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Meaning in Life and the Nature of Time

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Abstract: Many of the leading accounts of what makes a life meaningful are goal-based theories, according to which it is the pursuit of some specific goal (such as love for things that are worthy of love) that gives meaning to our lives. In this chapter I consider how these goal-based theories of meaning in life interact with the two main theories of the nature of time that have been defended in the recent metaphysics literature, namely, The Dynamic Theory of Time and The Static Theory of Time. I argue that The Dynamic Theory fits well with goal-based theories of meaning in life, but The Static Theory does not. Then I close with some thoughts about what a Static Theorist should make of this conclusion.

Keywords: Meaning in life, time, dynamic theory of time, static theory of time.

1 Introduction

According to Susan Wolf, a person's life is meaningful insofar as it contains love on the part of the agent for objects that are worthy of love, together with actions that are guided by that love. (Wolf 2010) Musicians practice their instruments, and play their music, at least partly out of a love for music, and for this reason their hard work and their playing contribute to their lives being meaningful. Similarly with parents, and friends, and even philosophers. On Wolf's view, experiencing love for something that is worthy of love, and acting on that love, is what makes our lives meaningful.

Thaddeus Metz has a different view. On his account, there are three main things that contribute to a life's having great meaning: moral achievement, intellectual discovery, and aesthetic creation. (Metz 2011) And what these three activities have in common is that they all involve an important kind of self-transcendence, whereby the agent transcends some aspect of themselves in a substantial way. To oversimplify somewhat, Metz thinks that achieving self-transcendence with respect to the good, the true, and the beautiful is the main thing that makes a life meaningful. Thus, this kind of self-transcendence is the main goal that we should all be aiming for.

An alternative to Wolf's and Metz's views, defended by Ben Bramble, is the idea that what makes one's life meaningful is the simple fact (if it is a fact) that one's life contributes to the world's being better than it otherwise would be. (Bramble 2015) Some version of this view was popular among teachers and parents of the kids of my generation, who taught us that what makes our lives meaningful is working to make the world a better place. "Leave the campsite better than you found it," as they often said.

I will not here attempt to adjudicate among these different theories (or any of their several plausible rivals) about meaning in life.¹ Instead, I will just note that what these three theories about meaning in life have in common is that they all emphasize the importance of striving for something (even if they disagree about what it is that we ought to be striving for). To the extent that an agent works toward a certain goal, on these theories, that agent's life is meaningful. Thus the theories of Metz, Wolf, and Bramble (as well as many other plausible theories about meaning in life) are all goal-based theories of meaning in life. According to these theories, what makes a life meaningful is working toward a certain goal (or perhaps a certain kind of goal).

None of this will be surprising to anyone who has come across this volume. For anyone who has thought a little bit about meaning in life will have at least taken seriously the idea that working toward some kind of goal is essential to a meaningful life. Perhaps, in the end, you will conclude that this idea is mistaken, and that it is in fact possible to have a perfectly meaningful life without ever working toward any particular goal. But for most of us, reaching that conclusion would require some non-trivial revision of our core beliefs.

Given all of this, here is something that is surprising: There are two main theories about the nature of time that have been defended in the contemporary literature on the metaphysics of time, and on one of them, it is very difficult (maybe even impossible) to make sense of the idea that one ought to be working toward a certain goal, if one hopes to have a meaningful life. In what follows, I will first lay out the two main theories about the nature of time. Then I will show that one of them – The Dynamic Theory of Time – is well-suited to accommodate goal-based views of meaning in life, but that the other one – The Static Theory of Time – is not. I will also argue that The Static Theory runs into problems when it comes to accommodating the general phenomenon of having and pursuing goals. Finally, I will consider the possibility that, despite all of this, we should stick with The Static Theory of Time, and revise some of our thinking about whether and in what way our lives can be meaningful.

¹ For an excellent survey of some of the leading theories about what makes a person's life meaningful, see Metz 2013.

