**Between Sisyphus's Rock and a Warm and Fuzzy Place:**

**Procreative Ethics and the Meaning of Life**

No one needs to exist.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet, here we all are. Every generation creates another generation of people, floundering about in our meaningless universe. Yet creating and raising children is widely claimed to be one of life's most meaningful activities (Ferracioli, 2018; Greenberg et al, 2015; and Velleman, 2005 a, among many others). You can see the problem: Creating children can be deeply and uniquely meaningful but, by creating children, we condemn another generation to lives that are meaningless. What does that imply about the morality of procreation? Why does the meaningful give rise to the meaningless?

The answers require us to distinguish between different kinds of meaning, because procreation is a source of one, or maybe two, kinds of meaning, but nothing can help us with the third kind. I suggest that there are three basic kinds of meaning, and six characteristics that meaning can sometimes have within a kind of meaning.[[2]](#footnote-2) The kinds of meaning are: Everyday, Cosmic, and Ultimate. These kinds of meaning may include six characteristics of meaning: significance, value, explanation, impact,[[3]](#footnote-3) purpose, and point.

Everyday meaning refers to the value and significance of our everyday lives, including values such as beauty, morality, love, and truth; and the significance of engagement with them. It includes the purpose (i.e., the reason for which something is done) and point (i.e., justifying valued end) of much of our meaningful, everyday lives, which aim at these valued ends. It includes the impact we have on others and on the world around us, as well as the explanation of some of our meaningful activities and pursuits. Cosmic meaning refers to our meaningful role in the cosmos: to the significance and value of our niche in the cosmos, to the explanation of our role in the cosmos, our impact on the cosmos, and the purposes or point of the cosmos and our place in it. Ultimate meaning refers to the point of leading and living a life *at all*.[[4]](#footnote-4) Why bother with the project, effort, or enterprise of life? What is the valued end of leading, running, and living a human life? Ultimate meaning is the end-regarding justifying reason, the valued end, or the point of leading a life at all.[[5]](#footnote-5) (Unlike Everyday and Cosmic meaning, in my view, Ultimate meaning has only one of the six potential characteristics of meaning: it is confined to point).

I will argue that having children can be a deep source of Everyday meaning, and perhaps Cosmic meaning as well. But nothing can provide us with Ultimate meaning. That is the sense in which having children can be (Everyday and Cosmically) meaningful yet may still leave us with the sense that we are condemning another generation to (Ultimate) meaninglessness. In this essay, I will analyze the ways in which procreation is meaningful to us, and the implications this may have for procreative ethics. As I've argued elsewhere, life is a risk (Weinberg, 2015). As with other risks, we justify imposing it on our children due to our interest in procreation and the effect of the procreative risk on the children we will have. In other words, we consider how important having children is to us as well as how the risk of life is likely to play out in the lives of the children onto whom it is imposed. This is consistent with how we justify risk imposition, generally: we consider the interests of both the risk-imposer and the risk-imposee (Weinberg 2015, and forthcoming, *OUP*).[[6]](#footnote-6) An important aspect of parental interest in procreation is the ways in which procreation is a route to meaning in life. So the ways in which and the extent to which this is the case is of moral importance because the stronger the parental interest in procreating, the more justified we are in having children. But, if the risk of life is likely to ripen into overwhelming and terrible harms, then we will have a hard time justifying procreation, even if it is so meaningful to people alive already. So we must also consider whether the ways in which life may be meaningless may be so terrible for people as to make creating them morally problematic or even wrong.

That is what I will explore here. I will discuss procreative meaning as it pertains to the three kinds and six possible characteristics of meaning (which I take to cover all the meaning bases). I will use the term "procreation" and "having children" quite sloppily, to refer to both creating and raising children, even though these are separable activities. Where they come apart, I will note which aspects of meaning can or cannot apply to the separate acts of procreating and raising children. I will then consider the implications of procreative meaning for procreative ethics.

