not at all racist, but still subconsciously avoid people of different color, when, for example, choosing whom to recruit or whom we are willing to accept as a son-in-law.

As regards these implicitly held proto-values, yet another distinction needs to be made. Some of the implicit preferences of an individual are the results of the idiosyncratic conditions of one's social upbringing. A father who only showed affection for his son when that son excelled in some sport might bring up a son who desperately craves to achieve in sports. A child growing up in conditions of constant shortage of money might develop a strong desire to achieve financial success above all else. Various sects, groups, cultures, religions and educational institutions like schools have their own favorite proto-values that they (more or less consciously) try to pass on to the next generation. However, other implicit preferences might be more universal in the sense of being the types of dispositions that evolution has equipped us with (Street 2006). It is clear that evolution has given rise to certain physical needs that manifest themselves in strong motivational dispositions. Being thirsty makes us strongly motivated to seek water. Suddenly being out of oxygen overrides all other desires as we desperately seek for air to breathe. But beyond these physical needs designed to keep our physical body alive, humans have also evolved to have more socio-psychological needs. For example, the parental instinct to care for one's offspring is strong in mammals like humans where the infants are highly vulnerable for a long time after birth (Brown and Brown 2015). Accordingly, human parents typically have a strong motivational disposition to protect and help their children that can in extreme situations even override their own survival instinct.

Recent psychological research has devoted increased amount of attention to basic motivational dispositions, sometimes referred to as 'fundamental human motivations' (Baumeister and Leary 1995) or 'basic psychological needs' (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2017). Such fundamental human motivations are

defined as "evolved tendencies to seek out certain basic types of psychosocial experiences and to feel good and thrive when those basic experiences are obtained" (Sheldon 2011, 552). They are thus defined by the simultaneous presence of three crucial elements: 1) Human beings have a natural motivational tendency to seek their fulfillment especially when the given psychosocial experience is lacking. 2) When humans are able to acquire such psychosocial experiences, this tends to make them feel good in the short term. 3) When humans are able to chronically have such experiences, this tends to lead to better physical and mental health and other symptoms of human flourishing. Furthermore, 4) the disposition has to be universal in the sense of being operational across cultural context. A candidate disposition thus needs to motivate and lead to both short-term and long-term well-being no matter the cultural context where it is studied to be considered a basic motivational disposition. Various candidates such as autonomy (Doyal and Gough 1991; Deci and Ryan 2000), and social relatedness (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Deci and Ryan 2000) have been suggested, and the evidence behind such candidates has been carefully reviewed to arrive at conclusions about how strong or weak the scientific support is behind each of the candidates. The suggested fundamental motivational dispositions are thus not arbitrary but have acquired their status based on a synthesis of literally hundreds of scientific inquiries.

4. The Proposal: Connecting Explicitly-held Axiological Values with Basic Motivational Dispositions

Subjectivist theories of meaningfulness make meaningfulness dependent on certain pro-attitudes (wants, desires and so forth) that individuals have. Subjectivists are opposed to there being any objective or mind-independent values 'out there', but take all explicitly endorsed values to be something constructed by us humans. Nevertheless, even if values emanate from human psychology, deliberation and reflection, distinctions can still be made between more fleeting desires and such reflectively endorsed values that we are strongly committed to and that are tightly grounded to our identity and who we are. In particular, if we want to suggest that something like meaningfulness is an axiological value that should be used as an independent basis for evaluating the overall goodness of a life, we would like it to be grounded in something. It could be grounded in our intuitions: We – at least the pack of mostly Western philosophers who usually write about meaningfulness (which of course is not a very representative sample

of the human population) – seem to have strong intuitions about what lives are meaningful (think Mandela, Gandhi, Einstein, Curie), what occupations are meaningful (think fire-fighters, nurses, emergency workers), and what activities are meaningless (think collecting rubber bands, watching reruns of sitcoms and drinking beer alone) (these are widely cited prototypical examples circulating in the meaningfulness literature, see e.g., Metz 2013; Smuts 2013; Svensson 2017; Wolf 2010). In building our philosophical theories about meaningfulness, one of the main criteria used for the successfulness of the theory is whether it is able to explain these intuitions and not lead to counterintuitive cases of meaningful or meaningless lives.

The version of subjectivism I develop here suggests that meaningfulness could be grounded also in something else than intuitions, and furthermore, this grounding could help us understand why we have these intuitions in the first place. The central proposition of the present subjectivism is that axiological values such as meaningfulness should not be connected to any kind of pro-attitudes that a person might have, but, more specifically, they should be grounded in the basic motivational dispositions of the individual in question. In the quest to identify axiological values worth committing to, grounding axiological values to these evolutionary acquired motivational dispositions makes much sense. When we seek to identify axiological values, we are exactly seeking for values that are not derivative of other values. In other words, we are seeking values that feel like their own justification, that don't need anything beyond themselves to justify themselves. And, if evolution has equipped human beings with certain natural motivational preferences, then a corresponding explicit value would need no further justification as it would feel valuable as such. We would be naturally inclined to find the value in question valuable. Thus building an explicit axiological value upon an implicitly held motivational disposition would ensure that the axiological value satisfies the most important criterion for any axiological value: That it is valuable as such and not derivative of other values.

The present account thus argues that of all the different types of pro-attitudes, some more explicit, some more implicit, only the basic motivational dispositions matter when we examine meaningfulness and axiological values. In other words, meaningfulness as an axiological value is grounded in a particular basic motivational disposition that ensures that it feels valuable as such for us human beings.

This formulation means that the current theory can avoid the key shortcoming

that the subjectivist theories have been traditionally accused of. Even if a person enjoys lining up torn newspapers in neat rows (Cottingham 2003), categorically desires reading gangster novels (Svensson 2017), finds value in maintaining 3732 hairs on one's head (Taylor 1991) or if Sisyphus has "a keen and unappeasable desire to be doing just what he found himself doing" (Taylor 2000, 173), these desires and feelings would not add anything to the meaningfulness of the activity, as they are not connected to a relevant basic motivational disposition. In examining a certain activity's capability to make a person's life meaningful, we thus need to evaluate if that particular activity is fulfilling the relevant basic motivational disposition that makes certain activities seem intuitively meaningful. Thus a supporter of the present account can agree with Metz when he says that most readers will be inclined to find meaning "only when a person is absorbed by a condition that intuitively *merits* it." (Metz 2013, 174). The basic motivational disposition can serve as the source of the intuition that makes us see certain activities as intuitively meriting to be seen as meaningful. Thus the current theory seems to be as good as the objectivist alternatives in avoiding labeling an activity as meaningful, if it intuitively sounds as a totally meaningless activity. The present account of meaningfulness therefore doesn't seem to suffer from the standard argument against subjectivism – that it leads to highly counterintuitive cases of meaningfulness where anything that a subject endorses or chooses to value is meaningful.

5. Explaining Our Intuitions about Meaningfulness and Other Merits of the Current Theory

Besides not falling prey to the counterintuitive cases that many subjectivist theories suffer from, the current theory of axiological value provides something more: An explanation for why we have an intuition about certain conditions meriting meaningfulness in the first place. Our intuitions about meaningfulness (or any other matter) don't come into being out of nowhere, but there is always a story behind them. All the intuitions we have are the results of either our evolutionary developed dispositions, our life experiences, or our reflection that builds on these two. In appealing to intuition – as philosophers of meaningfulness almost inevitably do (see Metz 2013) – we are in essence appealing to this developmental path behind us. Most robust and uncontroversial intuitions would be those that are not dependent on having particular life experiences but that we

have inherited from our evolutionary past. Basic motivational dispositions thus should give rise to very robust, uncontroversial, and widely shared intuitions about what we find valuable and meaningful in life. Thus, the current theory not only appeals to our common intuitions, but aims to provide an explanation for them.

Furthermore, if the basic motivational disposition is really a product of evolution, it should be something that all members of the human species would share (discounting various pathologies). Thus, a corresponding value would have wide appeal across people and cultures; virtually everyone would see value in it – naturally, to establish this requires a broad cross-cultural research program and thus conclusions about 'human nature' should be done with care before the true cross-cultural generalizability has been established (see Henrich et al. 2010; Henrich 2020). Within a society, such values would be primary candidates for what kind of values the society should protect and promote when making choices about various structures such as the educational system or legislature. Between societies, these values could provide the cross-cultural common ground upon which dialogues about more specific policies, rules and agreements could be built upon.

6. Benevolence as the Basic Motivational Disposition Grounding Meaningfulness as an Axiological Value

As noted in the introduction, I take the contribution analysis of meaningfulness, where meaningfulness is about the positive contribution beyond oneself that one is able to make (Levy 2005; Bramble 2015; Martela 2017), to be roughly correct. Thus, given the current suggestion of grounding meaningfulness in a corresponding basic motivational disposition, the question is whether there exists a suitable basic motivational disposition for it. Before examining that, I want to note that this version of subjectivism is not dependent on the contribution analysis of the nature of meaningfulness. If we come to endorse another theory about how meaningfulness is defined, we can similarly look for a corresponding basic motivational disposition, given that definition.

Given the contribution analysis of meaningfulness, a look at the psychological literature reveals that there indeed is a good candidate for a basic motivational disposition that would be connected to it. This disposition, labeled here as *benevolence,* is defined as a disposition to want to have a "positive impact in the

lives of other people" (Martela et al. 2018, 1263). There is quite a broad set of empirical evidence demonstrating that such a disposition is able to fulfill the three criteria of a basic motivational disposition.

First, research has demonstrated that humans are motivated to benefit others even when the effects of other potential motivations are experimentally controlled for. Research in behavioral economics has shown that even in anonymous situations, without any reciprocal or reputational benefits, most people, in most situations, are willing to give away at least some of their money to benefit others (see Engel 2011 for a meta-analysis of 616 experiments). Social psychological research, in turn, has shown that other-oriented empathic concern leads to and explains prosocial behavior, even when the effect of various types of selfish motivations have been experimentally controlled for (reviewed in Batson et al. 2009). Furthermore, various ways of priming participants to make decisions more intuitively (time pressure, cognitive load etc.) tend to show that more intuitive decision-making is associated with increased prosocial behavior (Rand et al. 2012, 2014).

Second, a wide number of experimental studies have demonstrated a robust connection between engaging in behavior that helps others and increased subjective well-being afterwards (Dunn et al. 2008; Martela and Ryan 2016b; 2021), and this is true in countries around the world (Aknin et al. 2013) including a small-scale rural society on the Pacific Island of Vanuatu (Aknin et al. 2015). Third, several longitudinal studies have shown that various types of prosocial behavior have positive long-term effects on psychological well-being and various indicators of health, such as decreased blood pressure and reduced risk of mortality (e.g. Okun et al. 2013; Whillans et al. 2016). Accordingly, even though a full review of empirical evidence would require much more space than can be dedicated to the topic here, I submit that we have relatively robust scientific evidence to conclude that humans have a basic motivational disposition to be benevolent in the sense of wanting to contribute positively to the lives of others (for reviews, see chapters in Schroeder and Graziano 2015). Thus, if take meaningfulness to be about being able to contribute, then meaningfulness would be well connected to a corresponding basic motivational disposition that could explain why we have such strong intuitions about meaningfulness being its own source of value.

