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The "Why Be Moral?" Question and the Meaning of Life

1

Of the many possible ways of approaching the question "Why be moral?", I focus in this paper on one, which links the question to the notion of the meaning of life. Following the work of David Wiggins (1976, pp. 348–349), R. W. Hepburn (2000, p. 262), Kai Nielsen (2000, pp. 237, 242–250), Susan Wolf (1997a, pp. 208–213; 1997b, p. 304) Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith (2005, p. 443), and many others, I take the "meaning" in "the meaning of life" to have much to do with worth or value. Discussions of the meaning of life complain that life does not have sufficient worth, or wonder what might give life sufficient value, or celebrate the finding of something of sufficient importance in life, etc. (In what follows I will use the terms *worth*, *value*, and *importance* interchangeably.) Take, for example, Tolstoy's narration, in his semi-autobiographical *My Confession*, of how he came to feel that his life was not meaningful. At a certain point in his life he started looking at all he had achieved and asking himself "What of it?" and "So what?" He was the greatest Russian author: so what? He owned a lot of land: what of it? (Tolstoy 1983, pp. 26–27). I suggest that the "so what?" and "what of it?" questions exclaim that what seemed to him of sufficient worth stopped appearing so. What troubled Tolstoy was the feeling that all that has been described above was not in fact of sufficient value.

Similarly, Thomas Nagel (1986) argues that from the objective, broad perspective of the whole cosmos and time, *sub specie aeternitatis*, our lives are not as meaningful as we would like them to be. He mentions that, seen from that broad perspective, our influence on the world is negligible; if we had not lived, nothing much would have changed, in the long run, for the world at large. Put differently, seen from the broad perspective, our death and our life are inconsequential or unimportant. Moreover, our coming into existence is contingent: we could have easily not been born. Nagel's arguments suggest that, from the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective, our lives do not seem to have much value; he is discussing the insufficient worth of human beings (when seen from that broad perspective).

Discussions I have had with people who thought that their lives were meaningless, or were searching for what would make them more meaningful, also confirm that those people were preoccupied with issues of worth and value in their lives. They had not found something of value, or what had been worthwhile in their lives was taken away, or they no longer saw what could be of sufficient worth in their lives. A person who lost a beloved brother felt that life was meaningless because something very valuable he once had in his life was now gone. Another person said that she found life meaningless upon painful disappointment with a political movement for which she had sacrificed much; again, something that had endowed great value ceased to do so. And an able and ambitious biologist I knew confided that she felt that her life was meaningless because, in spite of her many efforts, she failed to reach what she considered to be the very top of her profession. For her, this was a sufficient reason to judge her life to be meaningless. What was of extreme value to her (whether for good reasons or bad) was the public or professional recognition of her peers that she was at the very top of her profession; when it became clear to her that she would not achieve that, she felt that her life was meaningless.

All other discussions of the meaning of life seem to involve similar preoccupations. Complaints that life is meaningless translate well to claims about the lack or insufficiency of aspects of value in that life. The search for meaning translates well to a quest for aspects of sufficient value. Therefore, I will henceforth treat the meaning of life as the value, or worth, in life. A meaningful life is one that has a sufficient number of aspects of sufficient value. A meaningless life is one without a sufficient number of aspects of sufficient value. (This is why people sometimes describe meaningless lives as “empty”; they are empty of sufficient value.) To make a meaningless life into a meaningful one, or to make an already meaningful life into a more meaningful one, we should increase what is of worth in our lives.

Now if one accepts what I have suggested here, I believe that we already have a beginning of a reply to the question “Why be moral?” Those who want to have meaningful lives have a reason to be moral, because being moral increases the value, or worth, in our lives. Morality makes our lives more meaningful.