**I: Everyday Meaning**:

Everyday meaning is the ordinary, everyday kind of meaning that we have in our everyday lives. It runs deep, it runs wide, and it pervades most lives. That's lucky, because, as we will see, it's the only kind of meaning we can be somewhat sure of. Having children is a sure route to several characteristics of Everyday meaning (Brighouse and Swift, 2014; Smilansky 1995). The parent-child relationship is a highly valuable and unique love relationship; a true case of the warm fuzzies. As Ferracioli (2018) has pointed out, parental love is uniquely deep, robust, and resilient. It often includes steep sacrifices rarely seen in other loving relationships, and often proves enduring in the face of challenges of distance, time, and offense. We love our children from far away, be they dead or alive, and even when they are not particularly nice to us.

Procreation is therefore extremely significant; it is often a defining meaningful feature of a person's life, life story, and life trajectory. If something bad happens to one's child or to one's relationship with one's child, it is almost never a "who cares?" It is significant to you; you care. The parent-child relationship is deeply and uniquely valuable such that it renders almost anything about it significant. It is nearly impossible not to care about your children so your life includes some significance from the moment of your child's conception. Your child is significant to you, and your role as the parent is significant as well as impactful. It is hard to overstate the impact a parent has on her child, even while the child is still developing in utero.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Children anchor you to the world, connecting you to humanity's past and future. For some, children provide a sense of immortality and the comfort of being remembered after you die (at least for a while) (Solomon *et al* 2015).[[8]](#footnote-8) By procreating, you become part of the chain of human history, linking one generation to the next. Thus, the fate of the world gains significance to you. It is harder to stand apart, aloof, indifferent about the world. By procreating, you have committed to the world, invested in its future. Political stability, long term peace or war, the health of the planet… - it all matters so much more to you because it will affect your children, and their children, etc. In these ways, children make you deeply vulnerable to the world, to nature, and to other people. Everything matters.[[9]](#footnote-9) The value, significance, and impact of so much of your life is amplified by procreating. Having children makes life deeper and fuller; better, worse, happier, and sadder. In other words, much more meaningful.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Procreating can also provide people with a purpose: to raise their child well, to nourish the parent-child relationship for the duration of their lifetimes. That can serve as a purpose, the reason for which so much of your life's work is done. And because the value of your child and your relationship with your child is so high and unique, your child can serve as the valued end, or the point, of much that you do for and with your child. Thus, there is a point to playing with your child: you stack blocks with her, even though the activity itself can be mind-numbingly boring and meaningless on its own for an adult, because you value your child and your relationship with her. So there's a point to stacking blocks with her, and an explanation for many of your everyday activities.

Procreativity can explain a good deal of your life. It expresses your nature as a biological being, as an animal that reproduces, as part of the physical world and, in so doing, may help clarify what it can mean for you to be a biological human organism. Procreativity explains many of your aims and acts. We all do many things that are explained by the fact that we are parents (e.g., we love our children, we care for them, we work for them, we sacrifice for them, etc.). Procreating can thus render a good deal of human activity fairly intelligible, which is not always easy to do.

Even if one does not personally procreate, as Scheffler (2012) has argued, human procreation in general can be an important source of meaning in our lives, as we can see by imagining the doomsday prophesy, in which we know that everyone will die thirty days after our own death. The tragedy of this future, he argues, shows us that our values make most sense in the context of a collective afterlife (i.e., in which others live on after we ourselves die).

***Creating versus Raising:*** Both creating and raising a child can be a source of Everyday meaning. If one raises but does not create one's child, as is the case in adoption, the parent-child relationship can be characterized by much of the same everyday meanings as biological procreation, though likely not all. For example, adoption does not express your nature as a biological animal that reproduces but it does express your nature as a biological animal that cares for its young, and it does produce a uniquely valuable parent-child relationship. If one creates but does not raise one's child, depending on the level of parental involvement, that too can be meaningful in the everyday sense of it being something significant, valuable, and impactful but rarely meaningful in the sense of providing explanatory meaning or everyday purpose or point to your everyday activities since your everyday activities in this sort of case are not explained by or aimed at your child or your relationship with your child.