7. Answering Some Counterarguments and Challenges to the Present View

Before we can conclude, there are certain open questions that need to be addressed. First, are we here committing the naturalistic fallacy (Moore 1903) of using empirical and naturalistic facts about the human nature to derive conclusions about what is good and normative? The present account indeed argues that one can use the empirical generalizations about basic motivational dispositions to identify axiological values especially suitable for human beings. Yet, these two levels are kept separate: *Basic motivational dispositions* such as the need to be benevolent and *axiological values* such as the value of contributing are two separate things even though they might guide people towards the same kinds of behavior: The first is a descriptive and empirically verifiable fact about the human nature, the second is a normative value about what humans should strive to do in life. Instead of silently creeping from one level to the other, the step between the levels is made explicitly: It is argued that when we operate on the normative level, aiming to choose what normative values are worth defending and upholding – indeed what values are worth being valued – we can use empirical facts about the human nature to identify especially defensible axiological values that are in need of no further justification. The basic motivational dispositions and axiological values are thus not one and the same quality or otherwise essentially connected. Rather it is argued that, in our normative discussions about what values to adopt, it would be wise to connect our axiological values to the human nature in the way proposed in the present account. Instead of an automatic or hidden jump from descriptive facts to normative values, the discussion taking place on the normative level consciously utilizes descriptive facts to reach certain normative conclusions.

Another worry concerns the case of a person that lacks a certain basic motivational disposition or is for some reason alienated from it. Would that person have different axiological values from the rest of us? Take the case of a psychopath, who arguably (see Blair 1997) totally lacks the ability to care about the welfare of others and is simply unable to feel the sympathetic emotions that neurotypical people feel when seeing someone suffering? The psychopath's inability to care about the welfare of others has been compared to color-blindness (Cleckley 1941)[4]. Just as it is impossible to explain how 'red' looks to a color-

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[4] Within clinical psychology there is a debate about whether such descriptions capture the essence of psychopathology or whether our view should be more nuanced. However, for present purposes let's

blind person, it is impossible to explain to a person lacking the relevant experience how sympathy for others feels like. Would that kind of a person, who seems to totally lack the disposition for benevolence, have a reason to uphold contribution as an axiological value?

I assume that here an objectivist would argue that contribution would still remain an axiological value even for that person, but I am willing to bite the bullet and admit that this person would probably lack this axiological value. As the corresponding motivational disposition would be lacking, the potential axiological value would have no intuitive appeal for the person. For such a person, there wouldn't be any specific meaningfulness attached to making a positive contribution. The person would have as much trouble upholding it as an axiological value as we would have trouble upholding 'everything should be in neat rows' as an axiological value. It simply wouldn't resonate. This doesn't mean that such a psychopathological person couldn't hold contribution as an important instrumental value. Success in a society, in friendships, in career, or other fields of life often benefits from having a prosocial reputation. Accordingly, an individual living in our type of society probably would learn to contribute in many situations in order to reap the benefits that such behavior gives rise to. In fact, many psychopathological persons are probably well-adjusted and their behavior might be more or less indistinguishable from the behavior of neurotypical persons. Such a person thus could have contribution as an important consciously upheld value, it just would be an important instrumental value instead of a self-justifying axiological value. And naturally such a person might have other axiological values that give value to one's life such as valuing self-expression and authenticity – lacking a particular disposition thus would not make a person's life valueless in any sense even though they might personally lack a particular axiological value other people uphold. Thus, I argue that although mainly all humans would have the same axiological values due to their connection with our evolutionary nature, there can and will be individual cases for whom a certain axiological value simply lacks any resonance and who personally thus would not have it as an axiological value.

Furthermore, there is the question of whether one's life can be meaningful without one knowing it. Objectivist consequentialists about meaningfulness such as Smuts argue that if Sisyphus, while pushing the rock up the hill, scares away

assume that such clear-cut 'totally color-blind' psychopaths exist.

vultures that otherwise would attack a nearby village (example is originally from Wolf 2010), this makes Sisyphus's life somewhat more meaningful, even if Sisyphus himself would never find out about this positive impact of his labor (Smuts 2013). The present subjectivist account anchors meaningfulness in the subjective sense of fulfilling one's disposition to have a positive impact. Thus, it leads to the opposite conclusion: If Sisyphus never finds out about the impact he is making, this will not make his life feel subjectively more meaningful. This, however, doesn't mean that a future Sisyphus could not conclude that the past Sisyphus was wrong about not finding meaning in his life. $Sisyphus_{time1}$ might scare away vultures unbeknownst to him and accordingly experience his life as meaningless. $Sisyphus_{time2}$, informed about his impact, might conclude that his life is, after all, meaningful. And that it was meaningful all along. From the point of view of $Sisyphus_{time2}$, the $Sisyphus_{time1}$ was thus mistaken. This, of course, doesn't help $Sisyphus_{time1}$. His life, while he was living it, still felt as meaningless. No future revelations can change the past experiences. Similarly, I as an observer of $Sisyphus_{time1}$, aware of his impact, might conclude that he is actually mistaken in concluding that his life is meaningless. This is a fair conclusion, but again doesn't affect how $Sisyphus_{time1}$ experiences his life. His life remains meaningless to him until the moment a kind soul decides to inform him about the great service he is actually doing to the people of the nearby village. From a future point of view, or from the point of view of someone else, one can thus be mistaken about whether one's current life is meaningful. But from the point of view of the person actually living that life, it remains meaningless.

Finally, one might object that contribution analysis of meaningfulness is too narrow and that there is more to meaning in life than contributing towards other people. I fully agree with this criticism. I see that being able to contribute is *one* key axiological value that we typically associate with meaningfulness. Being able to have a positive impact in the lives of other people thus tends to make our own life feel more meaningful. And my aim in this paper has been to show how this axiological value is related to one specific motivational disposition, benevolence. However, there could be other axiological values associated with meaningfulness as well. In particular, self-realization and authenticity are often seen as valuable and something that could make the life of a person more meaningful (e.g., Roessler 2012). Thus I would like to see an article examining self-realization as a potential axiological value, perhaps examining how it could be connected to psychological research on experiences of authenticity as giving rise to meaning in

life (e.g., Schlegel et al. 2011). But that is a work for another time. Here the focus has been on connecting contribution as a value with benevolence as a disposition.

8. Conclusion

Although naturalistic objectivism seems to be in vogue as regards the nature of meaningfulness and axiological values, there are still many among us who think along with Frankfurt (2002, 250) that "efforts to make sense of 'objective value' tend to turn out badly." For various metaphysical background commitments, or for other reasons, many philosophers can't make sense of how objectivism about values or meaningfulness could be possible. For the sake of these philosophers, I have attempted to show that a novel type of subjectivist account is able to overcome the key counterintuitive implications that have been used to reject previous versions of subjectivism. What I have not attempted to do here is to reject naturalistic objectivism in any way, as that would need a treatment of its own. Rather, I have wanted to present a plausible alternative to it by showing that the kind of subjectivism I aim to construct here can have many of the qualities that have made such objectivism attractive in the first place.

The key quality separating the present version of subjectivism from some of the previous theories is the distinction between preferences and wants that are more conscious, explicit and changeable, and basic motivational dispositions as deeply held, implicit, and virtually unchangeable as they are connected to our inherited human nature. While objectivism anchors values to something *mind independent*, the present version of subjectivism anchors values to something *conscious-mind independent*, namely the basic motivational dispositions. This is how the present version can account for many of the qualities typically only connected to objectivism such as the relatively independence of meaningfulness from our fleeting wants and preferences.

So when Metz (2013, 170) argues – in summarizing Susan Wolf's objection to subjectivism – that "there intuitively are mind-independent standards governing what one ought to love", the subscriber to the present version of subjectivism can almost agree, only caveat being that these standards are independent of what we *consciously* have come to value. Furthermore, these very intuitions that objectivists typically appeal to about what one ought to love and value might arise from our basic motivational dispositions, as they typically serve as the source of the most robust and widely shared intuitions about what we

humans tend to value.

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Pessimism, Political Critique, and the Contingently Bad Life

Patrick O'Donnell[*]

Abstract

It is widely believed that philosophical pessimism is committed to fatalism about the sufferings that characterize the human condition, and that it encourages resignation and withdrawal from the political realm in response. This paper offers an explanation for and argument against this perception by distinguishing two functions that pessimism can serve. Pessimism's *skeptical* mode suggests that fundamental cross-cultural constraints on the human condition bar us from the good life (however defined). These constraints are often represented as immune to political amelioration, leading to the perception that pessimism is intrinsically fatalistic and resigned. Yet pessimism's *critical* function emphasizes the political, economic, and cultural contingency of many sources of suffering and crisis while exhorting us to reject and reimagine the social forces that actively harm our capacity to flourish. It also offers an internal critique of skeptical pessimism's tendency to naturalize and depoliticize the sources of our sufferings. These sometimes contradictory skeptical and critical tendencies should both be grouped under the pessimist banner, and we should see pessimism's critical mode as especially valuable to political critique.

1. Introduction

Philosophical pessimism is justly associated with two stark claims. First, human life is fundamentally and inescapably a condition of suffering, making happiness virtually unattainable. Second, human life is devoid of whatever meaning would satisfy humans—it is an ultimately insignificant, absurd, meaningless enterprise playing itself out amidst the indifferent vastness of the cosmos. Given that happiness and meaning above all else make human life worthwhile, the world's consistent refusal to realize those values makes human life a very bad prospect indeed. These are the days of our lives: squalid birth, meager fulfillment, boundless disappointment, uncompensated and unredeemed suffering, grinding pointlessness, annihilating death. In fact, life is *such* a bad prospect that it is a state of being worse than non-existence. Better never to have been at all.

Could any of that be true? If so, what features of human existence make happiness and meaning unattainable? And if pessimism is true, is it possible to

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make the human condition better? For some, even entertaining these questions gives pessimism more credit than it deserves. Many find pessimism's claims about the "bad news" of human life obviously false, or laughable, or repugnant, or even immoral (all charges, it should be noted, which have also been credibly marshaled against various species of *optimism*).

Yet pessimism deserves more than automatic dismissal. Historically, it deserves a great deal of credit for keeping fundamental questions about human life's justification, value, and meaning on the table during a late modern decline in religious belief and authority (Beiser 2016, van der Lugt 2021). It has much the same function now, in an age where there is a great deal of pressure to think that these questions are pointless, badly formed, or settled by complacent appeals to old religion, New Age spirituality, a relativistic "follow your bliss" self-help industry, technocratic optimism, or simply head-in-the-sand avoidance.

In addition, pessimism can be *useful.* Its attunement to the dark underbelly of existence gives it an ironic sensibility that is valuable to political critique. For example, pessimism is well-placed to observe the mismatch between modernity's self-congratulatory conception of "progress" and the actually existing conditions of human life.

Consider the situation of many of us in the generally materially well-off Global North. Technology, colonialism, and the forces of global capital have largely democratized access to forms of entertainment, leisure, and convenience which (we assure ourselves) would have astonished our ancestors—and yet we're largely bored, anxious, tired, depressed, annoyed, and unhappy. We have never been more free, we assert, coerced by economic necessity into exploitative work we despise while the state, itself captured by the interests of an aggressively anti-democratic elite ruling class, abandons the majority of the world's people to contend with various forms of social precarity and violence. In the midst of patterns of drought, heatwaves, wildfires, floods, and hurricanes that would seem utterly catastrophic less than a century ago, we cling to unsustainable consumption habits and respond to short-term economic incentives while affecting ignorance of the incalculable suffering that anthropogenic climate change has already begun to visit on the most historically disadvantaged groups of people. Scientific innovation will save "us" (or at least those of us already well-placed to benefit from it), we claim, at the same time that the specter of total nuclear annihilation continues to haunt the historical present. It is, I submit, not obviously true that human life is a good bet under these conditions. Just an honest

look at the modern predicament challenges us to say exactly where pessimism speaks falsely.