2 Two Theories About the Nature of Time

It is fair to say that The Static Theory of Time has been the majority view about the nature of time among scientists and analytic philosophers (who tend to follow the lead of scientists) since early in the 20th Century. The guiding thought behind The Static Theory is that time is similar in important ways to space. One main way in which time is supposed to be like space, on this theory, is that the universe is spread out in four dimensions, which together make up a unified manifold that is appropriately called *spacetime*. This is usually taken to be a consequence of The Special Theory of Relativity. It is also normally thought to be a consequence of Special Relativity that there is no privileged way of orienting the four-dimensional manifold. Some dimensions are said to be “time-like,” but, on this view, there is no one, special dimension that deserves the name “time.”²

A second way in which time is supposed to be like space, on The Static Theory of Time, has to do with the way physical objects are extended in time. On this view, physical objects have *temporal parts*. To get a handle on the idea of a temporal part, think of a film strip showing you as you walk across a room. The film strip is made up of many frames, and each frame shows you at a particular moment of time. Now imagine cutting the frames, and stacking them, one on top of another, in chronological order. Finally, turn the stack sideways, so that the 2-dimensional images of you are all right-side-up. Each image of you in a frame corresponds to a *temporal part* of you, in a specific position, at a particular location in space, at a single moment of time. And what you are, on this view, is the fusion of all of these temporal parts. You are a “spacetime worm” that curves through the four-dimensional manifold known as *spacetime*. Also, on this view, what it is to have a momentary property at a time is to have a temporal part at that time that has the property in question. So you are sitting right now in virtue of the fact that your current temporal part is sitting.

A third way in which time is supposed to be like space, on The Static Theory, is that no one moment is special. A good way to illustrate this is to imagine taking the filmstrip for the entire universe, and then cutting and stacking the frames. Now you have something – a gigantic block of movie frames – that represents the entire history of the universe. Each frame in this block represents the universe at a moment of time (so the universe has temporal parts, too), and we can see by the way the frames are arranged which ones are earlier than which other ones. But there is no one of the frames that is privileged. There is no present moment. (Just as no location in space is privileged.)

² For the record, I do not think these things really are consequences of Special Relativity. And in fact, quite a few philosophers have resisted arguments for The Static Theory from Special Relativity. See for example Emery 2019; Hinchliff 2000; Miller 2004; Markosian 2004, Section 3.9; and Zimmerman 2008, pp. 218-221.

Here is some terminology that has proven to be useful in stating this aspect of The Static Theory.³

A-properties: putative temporal properties such as *being present, being past, being future, being four days future*, etc.

B-relations: temporal relations such as *simultaneous with, earlier than, later than, four days later than*, etc.

On The Static Theory, there are no genuine A-properties, and there are no objective facts about which moments are past, present, or future. (This is why the definition of A-properties contains the word ‘putative’ – because it is controversial whether there are such things as A-properties. But all parties to the dispute believe in B-relations, which is why the definition of B-relations does not contain ‘putative’.) If someone says today, “My 30th birthday is two years in the future,” then, according to The Static Theory, they express the proposition that their birthday is two years later than the time of their utterance. That is, they are talking about B-relations rather than A-properties.

Another way in which time is supposed to be like space, on The Static Theory, has to do with ontology. Everyone agrees that the correct ontology doesn’t change from one place to the next. Even if we are in Western Massachusetts, we need to include The Brooklyn Bridge in the correct ontology. It’s on the list of everything that exists, regardless of where we are as we compile the list. On The Static Theory, it is the same with time: the correct ontology doesn’t change from one time to another. So all objects from every region of spacetime are to be included in the one correct ontology.

Here then are six ways in which time is meant to be like space, on The Static Theory of Time.⁴ (Note: What I am calling The Static Theory of Time is a natural and popular combination of related theses, but it is not inevitable. It is possible to mix and match.)

The Static Theory of Time

1. The universe is spread out in four dimensions, which together make up a unified, four-dimensional manifold (appropriately called *spacetime*) in which physical objects are located.

³ These terms are from Markosian 1993.

⁴ Some or all of the following components of The Static Theory can be found in Williams 1951; Price 1977; Smart 1966; Lewis 1976; Lewis 1986; Sider 2001; Hawley 2001; and Moss 2012. (As well as many other places.)