2

However, there are many ways in which this suggestion may be criticized. One way would be to point out that some theories of the meaning of life are subjectivist, and as such imply that meaningful lives need not be moral at all. Under subjectivism, highly immoral lives could be highly meaningful since subjectivist theories do not rely on objective criteria but take the endorsement of beliefs, feelings, or sensations that one’s life is meaningful to be a sufficient condition for leading a meaningful life. Richard Taylor (1970, p. 265), for example, argues that “if Sisyphus had a keen and unappeasable desire to be doing just what he found himself doing, then … it would … have a meaning for him.”[1] But this, of course, also implies that if a murderer has a keen and unappeasable desire to murder, his life, too, is meaningful. This is true, of course, not only on Richard Taylor’s subjectivist theory of the meaning of life, but also on all other subjectivist ones. Since, for them, endorsing a certain belief, feeling, or sensation about one’s life is a sufficient condition for leading a meaningful life, they allow that radically immoral lives could be meaningful.

Various considerations, however, suggest that subjectivist theories of meaningfulness are too problematic to accept. One consideration returns to the characterization of meaningfulness as value. As suggested above, we understand meaningful lives to be lives that include a sufficient number of aspects that are of sufficient worth or value. When the overall value passes a certain threshold, life becomes meaningful, and when it continues to increase, an already meaningful life can become even more meaningful. Meaningfulness, then, rests on value. But this is a reason to reject subjectivism as regards the meaning of life, because we commonly think that people can be wrong in their evaluations, including their self-evaluations. For example, one may believe oneself to be a good parent or spouse although one in fact is not. One may also wrongly think that one’s scientific work is good when in fact it is not (and vice versa) or that one is a good pianist when one is not (and vice versa). We sometimes think that people are too strict with themselves and that they actually write better literature, or better philosophy, than they think they do, while at other times we believe that people have too positive a view of their achievements. But if we accept that one can be wrong in the evaluation of specific aspects of one’s life, it is inconsistent to believe that one cannot be wrong in one’s estimation of the overall worth of all the aspects. According to subjectivist understandings of the meaning of life, however, one cannot be wrong in one’s estimation of the meaningfulness of one’s life. If I feel or think that my life is meaningful, it is meaningful, and if I think or feel that it is meaningless, it is indeed meaningless.

A second consideration relies on the notion of reflective equilibrium, presented by Rawls (1971, pp. 48 – 51) and in wide use today, which proceeds by examining and revising our views, judgments, and intuitions by looking for their coherence with other views, judgments, and intuitions about similar and other issues, sometimes revising some of them for the sake of coherence with others. But subjectivist understandings of the meaning of life have some extremely counterintuitive implications, perhaps so counterintuitive that those who endorse the notion of reflective equilibrium (or want their theory to accord with very clear and strong intuitions for other reasons) have a reason to find subjectivism too problematic to accept. Subjectivist understandings of the meaning of life consider a person who, for example, thinks that his life is meaningful because he is of the same height as some tree on the Siberian plain (Taylor 1992, p. 36) or because he devours his own excrement (Wielenberg 2005, p. 22) to indeed have a meaningful life. This, however, would seem to many of us to be too odd to accept and too far from the regular use of the notion of a meaningful life.

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[1] In a later paper, Taylor changes his view and mentions other, objective conditions such as autonomy, purpose, and creativity, but not morality (1987, 679 – 82).

A third, important consideration has been proposed by Charles Taylor (1992, pp. 31–41). Taylor points out that when we suggest that something makes our life meaningful, we do not mean that it does so because we just happen to think that it does. We think that that thing *really* makes life meaningful, and that imparting or arriving at meaningfulness is not arbitrary: it is not the case that anything else could have done so as well. We do not think that something is meaningful because we "just feel like it." This is so because the very idea of meaningfulness includes the notion of not being arbitrary. What is meaningful to us cannot be just anything whatsoever. In order to be meaningful, it has to have a certain quality or characteristic that is objectively meaningful, and that quality is what causes us to choose that particular thing. Even if we asked one of those mythical figures such as the excrement eater why they think that what they do is meaningful, they would most probably not answer "just so," or "just because I happen to be thinking about it now." They would give us a reason or tell us a story—perhaps a bad reason or a bad story, but a reason or a story just the same —to explain why what they do is really or objectively important. Perhaps the reasons or stories will have to do with some religious practice or ritual or involve an important symbol for something worthy and great. Or there may be some other reason or story, but we would very likely receive some reason that refers to what is taken to be "really" the case. Our informants are likely to tell us that what they do has to do with some objective worth, and that it is because of that objective worth that they endorse the activities that they do and that render their lives more meaningful. According to Taylor, then, our use of the notion of meaningfulness already presupposes objective rather than subjective worth.