The idea that pessimism could offer a worthwhile re-evaluation of the "usual" answers to life's big questions while also providing us with this critical political perspective may seem strange, for two reasons. First, there is a widespread assumption of a necessary connection between pessimism and *fatalism*. Life is going to be bad no matter what, the caricature holds, and so resignation, despair, and other forms of complacency about the sufferings that characterize the human condition are reasonable responses to the badness of the world. Second, defenders and detractors of pessimism alike point to the fact that pessimism is often "a philosophy of personal conduct, rather than public order" (Dienstag 2006: 7), and so incentivizes a retreat from the political sphere into "personal and self-created notions of progress" (Dovi 2017: 229) at the expense of collective participation in the project of making a better world. If pessimism indeed is fatalistic, resigned, and problematically individualistic, what could it possibly offer to the language of political critique? What would it mean to affirm a form of pessimism that speaks truthfully about suffering and the inevitable constraints of human limitation on the one hand while fueling a critical stance that seeks the amelioration of a very bad world on the other?

This paper argues that we can answer these questions by distinguishing between two separate uses that pessimism has historically had: its *skeptical* function and its *critical* function. In its skeptical mode, pessimism expresses skepticism about the attainability of the good life across the board. The main targets of skeptical pessimism are various theories of well-being, each of which attempts to explain what a good human life consists in. Pessimism holds that human life goes badly *regardless* of which theory of well-being we adopt. In so doing, it advances a modal claim against those theories: perhaps a certain theory of well-being specifies the conditions under which a human life *would* be good and worthwhile, but worldly conditions systematically prevent actually existing human beings from achieving that kind of life.

As we will see, pessimism comes closest to precluding itself from political critique in its skeptical mode, since it often represents the constraints that prevent people from living good lives as fundamental or intrinsic to the human condition. Yet this does not mean that pessimism must succumb to fatalism, resignation, and withdrawal. In its critical mode, pessimism can be a vehicle of cultural and political critique, to the extent that it emphasizes the social contingency of many

of the sources of our suffering.

Section 2 provides some motivation for the skeptical pessimist's claim that "no life is good" (Benatar 2011). My goal will not be to show that pessimism about well-being is true, but to illustrate the reasons behind its global skepticism about the possibility of the good life. Section 3 argues that the appearance of a conceptual connection between pessimism, fatalism, and withdrawal from the political domain is largely generated by this skeptical function. Section 4 introduces pessimism's critical function and explains its role in political critique. Here we will see that pessimism's critical function can even ground a critique of its own potentially depoliticizing skeptical function. In closing, I suggest that while pessimism is certainly a philosophy of regret for our predicament, it offers an ethic of resistance rather than resignation.

2. What is Pessimism?

There is a fair amount of resistance to the idea that pessimism about well-being could possibly be true. To begin then, we should give a deeper description of what pessimism is, and sketch some of the most prominent arguments for the view.

Mara van der Lugt (2021) distinguishes two separate constellations of ideas that go by the name of "pessimism." First, there is *value-oriented pessimism*, "which applies itself to questions such as whether life is worth living, whether the goods or evils weigh out in life, and how to weigh them adequately." Second, there is *future-oriented* pessimism, which has "something to do with our expectations about the future," namely that the future will contain bad things, that things will get worse, or at least that tomorrow will be no better than today (van der Lugt 2021: 11).[1]

To date, many of the discussions of pessimism's political utility (or lack thereof) have focused primarily on this future-oriented dimension of pessimism, particularly its skepticism about narratives concerning moral, cultural, and political "progress" (Gray 2002, Dienstag 2006, Dovi 2017, Witlacil 2022). As we will see, I agree that this is an important component of pessimist political

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[1] As van der Lugt points out, this characterization of future-oriented pessimism is a popular but distorting representation of how pessimists think about the future. While future-oriented *optimists* do seem to think that things progress and get better, pessimists do not necessarily embrace the claim that things will get worse. As Joshua Foa Dienstag puts it, where the optimist expects good things in the future, "the pessimist expects nothing" (Dienstag 2006:40).

consciousness. At the same time, this paper seeks to focus primarily on the political upshots of *value-oriented* pessimism, which is reflected by pessimism's suspicion that human life is a condition of irredeemable suffering. In my view, the connection between value-oriented pessimism and a potentially liberatory political ethic has been insufficiently explored. In the light of van der Lugt's contention that value-oriented pessimism enjoys both historical and conceptual priority over its future-oriented cousin (van der Lugt 2021: 68-71), it seems especially important to investigate whether the pessimist tradition is compatible with such an ethic.

One pithy summation of the value-oriented pessimist stance is that "the bad prevails over the good" (Prescott 2012: 340). Pessimists often understand the bad to prevail over the good quite globally, as if the balance of bad things in existence defeats the balance of good things. As Arthur Schopenhauer puts it in a famous passage:

> If we were to conduct the most hardened and callous optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres, through prisons, torture-chambers, and slave-hovels, over battlefields and to places of execution; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it shuns the gaze of cold curiosity, and finally were to allow him to glance into the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death, he too would certainly see in the end what kind of world is this *meilleur des mondes possibles.* (WWR I: 325)

Of course, settling the question of whether "the bad prevails over the good" in the universe as a whole is a notoriously difficult enterprise. David Hume's own pessimism was apparently tempered by his empiricism on this point, leading him to deny that this question can be answered decisively one way or the other: "For who is able to form an exact computation of all the happiness and misery, that are in the world, and to compare them exactly with each other?" (quoted in van der Lugt 2021: 190-191). On the other hand, Hume held that we might be able to settle the question of whether particular human lives are worth living by attending to the balance of good and bad things *within* human experience.

In van der Lugt's words, this is an example of how the pessimistic debate shifts from the "cosmic" to the "creaturely" perspective, from questions about the value of existence as a whole to questions about whether human lives contain

more good than bad. Here we will be focused on pessimism's "creaturely" perspective on well-being. Pessimism holds that the bad prevails over the good in two domains of human life: 1) suffering prevails over happiness, and 2) meaninglessness prevails over meaning. The dominance of the bad over the good in these domains is acute enough to make non-existence preferable to existence.

2.1 Suffering prevails over happiness

In recent decades, analytic philosophical discussion about "happiness" has largely morphed into a discussion about "well-being." "Well-being" is a term for that which is "good for" human lives or makes those lives go well, and theories of well-being offer different accounts for what these goods might be. The majority of the literature breaks down into three broad views. Hedonistic theories hold that well-being basically amounts to experiences of pleasure (and perhaps relative freedom from experiences of pain). Desire satisfaction views hold that well-being amounts to having one's desires satisfied. Finally, objective list theories hold that well-being consists in realizing important values besides pleasure and desire satisfaction, such as friendship, knowledge, love, and a sense of purpose.

The many differences and qualifications between particular hedonistic, desire-satisfaction, or objective list views need not concern us here, because the pessimist's claim is that well-being is unattainable *regardless* of which particular theory of well-being we prefer. Well-being is unattainable on a hedonistic theory because painful states prevail over pleasurable ones. It is unattainable on a desire satisfaction theory because frustration and dissatisfaction prevail over satisfaction. And it is unattainable on an objective list theory because human lives systematically fail to realize values worth having. Here I will briefly sketch some pessimistic arguments against these three major theories of well-being.

If well-being consists in pleasure, then a human life will go well just in case it involves a greater balance of pleasure over pain. The pessimist contends that 1) no human life actually includes a greater balance of pleasure over pain, and 2) even if there is a greater *quantity* of pleasure in a human life, the *qualitative* badness of even a smaller quantity of pain outweighs even a very great quantity of pleasure.[2]

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[2] My survey of these pessimistic arguments owes much to David Benatar's clear exposition of them, but as Mara van der Lugt points out, many of the arguments themselves are prefigured or explicitly made by Pierre Bayle in the 17th century (see van der Lugt 2021: 42-66).

To some, the idea that life contains *more* pain than pleasure may seem strange. After all, many relatively fortunate people may look at their lives and note that health is more common than sickness, that positive or neutral mental states are considerably more common than painful ones, that the painful experiences they do have are not extreme or debilitating, and so on. How could the pessimist be right that the bad prevails over the good on this score?

Optimists and pessimists alike often want to draw a distinction between *thinking* that your life is going well and it *actually* going well. Once we distinguish between *judgments* of the quality of our lives and the *actual* quality of those lives, the question becomes how reliable our generally positive judgments about the quality of our lives are. Pessimists often point out that these judgments tend to skew to the optimistic side of the spectrum: we overestimate how good our lives are and underestimate how bad they are. We're just *biased* in favor of optimism.

According to David Benatar, among these biases are a psychological tendency to recall positive experiences and forget negative experiences, a deep-seated expectation that the future will be as good or better than the past, the tendency to habituate ourselves and adapt to life conditions that are objectively quite negative, and the tendency to focus on our well-being relative to those who we consider worse off rather than our "absolute" well-being (2006: 64-69). These biases prevent us from achieving a suitably objective perspective on just how many "negative mental states" everyday life contains:

> [We] tend to ignore just how much of our lives is characterized by negative mental states, even if often only relatively mildly negative ones…. These include hunger, thirst, bowel and bladder distension (as these organs become filled), tiredness, stress, thermal discomfort (that is, feeling either too hot or too cold), and itch. For billions of people, at least some of these discomforts are chronic. These people cannot relieve their hunger, escape the cold, or avoid the stress… in fact, if we think about it, significant periods of each day are marked by some or other of these states. (Benatar 2006: 72)

Of course, in addition to these mundane pains, human lives contain "chronic ailments and advancing age," as well as "guilt, shame, boredom, sadness, depression, loneliness, the ravages of AIDS, of cancer … and grief and bereavement" (Benatar 2006: 72). Once we take these experiences and biases into

account, it seems less and less likely that human beings generally attain the good life by hedonistic standards.

Moreover, even if subjective experience *is* a reliable indicator of "how much" pain and pleasure life contains, the *qualitative* badness of pain prevails over the *qualitative* goodness of pleasure. Indeed, many pessimists take the negativity associated with experiences of pain to decisively outweigh the positivity associated with experiences of pleasure. "The worst pains seem to be worse than the best pleasures are good. Anybody who doubts this should consider what choice they would make if they were offered the option of securing an hour of the most sublime pleasures possible in exchange for suffering an hour of the worst pain possible," says Benatar (2011: 62), echoing Schopenhauer: "Whoever would like to briefly test the assertion that pleasure outweighs pain in the world, or that they are at least in equilibrium, should compare the feelings of the animal that devours another with those of the one being devoured" (P&P 2: 263). As a result, a human life could contain a great many pleasurable experiences and relatively few painful ones while still in some sense being dominated by negative experiences.

Much of the pessimist's argument against hedonism applies to desire-satisfaction theories as well. First, one's sense of whether one's desires have been or are being satisfied is arguably even *more* unreliable than one's assessment of whether one's life is largely pleasurable or painful, and so judgments about one's own well-being are even more susceptible to bias and distortion. Second, like our quest for pleasurable experiences, many desires—for health, wealth, or honor—are temporarily or fleetingly fulfilled only after long periods of toil and frustration, and many of our deepest desires remain unfulfilled altogether: "One yearns to be free, but dies incarcerated or oppressed. One seeks wisdom but never attains it. One hankers after being beautiful but is congenitally and irreversibly ugly. One aspires to great wealth and influence, but remains poor and impotent all one's life" (Benatar 2006: 75). Finally, even the fleeting fulfillment of our desires tends to produce more desires, with the result that we are compelled to strive constantly after new objects of desire, leading to states of dissatisfaction and restlessness ranging from outright pain to numbing boredom. If well-being consists in having our desires fulfilled, then, the world makes the prospects for our own well-being quite bleak.