**II: Cosmic Meaning**

As noted earlier, Cosmic meaning refers to our meaningful role in the cosmos. As rational, intelligent, moral agents, people may have a valuable role to play in the cosmos because our characteristics are valuable and, at least in our corner of the universe, quite rare (see Korsgaard, 2006). Having children is therefore taken by some to be a way to contribute to cosmic value (Smilansky 1995) and can similarly be seen as an explanation of what we are doing here in our corner of the cosmos: perpetuating a special kind of value. Some argue the opposite – that people are uniquely awful and should not be perpetuated because we add negative value to the cosmos (see Benatar 2015) but I find that conclusion unrealistically focused on the small percentage of villainous people. Procreation allows us to play a valuable and significant role in the cosmos, and provides us with one way to have cosmic impact: we create more of this cosmic specialness and leave our children to continue to play this role in the cosmos. Because the universe is vast, this impact might be quite small indeed and some may find it insignificant or meaningless, but it can also seem more important if we are indeed as rare as we seem to be in our discernable corner of the universe.

Whether there is any cosmic point or purpose and whether or how procreation participates in that is unknown, at best. If there is a cosmic purpose or point, it is certainly not obvious. Though it is also not obvious that this particular lack of meaning should bother us very much.

Insofar as we have non-cosmic points in our lives (such as those provided by our Everyday meaningful pursuits), it is not clear that the fact that these points aren't cosmic should bother us, and if there was a cosmic point but that didn't serve to provide our own lives with a point (be it Everyday or Ultimate), it is not clear why or how that would serve as much of a comfort to us.[[11]](#footnote-11) My view is that our lives are indeed ultimately pointless and no amount of Cosmic meaning can change that (see section III, Ultimate Meaning, below).

Some use the term *sub species aeternitatis*, or "the perspective of the universe"[[12]](#footnote-12) as a way of referring to Cosmic meaning. However, I find that a confusing concept because the universe is non-agential and doesn't seem to have much of a point of view. Moreover, it is unclear why we should care about that point of view, even if there was one. Perhaps, however, the so-called perspective of the universe is a descendant or a naturalistic variant of the view that Cosmic meaning is spiritual or godly. Some think there is cosmic spiritual meaning in the context of a religious cosmic order or purpose. On that view, having children could be seen as a way of participating in or perpetuating that supernatural cosmic order (if having children is part of how that order or purpose is supposed to work). Religion is supernatural. Not being wise to magic, I have no access to supernatural realms, if they exist. I guess I cannot rule out the possibility of this sort of cosmic purpose but, as I will explain in section III, I don't think that could provide us with Ultimate meaning. As such, I don't think that procreation provides us with a cosmic point to our lives, though it can provide other sorts of Cosmic meaning (in terms of value, significance, explanation, and impact, as explained above).

***Creating versus Raising:*** Both creating and raising a child can be ways of achieving Cosmic meaning insofar as both creating and raising a child are ways of contributing value to the cosmos. (This differs from Everyday meaning in that the meaning provided by procreativity is not confined to our everyday lives, though it will overlap with it). Because the uniquely valuable moral, artistic, and rational qualities of people are likely a combination of natural and social factors, both creating and raising children can be important to this sort of meaning.

**III: Ultimate Meaning**

Ultimate meaning refers to the point of leading and living a life *at all*. What is the valued end of the meta-project, effort, or enterprise of leading or running your life? Ultimate meaning is the end-regarding justifying reason, the valued end, or the point of running a life at all. I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming, *JCI*) that we cannot have this kind of meaning, and that presents a human tragedy. I won't repeat the argument in detail here, but I will very briefly state some of the central points so that we can consider how it may apply to the procreative ethics and the meaning of life.

We live our lives in several ways. We have our everyday lives, which include much of what we care about and value, and the ways in which we pursue or embody those values. But we also do this other thing: we have a human agential life that we run or lead, as a sort of project, effort, or enterprise of its own (Brännmark 2003, Nagel 1987, and Velleman 2005 b). Points, or valued ends, lie outside the efforts or enterprises toward which they are aimed. E.g., you visit your grandma because you value her and you value loving relationships – the visit itself is not the point of the visit; you fight for justice because you value justice – the fight is not its own point; you study because you value truth – the study itself is not the point of the study. In all of these pointful pursuits, the point or valued end does not consist in the pursuits themselves, even if the values aimed at or grounded by such pursuits, such as love or truth, are valuable for their own sake. (The project or pursuit itself doesn't tell you why you're doing it; the pursuit itself doesn't tell you what the purpose or point of all that effort is). Because our life encompasses its entirety, including all of the everyday values in it, there is nothing that can serve as the point or valued end of leading it because nothing lies outside of it to serve as a valued end for it.