I might add that the same is true of the notion of meaninglessness. People who say that their life is meaningless tend to distinguish very clearly between reporting a feeling or a thought, on the one hand, and making a claim about the way they believe their life really, objectively is, on the other hand. When they claim that their life is meaningless, they are not saying that they just feel awful, but are claiming that their feeling has to do with more than a feeling and that their life, or existence in general, is really, objectively, not of sufficient value. Some may be unsure whether they are just in a bad mood and having dark thoughts or whether they are actually correctly conceiving the way existence is, but they distinguish very clearly between the two notions and take them to have different implications.

3

Another criticism of the claim about the relationship between morality and meaningfulness may accept that meaning in life has to do (at least in part, if not entirely) with objective conditions, while denying that these conditions have to do with morality. Indeed, some theories of the meaning of life that present both subjective and objective conditions for meaningfulness do not mention morality at all, thus allowing for highly immoral lives to be considered meaningful. A. J. Ayer, for example, posits “one’s standing in one’s society and the historical influence … that one exerts” as the objective conditions of meaningfulness (1990, p. 196; see also p. 194). For Paul Edwards (2000, pp. 143–144), a meaningful life is one in which one’s actions relate to “some dominant, overall goal or goals which gave direction to a great many of the individual’s actions” and in which one’s attachments “are not too shallow.” And for John Kekes the objective conditions of meaningfulness are successful rather than futile activities whose success relates to objective conditions in the natural world (2000, p. 32). But since, for Ayer, one’s prominent standing in one’s society need not have morally beneficial results, and one’s historical influence need not be a morally positive one, his objective criteria allow for people who use their social power in their societies in quite horrid ways to have meaningful lives. Likewise, since Edwards does not hold that one’s non-shallow attachments and overall goals must be moral, his objective criteria, too, allow for very evil individuals to be considered as leading meaningful lives. Edwards is aware of these implications and openly endorses them, accepting claims such as “as long as I was a convinced Nazi … my life had meaning … yet most of my actions were extremely harmful” (2000, p. 144). Similarly, since many people successfully realize quite immoral projects in the objective world, Kekes’s criteria imply that if Jack the Ripper was successful in carrying out his plans, he too would have had a meaningful life. Kekes, too, is aware of the implications of his position, and writes “that immoral lives may be meaningful is shown by the countless dedicated Nazi and Communist mass murderers … [who] may be successfully engaged in their projects, derive great satisfaction from them, and find their lives as scourges of their literal or metaphorical gods very meaningful” (2000, p. 30).

Some other objectivist theories take morality to be a contributing factor that increases meaningfulness, but not a necessary condition for meaningfulness. For example, Laurence Thomas (2005, p. 405) argues that "on the one hand, it seems too strong to say that it is impossible for an immoral person to lead a meaningful life. On the other hand, we should like to think that a morally decent human being … is … more favored to lead a meaningful life than an immoral person is." Thomas's criterion, too, then, allows that an immoral life that fulfills some other conditions for meaningfulness could well be meaningful.

Theories that accept that immoral lives could be meaningful take meaningfulness and morality to be independent of each other. Such theories suggest, then, that we can describe a life as having achieved a certain degree of morality, and we can also describe a life as having achieved a certain degree of meaningfulness, but these descriptions neither imply nor exclude each other. Following Kekes's example, consider Bill, whose life was not meaningful until he joined the Ku Klux Klan. Before becoming a KKK member, Bill never believed in anything, never held a job for more than two days, and mostly moved, half drunk at best, from one bar to another. However, after he joined the Klan his life became more coherent and focused; it was now dedicated to an ideal and had a purpose (i. e., realizing some violent white-supremacist platform). He now had something to believe in, experienced self-worth and contentment, and had a considerable (murderous) effect on the lives of other people. Bill, the argument would go, indeed did not have a moral life; but he did have a meaningful one. We may take morality to be more important than meaningfulness and thus condemn Bill's life as immoral, even if meaningful, judging that it would have been preferable if he had not had this meaningful but immoral life but had instead remained an unfocused drunkard. Likewise, we may wish that he had had a less rather than more meaningful life, since then he would have been less effective and inflicted less harm. Still, the argument would go, Bill's life was meaningful. Just as radical immorality can be consistent with, say, good taste in music, a high IQ, or a thorough knowledge of classical literature, so too can it be consistent with meaningfulness. But if meaningfulness can be consistent with both morality and immorality, then the wish to have a meaningful life cannot function as a reason for being moral.