2.2 Meaningless prevails over meaning

Objective list theorists insist that well-being is constituted by more than simply pleasurable experiences or having one's desires satisfied. Rather, well-being involves having one's life realize a broad spectrum of values which do not seem to be reducible to pleasurable experiences or instances of desire satisfaction. Different objective list theories offer different accounts of what values well-being involves, yet goods such as beauty, knowledge, virtue, friendship, and meaning can be found on many lists. Objective list theories are harder for the pessimist to dismiss, precisely because they presume that even a life which does not fare well by hedonistic or desire-satisfaction standards can nevertheless be worthwhile. Human life might be painful and frustrating, the objective list theorist argues, but it may also realize goods that make life worth living after all.

Again, the question of whether a life realizes a certain objective value is separate from the question of whether a life is *subjectively fulfilling*. This underlines the point that our judgments of the quality of our lives do not *settle* the question of how worthwhile those lives are. Consider meaning. I might think that my life is meaningful even if all I do is watch cartoons all day, but perhaps you will agree (not all do) that my being fulfilled by this activity does not *settle* the question of whether my life is truly meaningful. Or to borrow an example from Susan Wolf, the utter pointlessness and meaninglessness of Sisyphus' predicament is not ameliorated if we assume that Sisyphus loves nothing more than rolling boulders up hills, endlessly. While a "happy Sisyphus" might be better off than he otherwise would be insofar as he suffers less, he is worse off in an epistemic or "existential" sense—now he falsely *believes* endless boulder-rolling to be a meaningful activity.[3]

If well-being consists in realizing some constellation of objective values, we need some account of what those values are, and an assessment of how likely it is that actual human lives will realize them. Once again, we must be careful to avoid the distortions that inherently optimistic cognitive and perceptual biases may introduce into our assessment of the value of "objective" goods such as friendship, knowledge, and love. Our resilient optimism might lead us to overestimate the

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[3] Interestingly, the largely pessimistic Richard Taylor (1970) disagrees, holding that subjective fulfillment in pointless tasks can confer not only well-being, but meaningfulness. Wolf's (2010) "fitting fulfillment" view of meaning in life is explicitly intended to show against Taylor that a meaningful life involves both subjective fulfillment and the realization of objective value, as well as an appropriate relationship between them.

extent to which these goods are present in our lives. Yet there is also another danger: we might *overvalue* whatever goods we take well-being to involve by regarding them as better than they actually are. The question then becomes, how are we to assess the objective value of the goods that the objective list theorist holds to be constitutive of well-being?

David Benatar suggests that in answering this question, we should think about how good a purported objective value appears from a perspective beyond the parameters that normally constrain human value judgments. For example, from a human perspective, it would be better to live a life full of fulfilling relationships and valuable experiences for 80 years rather than 40 years. The former might be judged a "good life" while the latter would be judged a life tragically cut short. In fact, an 80-year life of this sort is pretty close to the best sort of life humans can expect. Yet from a supra-human perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*, even the goodness of the 80-year life pales in comparison to the value of a 250-year life. Of course, living 250 years is impossible for humans. But that doesn't change the fact that it would be *better*, all things considered, for the "good life" to be 250 years rather than a mere 80. Similarly, we can acknowledge that objective list theories name many goods which are in fact valuable—e.g. love, knowledge, friendship, virtue, or meaning—while recognizing that human finititude ensures that our access to these goods is all-too-limited. Viewing goods *sub specie humanitatis* might tell us how worthwhile a given life is within the parameters that are possible for humans, but viewing things *sub specie aeternitatis* reveals how impoverished even the best of achievable goods are.

The claim that the right perspective to take on the value of the goods named in objective list theories of well-being is that which is achieved *sub specie aeternitatis* obviously needs argument (see Benatar 2006: 81-86 and Benatar 2017: 51-63 for support). Yet even if we are unconvinced by this claim, the main point that the pessimist is driving at still stands: the goods named by objective list theorists are ultimately valuable *relative to some standard or other*, and objective list theories need to provide an argument for thinking that the standards they presuppose are the *right* ones for assessing the worthiness of these values. Even if it is not possible to transcend our human limitations, it does seem that the objective list theorist should have a response to the pessimistic point that the value our lives realize even under the best *actual* conditions pales in comparison to the value they could realize by these supra-human logically *possible* conditions (even

if that response is, to quote Susan Wolf, "get over it").[4]

Once we understand this move, it becomes clearer how pessimists might argue that human life is in many respects meaningless, in addition to being a condition of suffering. Benatar argues that human lives can certainly achieve some worthwhile kinds of meaning. For example, if you live a life that you *experience* as meaningful, then your life *is* meaningful, at least subjectively—which is of course compatible with your life being *objectively* pointless (e.g. my quest to watch cartoons all day). Or if your life's work makes an important contribution to a greater meaningful enterprise (e.g. the case of Martin Luther King, Jr.), your life may have objective significance for the broader human community (which again is compatible with it being *cosmically* pointless). As before, these are examples of various ways that life can be meaningful *sub specie humanitatis*. And yet this is not enough to show that human life can be meaningful *sub specie aeternitatis*. In other words, our lives (and everything else) lack "cosmic meaning," and they would be better if they could achieve that sort of meaning. Even the best human lives must fail to achieve important goods.

2.3 Pessimism's skeptical function

Pessimism's skeptical function thus represents human capacities to achieve the good life as severely and tragically limited. We are finite, fragile, precarious creatures, perpetually vulnerable to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and even the luckiest among us lead lives in which the bad prevails over the good. Whether you think that the good life consists in pleasure, satisfying your desires, getting into a relationship with any number of "objective" values, or some combination of these, pessimism is here to suggest that human life-- *your* life-- fails to meet that standard in a manner severe enough to make it reasonable to regret your existence.

In this mode, pessimism does not so much claim that any particular theory of what makes a good life is false so much as it suggests that the good life (however defined) is unattainable given basic facts about the human situation in the world. Maybe a good human life *would* be one that is happy and meaningful in the right

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[4] Benatar's own recommendation is to embrace "pragmatic pessimism," which involves recognizing the inevitability of suffering and meaninglessness while "distracting" ourselves through "projects that create terrestrial meaning, enhance the quality of life (for oneself, other humans, and other animals), and 'save' lives (but not create them!)" (Benatar 2017: 211)

kind of way, but pessimism is skeptical that actual human lives can meet that standard. To this extent, pessimism about the possibility of well-being mirrors skeptical arguments about the possibility of knowledge: perhaps a certain theory of epistemic justification accurately specifies the conditions under which one's belief *might* amount to knowledge, but it is impossible to attain that sort of justification in the actual world.

3. Skepticism, Fatalism, and Withdrawal

Pessimism's skepticism about the possibility of the good life invites us to reflect upon the quality of our own lives without illusions and pushes us to justify the value of existence in the face of the badness that the world contains. And yet its tendency to target *all* candidate theories of well-being often drives pessimists to claim that fundamental, cross-historical, cross-cultural constraints on the human condition ensure that human beings systematically fail to achieve the good life. This, I suggest, leads to the perception that pessimism is of no use to political critique.

Consider Arthur Schopenhauer. In some moods, the great pessimist seems to have held that human life is *intrinsically* a condition of pointless suffering. One of his arguments for this conclusion is that "willing and striving" are the "whole essence" of human life, and that we are "destined to pain" on this basis. For Schopenhauer, striving after a goal itself involves suffering, since in striving toward some object of desire, the lack of that object is painful for the striver. What about when we obtain the object of our desire? Things are hardly better: after a vanishingly brief moment of satisfaction or contentment, the striver either must strive after a new object of desire, or find themselves bored, anxious, and adrift. As Schopenhauer bleakly concludes: "Hence … life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents" (WWR I: 312).

Schopenhauer's analysis of striving is controversial. Yet it's worth noting just how *deep* and *central* he takes this source of dissatisfaction to be to human life. In a passage showcasing Schopenhauer at his amusingly caustic best, he suggests that our fundamentally striving nature would render our lives unhappy *even if* worldly conditions were very different from what they are.

Work, worry, toil and *distress* are indeed the lot of almost all human beings

their whole life through. But if all wishes came true no sooner than they were made, then what would occupy human life and on what would time be spent? Suppose this race were transported to a *fool's paradise*, where everything grew on its own and the pigeons flew around already roasted, and everyone found his dearly beloved and held on to her without difficulty. There some would die of boredom, or hang themselves, but some would assault, throttle and murder each other, and thus cause more suffering for themselves than nature now places on them. Thus for such a race no other venue, no other existence is suitable. (P&P 2: 264)

However odd Schopenhauer's examples may be, the point of this "modal" thought experiment is clear: the constraints that make human life a bad bet are so central to the human condition that they would produce suffering at very distant possible worlds. Even if we humans were to eliminate our current sources of strife and achieve everything we'd ever wanted out of life, our insatiable, restless, striving nature would surely drive us back into the condition of suffering.

Sentiments like this buttress the perception of an essential link between pessimism and fatalism as Paul Prescott defines the term: "the view that human agency is futile with respect to one or more basic constraints upon the human condition" (Prescott 2012: 338). The thought experiment about the "fool's paradise" certainly represents these "basic constraints on the human condition" as *very* basic. Truly ameliorating human suffering would be to make human life something other than what it essentially is. If intrinsic, ineradicable facts about human nature make it the case that human life is going to be very bad regardless of whether we live in the actual world or in the "fool's paradise," what's the point of trying to do anything about it?

Consistent with these sentiments is Schopenhauer's skepticism about the ability of collective political action to alleviate our sufferings. While Schopenhauer's political theory is rather underdeveloped compared to the rest of his philosophy (Beiser 2016: 223), he holds that the state is a contractual entity created by self-interested individuals who see the state as the most efficient way to satisfy their desires. On this roughly Hobbesian picture, the laws and sanctions of the state allow individuals to get some of what they want (e.g. the security to pursue their desires) while avoiding the dangers of social intercourse with other self-interested individuals (e.g. murder, theft, assault). In this way, "the State [is] the means by which the faculty of reason seeks to avoid its own evil consequences

that turn against itself; and then each promotes the well-being of all, because he sees his own well-being bound up therewith." Schopenhauer then notes that under *ideal* conditions, the state would continue to "make the rest of nature more and more serviceable by the human forces united in it," until "something approaching a Utopia might finally be brought about to some extent by the removal of all kinds of evil." And yet, under *actual* conditions, a familiar problem once again rears its head:

> But up til now the State has always remained very far from this goal; and even with its attainment, innumerable evils, *absolutely essential*[5] to life, would still always keep it in suffering. Finally, even if all these evils were removed, boredom would at once occupy the place vacated by the other evils. Moreover, even the dissension and discord of individuals can never be wholly eliminated by the State, for they irritate and annoy in trifles where they are prohibited in great things (WWR I: 349-350).