2. Any physical object that persists through time does so in virtue of having a distinct temporal part for each moment at which it is located.
3. There are no genuine and irreducible *A-properties*; all talk that appears to be about *A-properties* can be correctly analyzed in terms of *B-relations*.
4. The temporal facts about the world include facts about *B-relations*, but they do not include any facts about *A-properties*.
5. We do not need to take tense seriously. Propositions have truth values *simpliciter* rather than at times, and so cannot change their truth values over time. Also, we can in principle eliminate verbal tenses like *is*, *was*, and *will be* from an ideal language.
6. The correct ontology does not change over time, and it always includes objects from every region of spacetime.

Static Theorists admit that time *seems* special to us, and even that time seems to pass. But they insist that this is just a subjective feature of how we happen to perceive the world, and not a feature of objective reality that is independent of us.⁵

Let me now turn to The Dynamic Theory of Time. The guiding thought behind The Dynamic Theory is that time is very different from space. One important difference between time and space, on The Dynamic Theory, is that time cannot be added to the dimensions of space to form a unified manifold. Although talking about “spacetime” is a useful way to codify information about the spread of objects and events in space and time (including information about spatial and temporal locations as well as the laws of nature), it does not follow that space and time actually form a unified manifold in any important sense.⁶

A closely related difference between time and space, on The Dynamic Theory, is that physical objects are not spacetime worms that are extended in time in virtue of having different temporal parts at different times. Instead, each physical object is wholly present at each time at which it is present.⁷ It’s not a mere *temporal part* of you that is sitting in your chair right now, on this view. It’s you.

Another important claim of The Dynamic Theory is that the passage of time is a real, objective, and mind-independent feature of the world, one that makes time very different from the dimensions of space. Opponents of The Dynamic Theory (and sometimes proponents as well) like to characterize the theory using the metaphor of a

⁵ See for example Williams 1951 and Paul 2010.

⁶ For a recent argument against the claim that space and time form a unified manifold of orthogonal dimensions, see Markosian 2020b.

⁷ For a definition of ‘wholly present’ see Markosian 1994, p. 248.

moving spotlight that slides along the temporal dimension, brightly illuminating just one moment of time, the present, while the future is a kind of foggy region of potential and the past is a shadowy realm of has-beens. This moving spotlight metaphor is an intuitively appealing way to capture The Dynamic Theory, but at the end of the day it is just a metaphor. What the metaphor represents is the essential idea behind The Dynamic Theory, namely, the idea that A-properties like *being future*, *being present*, and *being past* are objective and metaphysically significant properties of times, events, and things. Also, the metaphor of the moving spotlight represents the fact that according to The Dynamic Theory, each time undergoes a somewhat peculiar but inexorable process, sometimes called *temporal becoming*. It goes from being in the distant future to being in the near future, has a brief moment of glory in the present, and then recedes forever further and further into the past.

Despite its being intuitively appealing (especially for Static Theorists, many of whom see it as a caricature of The Dynamic Theory), the moving spotlight metaphor has a major drawback: It encourages us to think of time as a fourth dimension, akin to the dimensions of space. On The Dynamic Theory (as I am conceiving it), this way of thinking – “spatializing time” – is a major no-no. For it is not that there are these four orthogonal dimensions, and one of them – time – has some extra bells and whistles added to it. Instead, it is that time is completely different from the dimensions of space. So different, in fact, that it is not even the same kind of dimension. (Just as neither *the moral dimension* nor *the modal dimension* is the same kind of dimension as space. For one cannot stick either of those dimensions onto the three spatial dimensions in order to produce a unified manifold in which physical objects can literally be placed.)

Yet another difference between time and space, on The Dynamic Theory, has to do with ontology. On The Dynamic Theory, the correct ontology does in fact change over time, and it always includes only objects that are present at a given time, never objects that are merely past (like Hypatia) or merely future (like my future grandchildren).

Here, then, is the view.⁸ (Note: Like The Static Theory, The Dynamic Theory of Time, as I am formulating it here, is a natural and popular combination of related theses. But it is not inevitable. It is possible to mix and match.)

The Dynamic Theory of Time

1. Time cannot be added to the dimensions of space to form a unified manifold in which physical objects are located.

⁸ Some or all of the following components of The Dynamic Theory can be found in Prior 1967; Thomson 1983; Markosian 1993; Markosian 2004; Markosian 2020a; and Sullivan 2012. (Not to mention many other places.)