The view that lives such as Bill's can be objectively meaningful, however, conflicts with the common conception, mentioned at the beginning of the paper, of what a meaningful life is. As argued above, a meaningful life is a life that, overall, has a sufficiently high degree of worth or value. But if this is the case, life cannot be very low in, say, morality yet very high in meaningfulness. If a sufficient degree of worth is a necessary condition for meaningfulness, then morality and meaningfulness are not independent of each other, since morality, for better or for worse, affects the overall value of one’s life and thus its meaningfulness. If we judge Bill’s life to have a very low value overall because of its radical immorality, it cannot at the same time be a meaningful life.

This relates to another difficulty in Ayer’s, Edwards’s and Kekes’s positions. According to them, we may take Bill’s life to have become more meaningful once he joined the KKK and at the same time be *sorry* that his life became more meaningful. They take the claim that Bill had a meaningful life to be consistent with the claim that it would have been nicer if Bill had never existed at all. But the notion of a meaningful life, I suggest, is a laudatory, honorific notion that has positive connotations. A meaningful life is not a life that it is better not to have had; meaningfulness is a positive value that we want people to have and to increase. It is a concept that functions much like “heroism” or “wisdom.” We may describe a certain SS soldier as bold, daring, or even brave. But we would not normally describe him as a *hero*, since for us “hero” has positive connotations. A hero is a person who behaves boldly and endangers himself for good causes. Likewise, we may describe a serial murderer or rapist who managed to evade the police for a long time as smart, clever, or intelligent, but we would not normally describe him as *wise*, a term we reserve for people who use their intelligence to gain understanding and knowledge that we see as constructive and helpful. Like heroism, wisdom, and some other terms (e. g., maturity), meaningfulness, too, is a laudatory term. Hence, it would be odd to suggest that people like Bill had had a meaningful life.

A third consideration that may lead us away from views such as Ayer’s, Edwards’s or Kekes’s as regards the meaning of life and morality is somewhat tied to the previous ones: we take meaningful lives to be full of worth. We admire highly meaningful lives such as those of Mother Teresa, Bach, Martin Luther King, Shakespeare, Rubens, and Mahatma Gandhi, and we respect lives that are meaningful even when they have not reached such excellence. But our reaction to Bill’s life is not one of admiration or respect but, rather, of abhorrence or contempt. The immoral behavior of rapists, blackmailers, thieves, liars, and thugs seems not simply wrong to us, but also despicable. We see such people as lowlifes and keep our distance from them not only because they make us angry, frightened, or cautious but because we are also disgusted by them. These are our reactions to what we find unworthy, or the opposite of worthy. It is for this reason that Thaddeus Metz (2002, pp. 805 – 807) has suggested that such lives include “antimatter,” so to speak. They should be seen not only as lacking meaningfulness but, in analogy to negative numbers, as being on the negative part of the scale. Such a life is not only not meaningful; it is the opposite of meaningful: it is “anti-meaningful.” But this suggests that immorality is inconsistent with meaningfulness. If we want to have a meaningful life, then, we have a reason not to act immorally.

4

It might be objected here, however, that being moral is not the only way of endowing life with worth or meaningfulness. We take not only Mother Teresa, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, but also Einstein, Rembrandt, and Michelangelo to have had meaningful lives, although the meaningfulness of the latter had little or nothing to do with moral achievement. Rembrandt, for example, did not do much moral good, yet many would see his life as meaningful because of his artistic contribution. As Metz (2003, pp. 60 – 61) points out, creating artwork or making scientific advances can be meaningful activities even if they have no moral import. Although a meaningful life has to be evaluated positively, then, it need not be evaluated positively in terms of one's moral contribution or achievement. And this may suggest that replying to the question "Why be moral?" with "in order to have a meaningful life" may be problematic. In order to have a meaningful life you do not have to be moral. It may suffice that you be, for example, artistic or knowledgeable.