Schopenhauer seems to grant that political systems can be better or worse depending on how happy and fulfilled they make their citizens, but they can do very little about "those fundamental evils of life that are constant and cannot be eradicated by political means: birth, sickness, age, and death" (Beiser 2016: 225). Even if they could, we would once again find ourselves in the fool's paradise.

Schopenhauer isn't exactly wrong about the inevitability of things like suffering and death, but it is fair to question the extent to which these "facts of life" are cause for the ethic of withdrawal he ends up recommending. After all, one might acknowledge the necessity and intractability of *some* sources of our sufferings while recognizing the contingency and malleability of other sources. For example, the fact that we are born, age, get sick, and die might not be up to us, but *how* birth, aging, sickness, and death occur and manifest themselves in our societies very much is. At least part of what birth, aging, sickness, and death *are* in a particular cultural and political moment is determined by specific practices surrounding these events, and these variant understandings have at least some effect on the nature and extent of the suffering associated with these "fixtures" of human life. (Consider, for instance, the differences we might find between a society which delays grieving for the dead by isolating and quarantining the dying

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[5] Emphasis mine.

until survival is deemed impossible, and a society that recognizes a communal responsibility to prepare the dying for the next stage of their spiritual journey as part of the grieving ritual). We will see that this unwillingness to impose a reductive naturalistic categorial uniformity on concepts (like "death") that are in fact sensitive to the way they are embedded in different cultural and political contexts is an important component of pessimism's *critical* function (Witlacil 2022).

Yet as mentioned, Schopenhauer's somewhat ahistorical account of the badness of human life famously leads him to recommend withdrawal from the political sphere into an individualistic ethical sphere. In the face of inevitable suffering, we must cultivate *compassion* for our fellow sufferers: "the conviction that the world and therefore also mankind is something that actually should not be, is designed to fill us with forbearance towards one another, for what can be expected of beings in such a predicament?" (PP: 273). To this extent, Schopenhauer's prescriptions remain at the level of personal conduct, as instructions for how to act with the knowledge of the inevitability of suffering and meaninglessness.

This ethic of withdrawal [6] certainly seems consistent with pessimism's skeptical stance on happiness and meaning. Indeed, pessimism's contention that even the best human lives fail to achieve important goods has considerable overlap with its skepticism about the prospects for collective political responses to suffering. For example, we saw in Section 2 that pessimists need not deny that human lives are meaningful from some perspectives. We may find our lives subjectively meaningful, or our lives can be objectively meaningful insofar as our lives "make a difference" in the world in some way. And yet humans are denied the kind of meaning that *really* matters, namely cosmic meaning. Analogously, pessimists like Schopenhauer can point out that political participation may alleviate *some* problems, but not the problems that *really* matter-- the ones concerning our finitude, fragility, and cosmic insignificance. If that is the perspective we adopt, it might seem wiser to "[lower] one's expectations for

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[6] In the work of other pessimists, this commitment to apolitical withdrawal is more explicit. Eugene Thacker, for example, claims that pessimism is (or should be) intrinsically apolitical, thus implicitly affirming the primacy of the sphere of personal conduct over the political: "The pessimist can never be political – or, to be more precise, the pessimist can never live up to the political. (Still, one imagines pessimist slogans – "Drop All Causes!" or "Not To Be!") Resistance, rebellion, revolt, protest, and intervention all fall outside the scope of the pessimist worldview. The pessimist is the most despised of nay-sayers, a stranger even to abstention, refusal, and precious forms of Bartlebyism." (Thacker 2018: 45)

'overall' human progress [and safeguard] personal and self-created notions of progress" by "retreating to the possibility of personal improvements" than to engage in the existential futility of political participation (Dovi 2017: 229).

In explaining the persistence of the gap between what would make human life a good bet and actual human capacities to achieve the good life, skeptical pessimism appeals to fundamental cross-cultural constraints on the human condition. This opens pessimism to the charge of fatalism and resignation (since these constraints are *ex hypothesi* non-negotiable), and detracts from a focus on the more contingent and particular sources of our sufferings, many of which are rooted in specific political, cultural, and economic conditions. Yet historically, pessimism has had more to contribute than skepticism. It also performs an important *critical* function.

4. Pessimism's Critical Function, or How Pessimism can be Political

As a form of value-oriented pessimism, critical pessimists can agree with skeptical pessimists that human life is indeed a sorry affair—perhaps even sorry enough to make it reasonable to wish one had never been born. The differences between critical and skeptical pessimists lie in 1) their interpretation of the scope and referent of "human life" and 2) their explanations of what makes "human life" a bad bet.

Pessimism's skeptical mode comes close to endorsing a universal claim about the prospects for human happiness: whoever you are, and wherever and whenever you are born, if you are a human being, your life is a condition of pointless suffering, thanks to fundamental and cross-cultural constraints on the human condition.

Pessimism's critical mode is wary of endorsing these generalizations, for two reasons. First, critical pessimism seeks to highlight the *contingency* of our sufferings by revealing the relative badness of human life to be largely determined by the social, political, cultural, and economic structures under which those lives are lived. Therefore, where skeptical pessimism speaks of "human life" as an existential condition writ large, critical pessimism speaks of various historically specific *configurations* of human life. Second, critical pessimism interprets static Schopenhauerian and Benatarian generalizations about the badness of human life as a whole as *themselves* symptoms of the extent to which dominant social and political systems have succeeded in alienating humans from their true needs and

naturalizing and depoliticizing their sufferings. Skeptical pessimism is thus *itself* a historically and culturally contingent stance whose rise to prominence requires its own explanation and critical evaluation.

Critical pessimism thus seeks to rein in skeptical pessimism's tendency to group diverse aspects of human experience under the same rubric. Indeed, this tendency toward identification and categorization is both a symptom and enabler of a historically contingent cultural and political status quo that insulates itself from critical alternatives partially through alienating, pacifying, and isolating its members.[7] From this perspective, critical pessimism underwrites a critique of skeptical pessimism itself.

To see what a nuanced critical value-oriented pessimism might look like, let us start with the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality,* Rousseau tells an idealized story of how human beings gradually move beyond the basic desires that can be fairly easily satisfied in the state of nature to more specific and sophisticated desires that can only be cultivated and satisfied by more complex societies.[8]

Complex societies involve goods that are in many respects of higher quality than those available in the state of nature (e.g. culinary diversity, aesthetic experiences, etc.). Yet these come with a hidden cost: "A great deal of leisure" allows people to "furnish [themselves] with many conveniences" which soon become "habitual." But once habituated to these conveniences, they "entirely ceased to be enjoyable, and at the same time degenerated into true needs." As a result, "it became much more cruel to be deprived of them than to possess them was sweet, and men were unhappy to lose them without being happy to possess them." An acquired taste for luxury and convenience leaves us extremely unhappy when we are deprived of those goods, and somewhat under-satisfied even when we do attain them. Hence an ironic relationship: the greater and more available the goods, the more intense our dissatisfaction.

If Rousseau is right, modern human life isn't bad just because humans have desires—it's bad because human beings have developed contingent, *particular* desires shaped and encouraged by the increasing "perfection" and self-regard that modern (European) society cultivates. Human life might not have been so bad if human beings had not developed a thirst for perfection and novelty in the

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[7] See Mary Witlacil (2022), who identifies this suspicion of ontological unity and attendant critique of its social effects as core elements of Theodor Adorno's critical pessimism.
[8] See Dienstag (2006: 58-63).

deleterious way that modern society encourages them to. Indeed, the state of nature is proof that humans are not always and everywhere condemned to live bad lives. As long as human desires remained relatively simple and the things that fulfilled those desires relatively abundant, individuals were able to live "free, healthy, honest, and happy lives, so long as their nature allowed."

While scholars disagree on whether Rousseau was really a pessimist or not,[9] his account outlines three ideas that I take to be central to critical pessimism: 1) our ideals of the good life and the desires we have for them are historically contingent and socially mediated, 2) they are a major source of our sufferings, 3) the relationship between the increasing quality of the objects of our desires and our increasingly powerful capacities to achieve them is *ironic* insofar as these both leave us worse off than we otherwise would have been had we never developed those desires or objects in the first place.

Of course, one need not be a pessimist to endorse 1) – 3).[10] Yet this Rousseauian view can also be found in the work of thinkers who are more naturally associated with the spirit of critical pessimism. For example, Mary Witlacil points out that Theodor Adorno and Lauren Berlant are each concerned with the extent to which modern capitalism harnesses and directs our desires in stunting ways that actively harm our capacity to flourish. In Witlacil's words, Adorno recognizes that "under capitalism, real human needs—such as the needs for safety, love, and human belonging—are manipulated to sell products, thereby cementing one's *need* to participate in capitalism," while Berlant recognizes that this distortion of our needs "ensnares us in a cruel cycle of unfulfilled expectation" which she refers to as "the cruelty of optimism" (Witlacil 2022: 9, 11, Berlant 2011).

For Witlacil, Adorno's pessimism in particular is ultimately future-oriented in scope, defined by a healthy skepticism about status quo-serving progress narratives. That view is pessimistic insofar as it recognizes the necessity of critique without the expectation of the "better." I take it that this is an important component of pessimist political consciousness. Yet how could this perspective

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[9] Dienstag (2006) treats Rousseau as absolutely central to the pessimist tradition, using Walter Starkie's epithet "patriarch of pessimism" to describe him. Van der Lugt (2021) classifies Rousseau as an optimist overall while noting some pessimistic tendencies in his early work. She notes that this difference in characterization most likely stems from Dienstag's decision to treat future-oriented pessimism as basic rather than value-oriented pessimism.

[10] As an anonymous reviewer points out, these commitments seem compatible with communism, which does not have a straightforward relationship with pessimism and in many cases self-consciously distances itself from it.

be complemented by a critical *value-oriented* pessimism?

As we have seen, value-oriented pessimism is primarily concerned with the question of whether a particular configuration of human life is *justified*, or whether it "covers the costs," in Schopenhauer's words. I suggest that in addition to claims 1) – 3) above, a critical value-oriented pessimist would endorse 4): the sufferings and crises of meaning that characterize a particular configuration of human life are so severe that it is reasonable to regret that this particular configuration ever came into existence (or at least to regret that one was born into *this* particular configuration of human life).

How could an attitude of regret towards (one's situatedness in) *this* particular configuration of human life avoid the problems we have laid at the foot of skeptical pessimism? And how could it possibly be of use to political critique?

First, it is important to note that unlike skeptical pessimism, this negative evaluation and corresponding attitude of regret is not directed toward "existence" or "human life" as a whole, but toward a *manner* of existing that is historically contingent. Because skeptical pessimism holds that life's unhappiness and meaninglessness is anchored in a basic universal human condition from which there is no escape, the value of human life must be compared (unfavorably) to the value of *non-existence*, or the prospect of never having been born at all (Benatar 2006). Yet in its critical mode, pessimism is alive to the possibility that bad prevails over the good because of contingent socio-historical mechanisms that produce a given configuration of human life. Consequently, the value of that configuration must be compared not merely to the value of non-existence, but to the value of *any number of contingent alternative configurations of human life that could have arisen instead had things gone differently.* Negatively evaluating *this* particular configuration of human life in all its absurdity and cruelty thus does not involve stepping into the problematic "bad life vs. total non-existence" dichotomy that skeptical pessimism seeks to force on us. While a skeptical pessimist might also be a critical pessimist and vice versa, the views are conceptually distinct. I might regret being born *here* and *now* in a world dominated by global capital, repressive state authority, and environmental catastrophe while leaving open the possibility that being born into a different configuration of human life would involve less cause for regret.[11]

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[11] While a critical value-oriented form of pessimism has to date received far less attention than its future-oriented cousin, something like the contrast I am drawing here may underlie Tom Whyman's recent discussion of the difference between Benatar's "ontological anti-natalism" and some radical

Second, the recognition that our conceptions of the good life and our desires for it can be socially mediated, ironic, and cruelly optimistic makes it possible to criticize, reimagine, and perhaps even ameliorate the structures that create this misalignment between embedded social incentives and actual human flourishing. Demonstrating that many of the sources of our sufferings are shaped by cultural, political, and economic forces that could have been, have been, and perhaps should and still could be otherwise is an invitation to resistance and experimentation, not resignation. This attitude of regret thus requires both the critical ability to reject an alienating and stunting status quo and to imagine different historical configurations in which human needs are not distorted in ways that function to replicate dominating power structures. This may require us to sacrifice many of the cruel pleasures and rewards associated with the status quo. Yet it also may give rise to identities, capacities, and communities more conducive to our flourishing.