2. Any physical object that persists through time does so in virtue of being wholly present at each moment at which it is present.
3. There are genuine and irreducible *A-properties*, which cannot be correctly analyzed in terms of *B-relations*.
4. The temporal facts about the world include ever-changing facts involving *A-properties*, including facts about which times are past, which time is present, and which times are future.
5. We must take tense seriously. Propositions have truth values at times rather than *simpliciter* and can, in principle, change their truth values over time. Also, we cannot eliminate verbal tenses like *is*, *was*, and *will be* from an ideal language.
6. The correct ontology is liable to change over time, and it is always true that only present objects exist.

Here are some better metaphors for these two theories of time.⁹ For The Static Theory, the universe is like a movie that is never shown. The frames are all there, but the movie is just sitting on a shelf, in the dark. Also, instead of being attached end to end, the frames are stacked, one on top of another. Each frame is a temporal slice of the world, and if you look closely you can see the various objects – each of which is a “spacetime worm” – curving through the four-dimensional continuum that is spacetime. But because the movie is never shown, no part of it is metaphysically privileged. There is no light shining on any one frame; no frame is special.

For The Dynamic Theory, on the other hand, the universe is like a movie that is being shown in a theater *right now*. But it’s not the frames that are the universe. Instead, it is the image on the screen. There is only one image on the screen, and it keeps changing. That’s because reality is one thing that keeps changing. It *was* that way, now it *is* this way. Soon it *will be* some other way. The movie frames in the projection booth are a useful way to represent the different states of the universe at different times – they are like maximal, consistent, tensed propositions. And there is always one of them that is special: the one that corresponds to the image on the screen right now. (But it is important to understand that which frames are in the film, and which one has a light shining through it right now, is determined by the universe, and not the other way around. So this is an important disanalogy between the universe and a movie being shown in a theater.)

Now that we have our two theories of time before us, we can return to the question of what makes a life meaningful, and the question of whether goal-based theories of meaning in life are consistent with each of our two theories of time.

⁹ The following metaphors for our two theories of time are borrowed from Markosian 2020a.

3 The Dynamic Theory of Time and Meaning in Life

One way to see that The Dynamic Theory of Time is *prima facie* consistent with having a goal such as making the world better is to recall that on that theory, there is one reality, and it keeps changing. Hence it is appropriate to work toward making it – the one reality – change for the better. This can mean taking action to improve things, or it can mean taking action to prevent things from getting worse. And similar remarks will apply to the goals associated with other goal-based theories about what makes a life meaningful. All of this seems to follow from the Dynamic Theory picture of the universe as an enduring and evolving entity. For we can sensibly work to make it evolve in one particular way rather than some other way.

Moreover, there are also available to the Dynamic Theorist very straightforward accounts of what it is to act, and what it is to have an effect. Here the movie metaphors are helpful. On The Dynamic Theory, you are an enduring character in the movie (rather than a spacetime worm curving through a granite-like block of movie frames), and you act by doing things, right up there on the big screen. Hence it is natural to think that the actions you perform now will have many effects in the future. You are a part of the present scene, and what you are doing now will affect what subsequent scenes will look like.

There is a similarly straightforward picture of causation that goes naturally with the Dynamic Theory. On the most naïve version of this picture, an event occurs (a cue ball rolling into an eight ball, for example), resulting in certain forces propagating around, in accordance with the laws of nature. Those forces in turn will result in certain other events happening (the eight ball rolling into the corner pocket, for example), and those other events will be the effects of the first event. All of these events unfold on the big screen, one after another, and although it might be difficult to give a satisfying philosophical analysis of causation, there is nothing puzzling about the intuitive idea that the current events taking place on the screen right now will produce the events that follow them – events that are not occurring yet, but will occur in the future. There are various more sophisticated ways of filling in the details of this naïve picture of causation, but they all involve giving an account of the one reality evolving in accordance with the laws of nature and the rules of causation.¹⁰

This means that, on this picture, causes literally produce their effects. If we are watching the movie, and one character is currently tidying up a campsite, the resulting state of affairs – the campsite's being tidy – will be a direct result of that character's efforts.

¹⁰ For an excellent overview of contemporary theories of causation, see Paul and Hall 2013.