The point of enterprises, pursuits, or efforts, like all points, are the valued ends that those enterprises or pursuits aim at or are grounded by. Those ends are separate from the pursuits or efforts themselves, even if they are attained while engaging in them. But, since your life includes its entirety, including all the values in it (be those values objective, subjective, natural or supernatural), there is nothing that can serve as a point for bothering to lead a life at all. We can see that by imagining justice achieved: then what?[[13]](#footnote-13) Sisyphus's rock does not roll back down: then what (Levy 2013)? You're hanging out with god blissfully in the afterlife, then what? What is the point of the rest of your life/afterlife?

Because our lives include their entirety, including their possible afterlife portion and including the values that guide our everyday activities, projects, and pursuits, the effort or enterprise of leading and living our lives cannot have a point. Thus, Ultimate meaning is metaphysically impossible due to the nature of points, or valued ends, (i.e., that they are separate from the projects, pursuits, and efforts toward which they're aimed) and the nature of human life (i.e., that it includes its entirety).[[14]](#footnote-14)

Although my diagnosis of the cause of the problem of Ultimate meaning is different from the explanations given by other philosophers, several philosophers have noted this problem so it is not that controversial a problem to acknowledge. Nagel, for example, says: "The problem is that although there are justifications and explanations for most of the things, big and small, that we do within life, none of these explanations explain the point of your life as a whole" (Nagel 1987, p. 95). Nozick seems aware of the problem as well, saying: "Once you come to feel your existence lacks purpose, there is little you can do" (Nozick 1981, p. 588). Thus, if you are not persuaded by my explanation of the etiology or nature of the problem of Ultimate meaning, you can still recognize the problem itself, which is that we *lead* our lives, we *run* them, agentially, as an effort, enterprise or project of its own. And, although we can find justifying reasons, in the form of valued ends, or points, for many of the things we do and enterprises we run within our lives, we don't have those sorts of reasons – *points* – for the agential effort or enterprise of leading and living our lives. So that leaves us with a lot of pointless effort since running one's life takes a lot of work and often includes much suffering. The value within, i.e., Everyday meaning, may suffice for some to make leading a life worthwhile despite the lack of Ultimate Meaning, but it still will not give the leading of one's life a point, a valued end of its own. Having and/or raising children can't give us this kind of point because nothing can. Boo hoo (I mean it!). When we create new people, we know that they too will lead lives that are pointless – Ultimately meaningless - in this way.

**IV: Implications for Procreative Ethics**

Procreating is a source of deep and unique Everyday meaning, and perhaps a source of Cosmic meaning as well (as we noted earlier). That strengthens our moral case for procreating insofar as it gives prospective procreators a very strong interest to go ahead and force another person to live: namely, that procreating is likely to be an Everyday and possibly Cosmic meaning boon for procreators. Yet we know that our future child will not have Ultimate meaning (because no one can) and that, at least in my view, is contrary to our future child's interests. Putting forth sustained and significant effort, as we do in the leading of our lives, without a point or end-regarding justifying reason for that effort is disappointing at best and potentially demoralizing. If the effort or enterprise of leading and living, or running, our lives could have a point, we would want it to. It would be nice if there was a point to the hard, wearying, and long-term agential effort we put into leading our lives in their entirety. Thus, issues regarding the meaning of life present us with a procreative ethics conflict: does the fact that our children's lives will lack Ultimate meaning outweigh or override the fact that procreating is a deep and unique way to achieve and enjoy Everyday and perhaps Cosmic meaning, or does this work the other way round?