Finally, critical pessimism involves regret for the fact that pessimism itself is a fitting philosophy for our time and place. Pessimist consciousness is often a historically contingent development which is symptomatic of the alienation that people justifiably feel in a world that reduces their capacities to the terms of competition and exchange value while delivering the ersatz rewards of comfort and pacification in exchange for their strivings. This means that in addition to a critique of current configurations of human life, critical pessimism offers an "internal" critique of pessimist consciousness itself. Skeptical pessimism may purport to speak rationally of the cold hard facts that attend the human predicament, but it must not be allowed to position itself as a purely *universal* perspective. For one thing, this can end up naturalizing and depoliticizing the sufferings and crises particular to modernity. For another, it can obscure the fact that there is nothing inevitable about pessimist consciousness itself.

This relationship between historically contingent configurations of human life, the socially mediated desires and strivings which that configuration fosters, and the historical specificity of pessimist consciousness itself can perhaps best be appreciated by looking at *this* configuration of human life from the perspective of a configuration which starts from very different assumptions about human capacities and relatedness. For example, in articulating an American Indian conception of humanity, Jicarilla Apache philosopher Viola F. Cordova suggests

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climate activists' "ontic anti-natalism." See Whyman (2021: 12-15).

that many of the attitudes that philosophical pessimism speaks to would be viewed as a "psychotic disruption" in the context of relations presupposed by indigenous tribal life:

> Human beings are a part of a whole that is greater than the individual. A human is not something apart from the Earth and the rest of its creations, including rocks, trees, water, and air; he is a natural part of the earth… Humans are not "fallen" creatures; they are what the Earth intended. Most of all, they "fit" in this world because they are products of it. A sense of alienation from the world and its many beings would not, in this context, be seen as the common malady of individuals but a psychotic disruption, an illness...Humans are not 'meaningless bits of cosmic dust floating about in an infinite universe." They are an integral part of the whole. (Cordova 2007: 151-2).

North American indigenous peoples have long recognized that this sense of alienation from the earth, true needs, and community is rooted in the social ontology of settler colonialism, which fundamentally distorts human capacities and desires in its quest for social and metaphysical categorization, hierarchical organization, and domination (Waters 2004). Euro-American and Canadian settler colonialism was and is *rapacious,* involving vast, unsatisfiable hunger for ever-more resources, wealth, territory, and conquest, backed up by almost limitless dishonesty, cruelty, and brutality. Diné writer and activist John Redhouse explains that these violent desires were and continue to be rooted in a "human condition" that was characteristic of the "ever advancing society of the West":

> *Wasi'chu* is the Lakota (Sioux) word for 'greedy one who takes the fat.' It was used to describe a strange race that took not only what it thought it needed but also took the rest. Wasi'chu is also a human condition based on inhumanity, racism and exploitation. It is a sickness, a seemingly incurable and contagious disease which begot the ever advancing society of the West. If we do not control it, this disease will surely be the basis of what may be the last of the continuing wars against the Native American people. (Johansen and Maestas 1979: 11).

Cordova and Redhouse each highlight the extent to which contemporary

alienation and crisis in the Global North are products of a history of colonialism, capitalism, toxic individualism, racism, and other contingent artifacts of human design. Globally dominant political, cultural, and economic systems continue to reflect this condition of greed, "inhumanity, racism and exploitation." In particular, the Global North's current ideals of the good life, centered as they are around accumulation, individualistic notions of achievement and success, comfort, and a corresponding politics of exclusion for those who are deemed insufficiently deserving of the good life, seem to be the historical and political descendants of *Wasi'chu*.

Skeptical pessimism rightly points out the emptiness of these ideals, and directs our attention to the possibility that all this is pointless. Yet while skeptical pessimism purports to make an "ontological" point about the human predicament writ large, it fails to acknowledge that it speaks from *within* the standpoint of an alienated configuration of human life, from a set of social conditions in which a felt sense of alienation in no way seems like a "psychotic disruption." Skeptical pessimism's inability to locate its own perspective as something that is shaped by the currents of a particular configuration of human life thus "collapses into resignation" by default, "because it fails to interrogate the social and historical conditions that reinforce domination and necessitate negativity about political reality" (Witlacil 2022: 14).

5. Conclusion: Regret, Resistance, and Resignation

Philosophical pessimism is, among other things, a symptom of the badness of contemporary life. Yet I have been suggesting that critical pessimism might be part of the cure. In its future-oriented mode, critical pessimism offers a vital disruption of reigning hegemonic optimism about the forces of global capital to meet human needs.[12] The triumphalist veil has a tendency to hide the dark sides of "progress." Critical pessimism illuminates these dark sides, not so that it can make an ahistorical point about the inevitability of suffering, but so that it can highlight the *cost* of "progress," and ask what (and for whom) all this "progress"

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[12] Witlacil rightly points out that the cult of uncritical and vapid optimism about these forces is itself a symptom of alienation: "There is a need for the vapid assurance of 'live, laugh, love' to pacify the alienation caused by contemporary reality. However, the need for vapid assurance 'lies in the will of people to be safe from being buried by a historical dynamic they feel helpless against.'[Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 93]... Just because a person accepts the premises of late capitalism does not mean they are free from the alienation and domination necessitated by capitalism." (Witlacil 2022: 11)

is for. And then the question for praxis becomes whether we are going to say "yes" to a situation like this. Are we going to allow this to stand?

In its value-oriented mode, critical pessimism suggests that our current *configuration* of human life does not "cover the costs." Perhaps it would have been better for it never to have been--not only for our own sake, but for the sake of those whose ways of life were and are erased, colonized, assimilated, or brutally truncated on the way to the often cruelly optimistic ideals of prosperity and comfort that so many of us doggedly strive for.

Yet unlike skeptical pessimism, critical pessimism insists on seeing our various sufferings and crises as inextricably embedded in historically contingent cultural and political relations. It encourages us to learn from, imagine, and actively experiment with alternative ways of conceiving of human life that could potentially liberate us from the distortions that historically contingent modern capitalistic societies impose upon our real needs. It encourages us to imagine a world in which even the most ineradicable features of human life—birth, death, and suffering—function not to isolate and individualize us, but to lead us into networks of mutuality for which it makes sense to be grateful we are here to participate in. Critical pessimism is thus a philosophy of regret, but also a philosophy of resistance. What it is not is a philosophy of resignation.[13]

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Reason, Luck, and Meaning
A Critique of the Moralist View of Meaning in Life

Kazuki Watanabe[*]

Abstract

Since the 20th century, many philosophy papers have been written about the concept of meaning in life. One notable question in the field is whether there is a necessary connection between morality and meaning. This paper's objective is to tackle this question and bring out two points that favor the view that there is no necessary connection between morality and meaning. I attempt to support the anti-moralist view that morality is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for a meaningful life. To do so, I articulate and defend two arguments suggested by Bernard Williams: one argument from the perspective of categorical desire and another from the perspective of luck. The first contrasts morality's impartiality with meaning as personal, and the second contrasts morality's immunity to luck with meaning's vulnerability to luck.

1. Introduction

Since the late 20th century, many philosophy papers have been written about the concept of meaning in life. Philosophers, largely those in Anglo-American countries, have attempted to analyze the concept as many ambiguities are involved in the common-sense conceptions of meaning. Among these, a notable ambiguity is the relationship between meaning and morality; namely, the question is whether there is a necessary connection between morality and meaning. This seems to be an important question for multiple reasons. First, philosophers' opinions are radically diverse on this question. Some say there is no connection, some argue moral lives are sufficiently meaningful, and some assert that highly immoral lives cannot have meaning. Second, the question concerns the nature of morality, which is the core problem of moral philosophy. If immoral lives can be meaningful, what is the point of morality? Does one have a necessary reason to observe morality by sacrificing one's immoral but meaningful life? As noted by some philosophers,[1] such questions have been the subjects of moral philosophy

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[1] e.g., Kekes (2000).

since Plato. Indeed, questions about meaning and morality have also been intensely argued by some of the earliest figures in contemporary discussions.[2] Thus, it seems important to scrutinize the relationship between the moral and the meaningful.

This paper's objective is to tackle this question and bring out two points favoring the view that there is no necessary connection between morality and meaning. To do so, I take up the arguments proposed by Bernard Williams, one of the leading figures in 20th-century moral philosophy. Although Williams has significantly contributed to moral philosophy, it seems that there are no corresponding treatments of his arguments in the contemporary discussion of the meaning in life. An important exception to this negligence is Susan Wolf, as her seminal paper on the relationship between meaning and morality is based on Williams's argument against the view that there is a necessary connection between them.[3] I attempt to extract Williams's thoughts on the matter more thoroughly than Wolf does.

In what follows, my basic point is that Williams suggests two arguments that support the view that there is no necessary connection between meaning and morality. In the paper's second section, I more precisely outline the problem regarding the connection and formulate the views I criticize. I focus on moralist views such that morality is either a necessary or sufficient condition for a life to be meaningful. In the third section, I propose an argument against the moralist views: an argument from the perspective of *categorical desire*. In the fourth section, I extract an argument by Williams that is rather more neglected in the field than the former: an argument from the perspective of *luck*.

2. Views on Meaning and Morality

Three views on the relationship between meaning and morality

In this paper, I presuppose two points on meaning and morality. First, I suppose that meaning in life is something that makes one's life meaningful and is *variable*; there are degrees of meaningfulness in life. One's life can be meaningful to a degree but can also be, in a severe case, meaningless. This conception of

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[2] e.g., Singer (1997), Wolf (1997), Kekes (2000).
[3] Wolf (1997).

meaning is very broadly shared in the literature.[4] Second, I suppose that a moral life is one generally lived according to moral codes that are morally approved by others. A moral life includes observing moral obligations, executing supererogatory actions, or helping others with good intentions. Here, being moral is also *variable*; there are very moral people, such as Mother Theresa; modestly moral people; and extremely immoral people, such as Hitler.