I agree. Although refraining from behaving in highly immoral ways is a necessary condition for having a meaningful life, behaving in highly positive moral ways is not a necessary condition for having a meaningful life. Hence Rembrandt's life could be seen as meaningful although he did not excel morally. But some minimal degree of moral behavior, or refraining from highly immoral behavior, is a necessary condition for meaningfulness. Once this condition is met, one's life can be deemed meaningful on the basis of value achieved also in other spheres of life. Hence, we should beware of claims such as "moral behavior is a necessary condition for a meaningful life," due to the ambiguity of "moral." We may take people to have behaved morally if they have committed no grave moral wrongs (when we say that such people lived morally we mean that they did not live immorally). But we may also take people to have behaved morally if they have helped others and performed deeds of charity or justice. Moral behavior is a necessary condition for a meaningful life only in the first sense, not the second.

But accepting that someone like Rembrandt could have had a meaningful life even though his contribution was not in the area of moral excellence does not undermine the suggestion that meaningfulness is an incentive for being moral. What has just been suggested is that if we want to have a meaningful life, we must refrain from highly immoral behavior. So meaningfulness gives us a reason to be moral in the sense of seeing to it that we never become highly immoral. Moreover, it has also been argued above that if we want to have a meaningful life, we may follow various routes, one of which is excelling morally. So again meaningfulness gives us a reason to be moral, here in the sense of excelling morally. True, we may opt instead for other avenues to a meaningful life, such as the scholarly route, or the artistic route. Nevertheless, meaningfulness gives us a reason to be moral even if it gives us a reason to be other things as well. It gives us a reason to be moral as one option out of several. The wish to have a meaningful life arouses the motivation to develop in various possible directions, one of which is the moral direction. And this too is a reply, albeit a weaker type of reply, to the question "Why be moral?" If we want to have a meaningful life we *must* be moral in the sense of avoiding immorality, since this would undermine meaningfulness, and we *may* be moral in the sense of excelling morally, since this is one way of increasing meaningfulness.

However, I should qualify what I have just written. Although a meaningful life cannot include highly immoral behavior, it may include some immoral behavior; a meaningful life need not be impeccable. A generally worthy life can include, to some extent, behavior that we evaluate negatively, including behavior that we evaluate negatively from a moral point of view. Different kinds of behavior can balance each other out, to a degree, and we may deem a life that encompasses a limited degree of certain negative elements to be, overall, meaningful. Once a person crosses a certain threshold, however, we can no longer regard that life as having sufficient value and, therefore, as meaningful (of course, there will be some borderline cases). For example, we would probably continue to see Rembrandt's life as meaningful even if we learned that he had not always paid his debts on time or that there were some promises he had not kept. But we would not consider a Rembrandt who had to commit Jack-the-Ripper-style activities in order to find inspiration, or who sold his children into slavery in order to finance his artistic work, to have led a meaningful life.

5

Another possible objection to the link I have presented here between meaningfulness and morality has to do with cases in which, it seems, our wish to have meaningful lives or to increase the meaningfulness of our lives does not give us a reason to be moral but, on the contrary, gives us a reason to be immoral. Consider a case in which some immoral behavior, such as telling a small lie, committing a small theft, avoiding some responsibility, or failing to keep a promise or to return a debt, allows one to take advantage of a one-time opportunity and thus, say, be accepted into an art school (or develop a beautiful love affair or receive an academic fellowship) that enables one to considerably increase the meaningfulness of one's life. This immoral behavior diminishes meaningfulness in one way, since it makes one's life slightly less worthy, it but also enables one to develop in other spheres or aspects of value in one's life (those having to do with, say, art, love, or scholarship) so much that one's overall life becomes much more meaningful. We can see, then, that meaningfulness sometimes does not answer the question “Why be moral?” but, rather, the opposite question: “Why be immoral?”