Before I address that question, I will address two issue that could render the question practically, if not philosophically, moot. The first is the possibility of adoption as an alternative to procreation. If we could achieve much of the meaning we get out of procreating by adopting instead, we can incur the meaning gains without imposing procreative risks on anyone since adoption does not create new people. The second is the Ponzi scheme problem. Some have argued that even if we can achieve meaning by procreating and our children can proceed to do the same thing, because humans, like all species, will eventually fade out of existence, this amounts to a procreative Ponzi scheme of sorts, and is therefore morally suspect (Benatar 2015; Reddit u/BeastBeef, 2019 and u/(deleted) 2019).

***Adoption: the Procreative Panacea!***

When discussing adoption, it is hard for me to appreciate the philosophical attention devoted to discussing whether adoption as an alternative to biological procreation provides us with reasons or obligations to adopt rather than procreate biologically (even though I'm participating in it right now!) (Friedrich 2013; Rulli 2016 a and 2016 b; Rieder 2015; Betzler and Löschke 2016; Peterson 2002; Ferracioli 2014; De Wispelaere and Weinstock 2015; among others). First, obviously, not everyone can adopt. *Someone* will have to create the children to be adopted, so the adoption solution to procreative ethics is quite limited, at best.

Second, it is simply not the case that there are numerous children available for adoption. So there is quite the pie-in-the-sky quality to these discussions. Since single parenthood, unmarried parenthood, and abortion have become more socially accepted in many parts of the world, the number of children relinquished for adoption has dropped precipitously, and the demand far exceeds the supply (Bitler and Zavodny 2002; Miller and Coyl 2000; *The Economist* 2017).[[15]](#footnote-15) International adoptions have proven to be rife with corruption, human trafficking, and with children who were not knowingly and/or voluntarily relinquished by their birth parents for adoption, causing some countries to restrict or cancel these programs (Goodwin 2010, Smolin 2006, Wang 2019, and Westerman 2018). Thus, adoption is hardly a procreative ethics panacea. As intended, it is a post-fact solution to children born to parents unable or unwilling to raise them. But even then, it is not clearly always the best solution or the best way to help those children and their parents. If we gave the biological parents the money that is used to arrange for the adoption of their children instead of using that money to arrange the adoptions, many of those parents would likely be delighted to have been rendered financially able to raise their children. Moreover, adoption comes at the cost of significant suffering, as it is usually emotionally difficult to relinquish a child for adoption (Aloi 2009, Memarnia *et al* 2015, and Jones 2016), and many (though certainly not all) adoptees struggle with feelings of rejection, alienation, and loss (Nickman and Rosenfeld 2005; Velleman 2015 a; and MacLeod, 2017). It is also worth noting that since the demand for babies relinquished for adoption far exceeds the supply, by choosing to adopt rather than procreate biologically, you may be making it harder for infertile or gay people to find babies available for adoption.

Finally, there is the matter of biological connection. While some argue that biological connection is nonexistent, mythical, fanciful, or of minimal importance (Silver 2001and Haslanger 2009),[[16]](#footnote-16) it seems a stretch to me to think that it amounts to nothing of value or nothing meaningful. Parent-child relationships, as argued, can be a source of Everyday and perhaps even Cosmic meaning. Biology is one sort of parent-child relationship that people can have with each other, and the sense of continuity and familiarity many feel for their close biological relatives, or when they discover new relatives, or long lost relatives, attests to the meaning that biological relationships can provide (Groll, forthcoming and Velleman 2005 a). The fact that people are primates who, like many other species of primates, tend to live in and favor kin groups makes it plausible to think that there is often a natural biological human bond, as does the fact that we are evolved to care about the survival of our kin. I certainly don't think that all biological relationships are always valuable to all people. Any kind of relationship can be soured in nearly infinite ways. However, the fact that people are formed and influenced by a combination of nature and nurture makes it likely that both natural and "nurtural" bonds are usually meaningful (i.e., significant, valuable) to people.  And I also think that the fact that so many people seem so interested in their DNA, their genealogy, and in finding biological relatives shows that it is common for people to find biological connections valuable, as does the lengths people often go to have biological children. For all of these reasons, I think it unreasonable to insist that adoption poses no loss to those who wish to procreate biologically. It may be a loss that people should or even must incur, under certain circumstances, but it is not something that comes at no cost.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Of course, adoption often works out quite well, to the benefit of all parties to it, and many times even better for parents and children than many biological procreative arrangements. And, as argued, it allows for most of the Everyday meaning that people get from procreativity. But it is not the way out of our procreative ethical problems. For anyone to enjoy the Everyday and Cosmic meaning that procreation can provide, someone will have to procreate biologically (at least so far – perhaps technology might prove otherwise). Moreover, adoption is expensive, exclusionary, beset with moral problems of its own, involves the loss of biological connection and, in any case, is only realistic for a miniscule fraction of the population. So it is not a way for us to reap procreative meaning benefits for adults without imposing any meaning risks on our future children. We will have to face the conflict.