As for the relationship between life being moral and being meaningful, there are broadly three popular views in the literature.[5] The first view is that being moral is neither necessary nor sufficient for being meaningful, which I refer to as the *anti-moralist* view. This view is asserted both by *subjectivists*, who hold that the meaningfulness of one's life is wholly dependent on one's subjective conditions, and by *objectivists*, who hold that meaningfulness needs more than subjective conditions.[6] As subjectivists assert that one's life is meaningful as far as one is in a subjectively proper state, they may naturally argue that one's life can be meaningful regardless of how moral it is.[7] Objectivists such as Kekes and Wolf also endorse the view that morality is neither necessary nor sufficient for a meaningful life. Kekes, by quoting John Stuart Mill's depression about his moral life, stresses that a morally good life can lose meaning and asserts that one's highly immoral life can be meaningful if one is genuinely identified with it.[8] Wolf, being rather more cautious than Kekes, also argues that moral life can be meaningless if one has subjectively lost interest in it and one's committed immoral life can be meaningful if it is still worthwhile.[9] The second view is that morality is a sufficient element for a meaningful life. For instance, Metz suggests that a highly moral life is meaningful even if one is completely depressed in it, as a morally great life is of great use for many people.[10] In this view, Mother Theresa's life is meaningful regardless of her psychological state. The third view is that morality is a necessary element of a meaningful life. Numerous philosophers agree that one's highly immoral life cannot be a meaningful life even

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[4] There might be skepticism about meaning in this sense by arguing that we cannot compare meaningfulness across people's lives as argued in Kukita (2015), p.212. Also, there is a sense in which everyone's life is equivalently meaningful, no less or no more. However, I do not take these views in this paper.

[5] A helpful survey on this topic is Kipke and Rüther (2019).

[6] Metz (2013) pp.19-20.

[7] e.g., Edwards (2018), p.119.

[8] Kekes (2000). p.30.

[9] Wolf (1997), p.313, Wolf (2010), pp.58-60.

[10] Metz (2013). p.135, p.227, Kipke and Rüther (2019), p.235.

if one is passionately committed to it.[11]

Assessment: anti-moralist vs two moralist views

To summarize, opinions can be broadly divided into two conflicting positions: the *anti-moralist* view that morality is neither sufficient nor necessary for meaning in life and the *moralist* view that morality is a sufficient or necessary element of meaning in life. The moralist view is divided into two views: the *necessity-moralist* view that morality is a necessary condition for a meaningful life and the *sufficiency-moralist* view that morality is a sufficient condition for a meaningful life. To make these moralist views ideally persuasive, let us suppose that both are weak statements. That is, the former merely asserts that *highly* immoral lives such as Hitler's cannot be meaningful, and the latter asserts that *highly* moral lives such as Mother Theresa's are sufficiently meaningful. This clarification is needed because the moral views will be singularly unpersuasive if the morality at issue is of a small degree.[12] For instance, it is rather absurd to suppose that the life of a great artist who has had an affair and is therefore deemed to be a bit immoral is meaningless. After the clarification, the two views can be formulated as follows:

> The *necessity-moralist* view (hereafter "N-moralist")
> If one's life is, to a certain considerable extent, immoral, it cannot be meaningful.

> The *sufficiency-moralist* view (hereafter "S-moralist")
> If one's life is, to a certain considerable extent, moral, it must be meaningful.

There are two points to note about the moralist views. First, these two views can coexist: one can be both N-moralist and S-moralist, and, indeed, philosophers such as Metz seem to hold both views.[13] According to them, a substantially moral life must be meaningful, and an extremely immoral life cannot be meaningful. Second, only some *objectivists* hold the moralist views. It is difficult for

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[11] Landau (2011), p.314, Louden (2013), p.40, Metz (2013), p.235, Kipke and Rüther (2019), pp.231-4. It is possible to read Wolf as a theorist on this view. She argues that an objectively worthless life is meaningless anyway (Wolf (1997), p.306), and, if she thinks that a highly immoral life is necessarily worthless, she supports this view.

[12] Landau (2011), p.314, Louden (2013), p.40.

[13] Kipke and Rüther (2019), p.236.

subjectivists, who hold that subjective states are crucial for meaningfulness, to assert that morality is either necessary or sufficient for meaningfulness as there is no necessary connection between morality and one's subjective states. On the other hand, some objectivists who still emphasize the role of the subjective state hold the *anti-moralist* view.

The question is: what is the nature of the conflict between the *anti-moralist* and *moralist* views? The most obvious difference is that anti-moralists believe that life's partial aspects, such as joy, are crucially important, while moralists believe life can be meaningful or meaningless irrespective of the partial aspects. Thus, anti-moralists think that a depressed Mother Theresa's life can be meaningless, and a devoted Nazi officer's life can be meaningful, while moralists think otherwise. Having said that, it is unclear which position to favor if the difference is just based on intuition. Is there a philosophical reason to favor one of them?

The anti-moralist position can become, I think, more attractive by achieving two tasks. First, anti-moralists should clarify why the partial aspect ought to be emphasized without presupposing a robust subjectivist view. If they want to persuade objectivists, they need an argument that is logically neutral to the subjectivist/objectivist debate. Second, anti-moralists should show the reason why morality *specifically*, unlike other objective properties, is in doubt. If there is a counterargument specifically directed toward morality, it might be a special reason for us to be cautious against the moralist views of meaningfulness. I attempt to achieve these two tasks by analyzing the concept of morality in more detail than in previous articles;[14] in what follows, I focus on morality being *impartial* and *immune to luck*.

3. Argument from the Perspective of Categorical Desire

The first argument from categorical desire

Can anti-moralists base their emphasis on the partial aspect of meaningfulness? One leading anti-moralist, Susan Wolf, extracts such an

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[14] One such attempt in the literature is Louden (2013), pp. 39-40. While Louden asserts that a minimum morality is required for all human cognitive activities and a rational conversation, his assertion seems to be false as an extremely immoral figure like Hitler can just speak rationally.

argument from Bernard Williams.[15] This argument, which I refer to as "an argument from categorical desire," is based on the fact that one's meaning in life gives one a reason to stay alive. Let us look carefully at this argument.

Wolf and Williams suppose that a salient fact about meaning in life is that "what gives one's life meaning gives one a reason to live."[16] If a person sincerely believes that their life is crucially about creating art, creating artwork makes their life meaningful and gives them reason to live. If they are deprived of the means to create art by, say, a war, they might think that they have no reason to live. They may take no interest in their life or the world at all. Williams calls this meaning in the sense that it gives one a reason to stay alive "categorical desire," as this is a desire that is not conditional on the assumption that one will survive.[17] While my desire to watch a boxing match tomorrow is conditional on my survival, my categorical desire to live with my partner is not, as this desire constitutes the condition for my survival.

Given this thought on categorical desires, the argument against the moralist views goes as follows:

> *The first argument from categorical desire*
> While what makes one's life meaningful necessarily produces a categorical desire, that is, one's reason to stay alive, morality does not necessarily give one a reason to stay alive. Therefore, moral life is not necessarily meaningful.

If this argument is sound, it negates at least the S-moralist view, in which a highly moral life is sufficiently meaningful. It is possible that a moral life does not give one a reason to stay alive. For example, a depressed Mother Theresa does not have

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[15] Wolf (1997).

[16] See Wolf (1997), p.303. An objection can be made to this point that one can consider that one's life is meaningful while simultaneously seeing no reason to live anymore. We can suppose, for instance, an old philosopher who thinks that philosophical contemplation makes life meaningful but has no desire to live anymore. To this objection, I can reply that this philosopher either still has categorical desire or philosophy has lost all meaning to him or her. If the philosopher is not depressed but just pessimistic about life, s/he still has reason to lead a philosophical live and write pessimistically. If s/he is so depressed that s/he genuinely believes that s/he has no reason to live at all, the meaning which s/he used to identify with the life is lost. For the depressed philosopher, philosophy does not add any meaning to life at all. One can be pessimistic and sometimes mistaken about one's reason to live, but I think there is a sense in which what makes one's life meaningful necessarily provides one's reason to live. I appreciate the anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

[17] Williams (1973), pp.85-6, Williams (1981), p.11, Williams (1995), pp.245-6.

reason to stay alive; in this case, she loses meaning in her life. In contrast, the N-moralist view, in which a highly immoral life is meaningless, is not critically damaged by this argument, as the argument only negates morality's power to necessarily provide a reason to stay alive. It remains neutral to the possibility that there exists a highly immoral reason to stay alive. Thus, the target of this argument is the S-moralist view.

Moralists might reply: how can you say that morality does not necessarily give one a reason to stay alive? To this, anti-moralists can respond: one's reason to stay alive is *personal*, while morality is *impartial*. That is, morality can, at best, give one a *general* reason to stay alive, but that is not enough to give *one* a *specific* reason to stay alive. Let us suppose a person who sees no reason to live. Here, it seems absurd to say that this person has a reason to go out and maximize the world's utility even if that is morally desirable. As Wolf points out, the person can ask "Why should *I* do this? Why am *I* responsible for the world?"[18] While it might be possible to suppose that morality impartially gives *one* a reason to act morally, it is hard to believe that it *specifically* gives *that* person a reason to act morally[19]. Morality can at best provide a reason that anyone can equally have.[20] However, what concerns us in virtue of the meaning in life is essentially a *personal* reason to act, since this personal reason enables *that person* to stay alive. Therefore, impartial morality cannot necessarily provide meaning in life.

The second argument from categorical desire

The fact that one has categorical desires can be used in a different way to argue against the moralist views. That is, one's categorical desires, which enable one's meaning in life, can be exhausted, while morality is not exhaustible. A person may feel that they have achieved their life's goal of being a teacher. One may find that one's reason for staying alive—living for their partner—is radically mistaken

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[18] Wolf (1997), p.307.

[19] Contrary to this point, Kantian theorists tend to argue that one has reason to observe moral duty regardless of one's subjective motivations. Following Williams (Williams (1995), p.37), I believe that the burden of proof is on the theorists. They need to demonstrate the existence of such reason notwithstanding the intuitive fact that it seems absurd to argue that a depressed person has a reason to be committed to famine relief. I owe this point to the reviewer's comment.

[20] This is related to the debate between *reason-internalism* and *reason-externalism,* in which internalists, including, most famously, Williams, argue that one's reason to act is enabled by their subjective motivations (Williams (1981), pp.111-2). If moralists insist that morality necessarily gives one reason to act, they are committed to either reason-externalism or reason-internalism, in which morality is necessarily connected to one's subjective motivations.

when they discover their partner is a cheater and a manipulator. As these cases show, categorical desires can be exhausted or extinguished in various ways. However, being moral cannot be exhausted in those ways. For example, suppose a person who used to be identified with their categorical desire to make the world better by donation to poor people. Even though this person is alienated from their categorical desire now, a forgotten regular donation automatically withdrawn from their bank account as a donation makes their life moral. Hence, it is possible for one's life to be moral while at the same time its meaning is exhausted. This can be formulated as follows:

> *The second argument from categorical desires*
> One's categorical desires can be exhausted in various ways. However, the morality of one's life cannot be exhausted in those ways. Therefore, there are many cases in which a life lacking in categorical desires is meaningless but moral.

This argument negates at least S-moralists again, as it shows that moral life is not always meaningful. Indeed, it seems that one's categorical desires can be lost or worn out while one's life remains moral. In the case of depression, one is devoid of categorical desires or a reason to stay alive, which, in an extreme case, leads one to commit suicide, although from the moral point of view, nothing is lost. A depressed Mother Theresa may produce as many goods or utilities as a normal Mother Theresa does, but she really loses her categorical desires. Another important case for exhaustion is *tedium*, as Williams famously argued. [21] Categorical desires can be worn out when one is completely bored by them. Williams invites us to think of immortal life and argues that, in an infinite amount of time, there will come a point when one is completely bored by one's life and loses a reason to survive. While the S-moralists would argue that one cannot lose one's meaning in an infinite time, as far as one is moral, [22] it is powerfully tempting to deem one's life meaningless if the life is so tedious that one is in extreme pain, hates their life, or all they want is to commit suicide. In short, in an extremely tedious life, one finds no *personal* reason to live.