In a very straightforward and literal way, the character is making the world better. And when we get to the scene showing the tidy campsite, we will know exactly what caused it to be that way. Similarly, if the current scene includes a character working hard toward the kind of self-enhancement that Metz talks about, then when we arrive at the relevant later scene, in which that character has, say, a better understanding of the true, then that state of affairs will be a direct result of this current one.

This picture of causation also leads to a relatively straightforward account of what it means to have a goal, what it means to work toward your goal, and what it means to hope you succeed. The goal is that the universe should evolve in a certain way (in a good way rather than a bad way, or in an increased-appreciation-for-the-true way rather than some other way). And as an active player in the evolving movie, you get to work toward that goal by trying to shape the evolution of the universe. (It can of course be hard to do this. But at least it is possible, and a reasonable goal to have.) Hoping that you will succeed amounts to hoping that as a result of your efforts, the universe will evolve in the desired way. You are hoping that the universe – the one reality, which keeps changing – will improve as a result of your efforts.

In short, because the world is an enduring thing (that is, one that persists through time by being wholly present at each different time, rather than by having different temporal parts at the different times), because the present moment enjoys a special status, because the future is coming, and because the world evolves as time passes, it is eminently reasonable to try to use your power as a player in the universe to make the world better (or to increase your own self-enhancement, or to act from love for things that are worthy of love), and also eminently reasonable to hope that you will succeed at your preferred goal.

The upshot is that on The Dynamic Theory of Time, goal-based views of what makes life meaningful make perfect sense. There is one reality that keeps changing, so it is natural to think that we ought to try to make it change in a certain way. Making the world change in some specific way is a goal that it is appropriate to aim for, and once you adopt such an aim, achieving that goal is something that it makes sense to hope for. Moreover, it is worth noting that even if you happen to reject all of the goal-based views of meaning in life, The Dynamic Theory of Time still gives you a natural way to understand the general idea of having a goal and working to succeed at it.

4 The Static Theory of Time and Meaning in Life

Things are very different, however, on The Static Theory of Time. To see why this theory is *prima facie* in tension with a goal such as making the world better, think of the movie metaphor for this theory. And recall that all of the frames in the movie already exist, with

none of them being privileged in any way. Hence it is hard to see how you – a spacetime worm that is like a small, thin wire stuck in the middle of a gigantic block of granite – could change anything about any of the later parts of the block. Those other parts are already there – you might as well try to make things better in regions to the east of you, or regions that are earlier than you. All of the other frames that make up the universe, regardless of their specific location in time, are just as real as the current frame containing you. Hence you don't seem to be able to make things better in these other regions of the block, or even to prevent them from being worse than they are. All of this seems to follow directly from the Static Theory's claim that ours is a static world rather than a dynamic and evolving one.

When one tries to spell out the details of what it is to act, and what it is to have an effect, on The Static Theory, things only become worse. For the Static Theorist has to give a not-so-straightforward account of acting, and having an effect. You are a tiny spacetime worm curving through some of the frames in the four-dimensional block that is the universe. So you perform an action in virtue of having a temporal part that performs that action (or perhaps by having a series of temporal parts that perform the temporal parts of the action). And then your action has a certain effect if something in a later frame is causally connected to your action in this frame.

But the idea of causation is very puzzling on this theory! The reason is that the whole of the universe is already there. We have these events over here, and those events over there, and they are all equally real, and all equally unprivileged. This picture of reality is hard to reconcile with the idea that to cause something is to make it happen. How do these events over here make those events over there happen, if they are all already contained in the gigantic block?

It turns out that there are two main accounts of causation in a static universe that are popular among proponents of The Static Theory of Time. The first one is The Counterfactual Dependence Theory of Causation. On this theory, an event, e_1 , causes an event, e_2 , iff e_1 and e_2 both occur, and if e_1 had not occurred, then e_2 would not have occurred.¹¹ In short, e_1 causes e_2 iff the nearest world where e_1 doesn't happen is a world where e_2 doesn't happen. Notice that this does not rule out backward causation, or simultaneous causation. For this account of causation is not based on a picture of the universe as an enduring and evolving thing. Instead, it is based on a picture of the universe as consisting of an enormous block of movie frames (the temporal parts), none of which is more real than any other, and none of which ever has a special property of being present. On The Counterfactual Dependence Theory of Causation, we might say, causation is nothing more than a peculiar, "otherworldly" relation between the events in one region of spacetime and the events in another.