***The Procreative Ponzi Scheme?***

Some have argued that procreating as a way of achieving Everyday or Cosmic meaning is morally suspect because, as with all Ponzi schemes, the last generation of "investors" or, in the procreative case, of humans, will be left without a return on their investment. As Benatar (2015, pp. 129-130) argues:

Continued procreation in order to save existing people from harm is a giant procreative Ponzi scheme. Each generation has to procreate to save itself from the fate of the final generation, thereby creating a new generation that must procreate in order to spare itself the same fate. Like all Ponzi schemes, it cannot end well….As a species, we can tread the perilous waters of purposelessness by procreating only so long. The final people's problems of purpose will be no different whether the final people are the current generation or some distant future one.

This is an intriguing argument, but its factual basis seems rather hazy. Even if it is accurate to describe each generation as "borrowing" meaning from the next by creating the next generation, it is a "scheme" we were all born into – it's not as if someone cooked it up as an alternative to honest procreative dealing. Unlike most Ponzi schemes, it is also not the case that most, on this view, stand to lose; it would just be the last few generations.[[18]](#footnote-18) Moreover, it is no moral crime so long as this sort of borrowing or creating of meaning is also available to the next generation. Sure, it seems unrealistic to expect that, unlike almost all known species, humans will go on in perpetuity without ever succumbing to extinction. But, deciding that we are all morally obligated, on pain of being immoral Ponzi scheme operators, to do our best to go extinct now in order to save some future generation from that sort of crisis of existential meaning is ridiculously speculative. We have no idea how long it will take for humans to go extinct and how that extinction process might occur. Therefore, we also have no idea whether forcing extinction now will spare future generations greater extinction suffering or, instead, cause vast suffering to current generations for no important reason. Maybe humans will painlessly evolve into another species, going extinct in an extremely slow and barely noticeable fashion over thousands of years. Maybe humans will colonize other areas of the universe and persist long after the earth's sun burns out. Maybe a nuclear war will take us all out tomorrow. Because we know so little about the ways in which human extinction may occur, it is not a reason sufficiently grounded in fact to demand the steep sacrifice in meaning that a current moral procreative ban would incur.

However, if each generation condemns the next to ultimate pointlessness, as I believe it does, we must consider whether the gains in Everyday or Cosmic meaning, which we may reap by procreating, are enough to justify putting the next generation in the same position.

***How Tragic is Our Lack of Ultimate Meaning?***

One might wonder why I am making that big a deal over our lack of Ultimate meaning. Where is the harm in lacking Ultimate meaning? If a good deal of what our everyday lives are about is meaningful, who cares if life itself - the life we lead as a project, effort, or enterprise of its own- happens not to have a point? "Why isn't Everyday meaning enough?"[[19]](#footnote-19) That is a fair question and it seems clear that, to many people, Everyday meaning is the most important kind of meaning.

If my conception of a flourishing life includes loving your children, playing the banjo, being a good friend, and a clear teacher, what sense does it make to ask me what the point of having this sort of life is? The point is the Everyday meaning, the living of this meaningful life. And that's legitimate: Everyday meaning counts. Without it, everyday life might well be unbearable. But I argue that you're not just loving your children, playing the banjo, being a good friend, and competently doing your productive and worthwhile job. You are also putting effort and agency into the meta-project, which is the running of your life as an effort or project of its own; conducting the enterprise of living, *leading* a life. So, to the question, how else do we live our lives but in this everyday sense? In the ultimate sense, I'd say (and, in fact, have said). It makes sense for us to want that effort, project, and enterprise to have a point of its own. (Just as we want all the rest of our efforts, projects, or enterprises to have a point). But it can't.