The thought that is the basis of this second categorical desires argument, I think, is that varieties of human emotions such as a sense of identity,

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[21] Williams (1973), p.100.
[22] Metz (2013), p.135.

purposiveness, depression, or tedium are so closely connected to the concept of meaning in life that moralists need a powerfully intuitive argument to claim that one's life is meaningful even if one loses proper emotions. When a person is conscious of their categorical desires or has a sense of destiny, it is natural for them to say that "I *find* meaning in my life," which means one finds a *personal* reason to live. On the contrary, when one is extremely bored with their life or finds that one's sense of identity is radically mistaken, one would naturally say that "I *have lost* meaning in my life," which means one has lost their *personal* reason to live. When one is extremely bored or depressed, one will seek meaning in their life or just cease to exist. In those extreme cases, a person is *really seeking* meaning, as they have *no* meaning. Thus, it is the variety of human emotions, such as the sense of identity and tedium, that enables the dynamics of personal reasons to live and, therefore, meaning in life.

4. Argument from the Perspective of Luck

Argument from luck

Though Wolf only emphasized Williams's argument from categorical desires, it is notable for the philosophy of meaning in life that Williams suggests another argument for the anti-moralist view. This is an argument that I refer to as an "argument from luck." This argument rests on the point that meaningfulness in life is vulnerable to luck, although morality is not.

In many places, Williams keeps claiming that the core driver of modern morality is an ideal that transcends luck: it is morality's ideal that moral value is not vulnerable to luck.[23] Indeed, moral evaluation seems to be luck-proof; whether one is moral is a matter of voluntary intention, not a contingent effect of one's actions. A man who tries to save a drowning child with good intentions is morally good whether he succeeds or fails. He might be unlucky if he fails to save the child, but he is still moral. As this case shows, whether one is moral is a matter of intention or goodwill, that is, a matter of voluntary control, and therefore not a matter of luck. Consequently, it seems morality is essentially immune to luck.

Meaning in life, however, seems to be largely vulnerable to luck, which is a deep problem for certain objectivists and moralists.[24] Let us consider again the

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[23] Williams (1981), pp.20-1, Williams (1985), p.217.
[24] Brogaard and Smith (2005), pp.453-4.

man who tries to save a child but fails. Let us suppose that he feels that he is unjustified, and in his life after the incident, he keeps blaming himself. His guilt is so deep that he never enjoys the activities he used to enjoy, and he never talks to other people. He may think that his life is worthless and may even want to commit suicide. It seems clear that he is a deeply moral man; his intention and action were completely moral, and his sense of guilt is moral. The problem for moralists is that his life turns out to be *unluckily* meaningless after the tragic incident, although he remains moral. In the real world, one can witness many kinds of tragic cases in which a highly moral person's life is crushed by an unlucky incident or factors they cannot control. Susan Wolf suggests that a woman who "has dedicated her life to the care and comfort of a man whom she now finds has been using her" loses meaning in her life.[25] It is hard to deny that her life has been highly moral, as she genuinely cares about a person she has loved with good intentions. Yet, her life is *unluckily* meaningless regardless of how moral she is. Given the reflection on these cases, the argument can be formulated as follows:

> *Argument from luck*
> Meaning in life is vulnerable to luck in a way that morality is not. Therefore, one's life being meaningful can be isolated from one's life being moral because of luck.

It should be noted that the role of luck is so essential to meaning in life that luck is woven into not only unlucky tragic cases but almost all kinds of life. Consider the famous case of Gauguin proposed by Williams.[26] Gauguin, trying to cultivate his creativity, moves to Tahiti even though it involves abandoning his family. Williams's point is that whether his life is meaningful is crucially a matter of luck, in other words, not a matter of voluntary control. If he is unluckily untalented or if he unluckily fails to flourish his creativity because of an accident, his life will be meaningless. If, on the contrary, he luckily succeeds in becoming a great artist, his life will be meaningful. Here, while Gauguin's life is immoral either way, his life can be meaningful or meaningless depending on luck. Many human projects are vulnerable to luck in a similar way; one's life being successful cannot be free of luck. Generally, the success and failure of a project that is central to the

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[25] Wolf (1997), p.305.
[26] Williams (1981), pp.22-4.

meaningfulness of one's life is largely a matter of luck, whereas the morality of one's project is not a matter of luck.

From this argument, it follows, first, that the S-moralist view is doubtful[27]. A highly moral life can be meaningless because of bad luck. We have seen a morally strict man who leads a life of solitary guilt after a tragic incident. We can also conceive of a woman who is born in a very androcentric society and has been dedicated to its sexist morality and her sexist husband but later feels that her life is empty after reading a book on feminism. Alternatively, we can consider "a very unfortunate person who has all the right dispositions and makes all the right decisions, but whose plans are repeatedly thwarted by a series of equal and opposite unlucky accidents."[28] These cases all suggest that although one can voluntarily control having a moral life, one cannot control having a meaningful life.

It follows, second, that the N-moralist view is also arguable. Even if one's life is highly immoral, it can be meaningful because of good luck. Gauguin's life might be such a case but, as the meaningfulness of his life is controversial,[29] let us also consider another example partly inspired by the film *Taxi Driver.*[30] Travis is a depressed veteran. Suffering from a horrific war memory, he becomes mentally ill and decides to randomly kill people. He has killed four men in a gunfight, which renders him unconscious for a while. When he wakes up, he finds that the media is treating him as a hero because the dead men were evil gangsters from a teenage prostitution ring. Being treated as a hero cures his mental illness. He becomes very happy and energetic and dates his ex-girlfriend again. Thus, because of the murders, he passionately identifies with his life again. It seems that Travis's life is deeply immoral since he killed people with bad intentions, but, *luckily*, his life becomes meaningful. As this case shows, even a highly immoral life can be meaningful because of luck. Again, one can control having an *immoral* life, but one cannot control having a meaningful life.

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[27] It seems this objection puts Thaddeus Metz's theory of meaning in life in jeopardy as Metz does not consider cases where one's life is unluckily meaningless even though one employs one's reason and rationality (Metz (2013), p.222). I owe this point to the reviewer's comment.
[28] Brogaard and Smith (2005), p.454.
[29] e.g., Wolf (1997), pp.306-7.
[30] The imaginary person I introduce is different from Travis in the original film in various ways. There is a sense in which the original Travis acts with good intention whereas my Travis does not.

Objections answered

The first possible objection from moralists is that the moral value of one's life is, in some cases, decisive of meaningfulness regardless of luck. They might argue that a Mother Theresa who is fully committed to and enjoys being moral has a meaningful life regardless of any bad luck that crushes her feelings. Her life is meaningful by virtue of being helpful to others even though she is *unluckily* in extreme grief. Indeed, it might be conceded to moralists that a moral life usually secures meaningfulness. Peter Singer has even claimed that a moral life "is the best way open to us of making our lives meaningful."[31]

Although morality is *empirically* a secure way to have a meaningful life, it is, however, not safe enough to *necessarily* confer meaning on moral saints or to *necessarily* deprive immoral devils of meaning. We can conceive of a very unlucky person who is, in terms of good intentions, as moral as Mother Theresa, but always fails to help people. We can also imagine an unfortunate billionaire whose huge donation is mistakenly transferred to a terrorist group's bank account due to a technical accident. Immoral variations of these cases are also easily conceivable. In short, it is always possible that, due to luck, moral saints lose meaning and immoral devils acquire meaning.

Another possible objection from moralists is that the morality of one's life must consider the life's actual effect. According to this objection, in deciding the morality of one's life, we should take seriously not only one's intention but its actual effect. Thus, a man who is depressed due to guilt is not that moral, and Travis is not that immoral. This objection is based on a kind of consequentialism according to which moral evaluation should be based on the actual consequences of actions. This objection, however, will make the moralist views too narrow. According to this model, one's life is not substantially moral if it does not actually produce a substantial amount of goods. Let us suppose a woman who has been deeply committed to helping neighbors and developing the community's economy. However, she does not know that by developing the community, she indirectly allows the people in underdeveloped countries to suffer from famine.[32] It is very arguable that she is not moral enough. At the least, this model will unfairly exclude

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[31] Singer (1997), p.259.

[32] I think, in capitalism, the status of moral people in advanced countries is somewhat like this. Even if they live substantially moral lives, their moral life is often based on the suffering of others because of a system they cannot control.

many innocent people who are fully committed to morality from substantially moral lives.[33]

Moralists might continue to argue that this model is only applicable to the N-moralist view: a highly immoral life is a life in which one acts with bad intentions and causes bad consequences. In this view, while Hitler's life is highly immoral, Travis's life is not so immoral and, therefore, it can be luckily meaningful. Again, it seems to me that this makes immorality too narrow. Let us suppose an evil cult leader filled with horrible hate who shoots random people but miraculously kills ten terrorists who would otherwise take 10,000 lives. I think that this person is highly immoral. In general, lucky immoralists are as much *immoral* as unlucky immoralists.

Given that the reasons to take the anti-moralist view of meaning have been confirmed, I have a final remark on the topic. Central to these reasons is an idea that there is no general and infallible answer to the question of what a meaningful life is, as Wolf rightly stressed.[34] Even though morality is, generally, a good answer to this question, it is always possible to ask "why should I be moral?" Moreover, it is always possible for luck to crush a moral life. This idea, in turn, encourages another idea—that it is not true that we ought to follow someone's meaningful life. Even if Travis's lucky immoral life may be meaningful, it is not true that we should be like him. First, his life is not *mine*; it does not follow that his reason to live constitutes my reason to live. Second, luck is everywhere; my life cannot be exactly like his.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to support the anti-moralist view of meaning by articulating and defending two types of arguments suggested by Bernard Williams. In the second section, I reviewed the literature on the relationship between meaning and morality and extracted three views on this relationship: the *anti-moralist* view that morality is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for meaning, the *S-moralist* view that a highly moral life is sufficiently meaningful, and the *N-moralist* view that a highly immoral life cannot be meaningful. In the

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[33] A further comment on this objection is that, as the consequence of one's life can change as time goes by, we cannot be completely sure how much good is achieved by one's life. The life of an ancient-Greek moral citizen might look immoral to modern people as it is based on slavery.
[34] Wolf (1997), p.312.

third section, I proposed an argument from the perspective of categorical desires. According to this argument, given that meaning in life is necessarily connected to categorical desires, that is, one's reason to stay alive, I develop two thoughts against the *S-moralist* view. The first is that impartial morality does not necessarily provide such a reason as that provided by the idea that morality is at best *general*. The second is that one's reason to stay alive can be exhausted in depression or boredom while one's life remains moral. In the fourth section, I proposed an argument from the perspective of luck: the meaningfulness of life can change depending on luck while the morality of one's life is unchanged. Both the *S-moralists* and the *N-moralists* are in trouble with this argument: a highly moral life can lose meaning, and a highly immoral life can obtain meaning. Later in the section, I addressed two possible objections to the argument from the perspective of luck.

As noted at the end of the second section, I tackled the issue of meaning and morality by emphasizing the contrast between them; *impartial* morality against *personal* categorical desires and *luck-immune* morality against *luck-vulnerable* meaningfulness. Whether my argument that rests on the Williams's analysis of morality has been successful or not, I firmly believe that more critical analyses of the concept of morality are needed for fruitful philosophizing on the meaningfulness of morality.

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