¹¹ This is only a rough characterization of the view. For a more thorough discussion, see Lewis 1973.

The second main account of causation in a static universe that is popular among proponents of The Static Theory of Time is based on the thesis known as *Humean Supervenience*. (This account is actually consistent with the Counterfactual Dependence account. For many Static Theorists, this is just the more detailed version of their view about causation.) Humean Supervenience is the thesis that the most fundamental facts about the world – the ones that determine all other facts – are facts about the point-by-point distribution of qualities over all of spacetime.¹² This distribution of qualities is known as “the Humean mosaic.” Facts about the laws of nature are grounded in these facts about the Humean mosaic. For the laws of nature are just the most basic patterns and generalizations to be found within the mosaic. (The laws generalize and systematize, on this view, but they don’t actually *govern*, in the sense of forcing things to happen in a certain way.) And then the facts about causation are in turn grounded by these nomological facts: e_1 causes e_2 iff the Humean mosaic is such that the laws of nature are such that e_2 is a lawful successor of e_1 .

So on this picture, all the frames, with all of their contents, are given first. That is the universe. Then there are some derivative facts about the laws of nature. These are generalizations that percolate up from the facts on the ground. And there are some further derivative facts about which events in the four-dimensional spread stand in causal relations to which other events in the four-dimensional spread. But these facts, too, percolate up from the facts on the ground.

It is notable that on this account, whether e_1 is a cause of e_2 depends very much on the entire spread of events throughout all of spacetime, and not just on what happens between e_1 and e_2 . There are worlds that are duplicates through the year 2525, only to diverge after that, and are also such that for two events in 2021, e_1 and e_2 , e_1 causes e_2 in the first world but not in the second world (due to the general patterns in the universe being different, purely as a result of differences in the frames after 2525).

No doubt there are other possible accounts of causation available to the Static Theorist. But they all share this one main feature: They all involve saying that facts about causal relations between events are grounded in more fundamental facts about the spread of events in all of spacetime. For they all incorporate the Static Theory claims about (a) the world being a four-dimensional block, with no privileged present, and (b) all things and all events, from every region of spacetime, being equally real. Another way to say this is that any theory of causation available to the Static Theorist will have to incorporate the Static Theory claim that the universe is a block of movie frames that all exist at once.

All of this in turn means that the Static Theorist has to give a completely unstraightforward account of what it is to have a goal, what it is to work toward your goal, and what it is to hope you succeed. To have a goal is to have the aim that a later

¹² This too is a simplification. For a proper discussion of Humean Supervenience, see Lewis 1994.

state of the universe be a particular way, despite the fact that it already either is that way or not. (So your “goal” is that a particular later frame in the already existing block should look a certain way – with a tidy campsite, for example.) To work toward a goal is for your current temporal part to perform a certain action in order that a later state of the universe be a certain way – again, despite the fact that it already either is that way or not. (You are working toward the goal of having that later frame, which is already there, contain a tidy campsite.) To hope that you succeed at your goal is to hope that a later state of the universe is a certain way, and also to hope that in the nearest world where your current temporal part does not perform your current action, the corresponding later state of the world is not the relevant way. (You are hoping that a particular later frame looks a certain way, and also hoping that in the nearest world where you do not perform this current action, the relevant later frame looks... worse.) Or, alternatively, to hope that you succeed at your goal is to hope that a later state of the universe is a certain way, and also to hope that the entire Humean mosaic is such that the combination of the action performed by your current temporal part and the relevant later state of the world fits into one of the most basic patterns to be found in the spread of qualities over all of spacetime. (So you are both hoping that a particular later frame, which already exists and already is whatever way it is, looks a certain way, and also hoping that the rest of the frames in the universe are such that your current temporal part and this particular later frame instantiate a certain general pattern to be found throughout the entirety of the block of frames.)