As persons, we live an agential life that we shape, lead, and run as its own project. This, I argue, is part of what Velleman (2005 b) means when he argues that we have a narrative identity, that we want our lives to makes sense as a whole story. It is also part of what Brännmark (2003) means when he argues that the fact that we *lead* lives is crucial to our sense of meaning. Just as one can wonder why Everyday meaning is not enough, I wonder the opposite: who cares if your everyday activities and pursuits have meaning if the whole fraught business of your life is pointless? If leading a life is pointless, why bother with all the everyday activity that goes into that effort? Thus, one way to put the harm of lacking Ultimate meaning is that you now are putting forth the effort of leading your life as an enterprise of its own, which is part of living and leading a human agential life, with a frustrating lack of end-justifying reasons, valued ends - a *point* - for that effort.

I can see the legitimacy of both perspectives. Of course, nearly all of us would prefer to have Everyday meaning *and* Ultimate meaning. But which of the two is more critical is hard to determine. Yet that is the conflict we have to assess in the procreative case (as noted earlier): we must consider whether the lack of Ultimate meaning our children will have to bear outweighs or overrides the interest that prospective parents have in procreating, which includes the ways in which procreativity is a deep and unique way (available to us and our progeny) of attaining Everyday and perhaps Cosmic meaning.

Although almost everyone puts effort into running their lives, not everyone does so with the same degree of effort aimed at achieving some kind of overall coherence and purpose.[[20]](#footnote-20) It seems plausible that people who are most conscious of putting lots of effort into running or leading their lives are most acutely disturbed by the fact that we cannot have Ultimate meaning because it makes that effort itself seem rather pointless. It also seems plausible that those of us who are more goal oriented rather than live-in-the-moment types would find Ultimate meaning more important than Everyday meaning. In other words, some run or lead their lives more consciously, and with greater priority over other everyday life pursuits, than others. The more you consciously aim at something, the more disturbing it may be to discover that you cannot possibly accomplish what you thought you were setting out to accomplish. Those who treat life like it's the journey rather than the destination that matters are likely more focused on Everyday meaning than those of us who find a dreary, dangerous, and difficult journey without a destination disturbingly pointless. Some, perhaps the laziest and happy-go-luckiest among us, may even feel relieved to discover that there is no Ultimate meaning because that can remove the onus of pursuing it, leaving one more carefree to enjoy the pleasures of everyday life.[[21]](#footnote-21) Finally, it seems plausible that those of us for whom life is more of an effort than a joy find Ultimate meaning more important because we put a great deal of effort into leading our burdensome lives and, without a point to it, that effort can feel draining, exhausting, and even alienating (because the connection between the effort and the point is missing). But if you think of life as fun, carefree, and delightful then it would make sense for you to care less about whether it is Ultimately meaningful. It doesn't have to be so meaningful if it has another reason for you to bother with it: the fun! (How could I forget how much fun life is?)

Then there is the matter of Cosmic meaning. If we set aside the spiritual or supernatural aspect that some believe exists cosmically,[[22]](#footnote-22) we are left with the fact that procreating can provide people with a valuable, significant, and impactful cosmic role. To me, this is neither here nor there. It is not clear to me why we should find our role in the cosmos any more important or significant than our roles in our everyday lives. If our role in the cosmos could provide us with Ultimate meaning, that would be a game-changer and solve much of our meaning problems. It would be quite the party trick! But, as argued, that is not possible because Ultimate meaning is impossible due to the nature of points, or valued ends, (i.e., that they are separate from the activities and efforts toward which they're aimed) and the nature of human life (i.e., that it includes its entirety). While Cosmic meaning may be available to people, the kind of value it offers, i.e., significance, value, and impact, does not seem different enough from Everyday meaning as to make much of a difference to our consideration of the implications that issues of meaning have for procreative ethics.