But I do not think that such examples undermine the claims made here. Even if meaningfulness, in some cases, gives us reason to be somewhat immoral, it also gives us reason to be moral because it always disallows any high degree of immorality. And while it gives us reasons not only to be moral but also to be, say, scholarly, or artistic, or loving, it always continues to give us a reason to be moral as well, as another option, or avenue, for making our lives meaningful. True, when meaningfulness gives us a reason to make our lives scholarly, artistic, or loving, it will in some specific constellations give us as well a reason to be slightly immoral. But that does not undermine the claim that, when “being moral” is understood as “refraining from being highly immoral,” meaningfulness always gives us a reason to be moral, and when “being moral” is understood as “engaging in positive moral activities,” meaningfulness gives us a reason to be moral in many, even if not in all, cases.

6

Another question may be whether we really gain any advantage when we employ the notion of the meaning of life to explain why we should be moral. I should note, first, that some people do not think that this question needs a reply at all. They see the requirement to be moral as self-evident, or an axiom, or just based on a very strong intuition, and they think that nothing more could or should be said about it. This seems to have been H. A. Pritchard's (1912) view in his famous paper that is commonly presented as having started off the debate. Those who believe that it is self-evident, or axiomatic, or strongly intuitive that we should be moral, and that nothing more could be said about it, will not think that anything has been gained in this paper, since nothing needs to be gained as regards the question “Why be moral?” to begin with. What has been argued up to now will be relevant only for those who think that it is sensible to ask this question and look for a reply. But even those in the latter group might argue that the reasons presented here for being moral do not really advance us; they just delay the question. Assume that we should be moral because we want to have a meaningful life. But why should we want to have a meaningful life? If, again, we refer to self-evidence, or an axiom, or a very strong intuition, we have not progressed much.

However, I think that we have made some progress here. First, referring to the meaning of life, as we have done here, advances us since it shows in what sense we always need to be moral, in what sense we may be moral but may also opt for other ways of having a meaningful life, and in what cases we may also be slightly immoral. In other words, this paper does not merely suggest an axiom or intuition that might be more basic than that having to do with morality, but it also aims to specify the ways in which we should be moral (as far as our need to have a meaningful life is concerned). Yes, we should always be moral in the sense that we should never be highly immoral, but no, we do not always have to be moral in the sense of trying to achieve moral excellence. And it is also all right, in some restricted cases, to be slightly immoral.

Second, it seems that for many people having a meaningful life is more important than having a moral life. It is more self-evident and intuitive to such people that they should make sure that their lives are meaningful than it is that they should make sure that they are moral. For them, it will be profitable to begin with the notion of a meaningful life and proceed from there to the implications about morality.

Third, once we understand what makes life meaningful—namely that it be of worth or value—the reply to the question “Why have a meaningful life?” seems easier than the reply to the question “Why be moral?” To ask “Why have a meaningful life?” is to ask “Why have worth or value?” and the reply to that is that value is valuable, or that worth is worthy. Asking this question suggests that one wonders whether a tautology is correct, or that one does not understand what one is talking about, in a stronger way than that appearing when one asks “Why be moral?”

Fourth, morality seems to compete less successfully with other values, or with other inclinations we might have, than does meaningfulness. Many may well think that morality has some worth, but that this worth is in some cases overridden by the worth in some other values (and as shown in the examples above, it indeed sometimes is). Meaningfulness, however, as a supervening or second-order value, is not taken to be overridden in such ways. This, too, gives meaningfulness an advantage over morality as an intuitive starting point.

7

I have tried to present here a reply to the question “Why be moral?” But this reply is not meant to be exclusive. There may well be several valid reasons for being moral, and thus several replies to the question, just as there are several replies to the question “Why read books?” or “Why befriend people?” Perhaps some of the other replies will substantiate and argue for more demanding concepts of morality than I have done here, and some of them perhaps for less demanding ones. I suggest, however, that the reply “because it frequently enhances meaningfulness” is one helpful way of tackling this question.

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