When considering whether it is fair for us to impose the risks of life on future people, we must consider as well the meaning risks of life. While Everyday meaning, and some forms of Cosmic meaning, are often achievable, Ultimate meaning is not. Therefore, when we consider procreative benefits and burdens, we now need to include the known burden of the frustrating lack of Ultimate meaning, which is a burden every person will bear (though it is likely that it will weigh more heavily on some than on others). Other than to say, unhelpfully, that both Everyday and Ultimate meaning seem incredibly important, which of the two kinds of meaning is more important is not something I will attempt to settle here. That remains an area open for further research. What I hope to have done here is to have made the issues of meaning relevant to procreative ethics clear and salient.[[23]](#footnote-23)

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1. As I have argued elsewhere, existence is value neutral and possessed by everyone at some point. See Weinberg, 2008, 2013, and 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is my conclusion from surveying the meaning landscape. It is, of course, possible that there are some other dimensions or aspects of meaning that have eluded me. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I thank Joey Gruman for noting this characteristic of meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I explain Ultimate meaning in detail and argue that we cannot possibly have or achieve Ultimate meaning in, Weinberg, *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here's a little chart, for those who like charts, to represent the kinds and characteristics of value. We can imagine filling in the blanks with a verdict on whether a characteristic and kind of value is accessible or possible for us…

   |  |  |  |  |
   | --- | --- | --- | --- |
   |  | **EVERYDAY** | **COSMIC** | **ULTIMATE** |
   | Value |  |  |  |
   | Significance |  |  |  |
   | Impact |  |  |  |
   | Explanation |  |  |  |
   | Purpose |  |  |  |
   | Point |  |  |  |

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. However, there are unique aspects of procreation that make the standard model of risk permissibility incompletely applicable to procreation – see Weinberg, forthcoming, Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A developing child is deeply impacted by its uterine environment, including whether it is nourished, maintained, stressed, etc. I take this as obvious: just as any organism is impacted by its environment, a developing fetus is as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. They argue that empirical evidence shows that having children helps people cope with mortality because a part of us is thought to live on through our children. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Though, as Daniel Groll pointed out to me, some things matter less to people once they become parents since their children take up so much mattering that there is less energy and emotion left to care about things that don't concern their children. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ceteris paribus*, of course. I am not claiming that a life with children is *always* more meaningful than a childless life. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Nozick (1981), for example, notes that finding out that we served the cosmic purpose of being tasty food for beings higher up than us in the cosmic food chain would give our lives some cosmic significance, but not of the kind to make our lives Cosmically meaningful to us. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Both Nagel (1986 and 1987) and Benatar (2017) discuss meaning from a cosmic, universal perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. You might wonder about seemingly inexhaustible values we can aim at, such as love. But I am skeptical of inexhaustible values. I think there can be too much love and it could feel smothering or, at some point, annoying, overwhelming, or just *too much*. There is even a phenomenon of seeing something so cute, you can't stand it and want to obliterate it (Hamilton 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ultimate meaning is metaphysically rather than conceptually impossible. I thank Thaddeus Metz for urging me to clarify this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ### Increased availability of contraception may also be a factor contributing to fewer children placed for adoption.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. # For arguments explaining the value of biological ties or biological procreation, see Ferracioli 2018 and Velleman, a 2005.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I discuss some of these sorts of circumstances in Weinberg, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I thank Iddo Landau for pointing this out. Landau also suggest that another difference between the procreative Ponzi scheme and the standard Ponzi scheme is that, in the procreative case, even the last few generations can enjoy some kinds and characteristics of meaning. So they get some "profit," so to speak. However, Scheffler (2012) challenges this possibility by arguing that an impending human extinction would erode or erase much of what is meaningful to us. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I thank Thaddeus Metz and Daniel Groll for pressing me on this question. My answer here is the same as the one I provide in “Ultimate Meaning: We Don’t Have it, We Can’t Get it, and We Should be Very, Very, Sad," *JCI*, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This point is one I made originally in “Ultimate Meaning,” *CJI*, forthcoming*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. As with so many of the optimistic points in my work, I owe this one to Saul Smilansky. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Again, I set that aside because I have no access to supernatural information. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Many thanks to Yuval Avnur, David Boonin, Daniel Groll, Joey Gruman, Iddo Landau, Thaddeus Metz, Paul Hurley, Dion Scott-Kakures, and Saul Smilansky for helpful comments and discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)