To hope that your current action will make the world better, then, amounts to either: (a) hoping that the nearest world in which you don’t perform this current action is less good than the actual world, or else (b) hoping that the entire Humean mosaic is such that your current action and some later, better state of the world fit a basic and universal pattern. Neither of these things, I would submit, is a satisfying or plausible way to cash out the sentence, “I hope that what I am doing now will make the world a better place.”

The upshot is that on *The Static Theory of Time*, Bramble’s consequentialist account of meaning in life makes little sense. Because the universe is static rather than evolving, the having of goals in general must be understood in a rather complicated and indirect way, and this applies in particular to the goal of making the world better. Moreover, to hope that the world will be made better by your current action is to have a hope that is about much more than what the world will be like at later times. For it is either (a) partly about some other possible worlds, or (b) partly about the patterns to be found in the entire spread of things and events in all of spacetime. Strange!

Note that the strangeness does not go away if the Static Theorist simply gives up the consequentialist account of meaning in life. If we replace *Make the world better* with some other goal (such as *Achieve self-enhancement*) as our answer to the question *What makes a life meaningful?*, the problem will still arise. For the problem is that the whole idea

of working toward a goal, and hoping to succeed at accomplishing that goal, can only be understood by the Static Theorist in a strange and convoluted way. This is a general problem for any Static Theorist with goals, but it is especially a problem for a Static Theorist who takes seriously the idea that there is some main goal, or some small number of main goals, that are especially relevant to making our lives meaningful.

This last point is particularly important in the present context. For what we have seen is not only that The Static Theory of Time seems to be incompatible with the consequentialist account of meaning in life. We have also seen that The Static Theory seems to be incompatible with any view according to which there is some goal (or some small number of goals) that all of us should be pursuing, in order to make our lives meaningful. That is, The Static Theory appears to be incompatible with the consequentialist account of meaning in life, and also with each one of its goal-based rivals (including Metz's and Wolf's).

5 Conclusion

I am inclined to think that the correct moral to draw from these considerations is that we should endorse The Dynamic Theory of Time over The Static Theory of Time. But I was already inclined to endorse The Dynamic Theory, and your mileage may vary. For their part, many Static Theorists will want to conclude that the correct moral here is that we must find an alternative to the goal-based theories of what makes a life meaningful. As far as I can tell, however, there are not a great many options along these lines, either in the philosophical literature or in commonsense thought about the topic. So there is work to be done for Static Theorists who want to give a positive account of what makes our lives meaningful.

Another option for the Static Theorist is to accept that some goal-based account of what makes life meaningful (such as Metz's) is correct, but also to accept some non-standard (and counterintuitive) account of what it is to have a goal and what it is to work toward a goal. One might bite the bullet described above, for example, and say (i) that to have Metzian self-enhancement as a goal is just to hope that some already existing, later stage of the universe contains a temporal part of yourself that is better than the current temporal part of yourself in the relevant way; and (ii) that working toward this goal amounts to taking actions that you either (a) hope will be counterfactually related in the appropriate way to those later, enhanced temporal parts of yourself, or else (b) hope will, together with the later, enhanced temporal parts of yourself, fit into a general pattern to be found in the entire block of frames that is the universe. In short, some Static Theorists may simply want to bite the bullet and accept a non-standard account of the having of goals.

There is a third moral that might be drawn by a Static Theorist (although I do not recommend it). Perhaps the Static Theorist will conclude from the above considerations that our lives are in fact meaningless.¹³ Perhaps the Static Theorist will say that when we take into account the idea that the universe is a static and eternal block of temporal and spatial parts stretching forever in every direction, the appropriate conclusion to draw is that nothing matters.¹⁴

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¹³ After all, many thinkers have already reached this conclusion, for independent reasons. (See for example Schopenhauer 1969 [1844], Tartaglia 2016, and, to a lesser degree, Benatar 2017.) It is not clear that the arguments presented here will be of any help to traditional "meaning in life pessimists," however, and it is also not clear that the Static Theorist will want to sign up for the views offered by the traditional pessimists. For the traditional pessimists often give arguments for their view that presuppose something like The Dynamic Theory of Time. There is, for example the often-heard argument that there can be no meaning to our lives, since the universe is heading inexorably toward its eventual heat death, and there is nothing anyone can do about that.

¹⁴ I am very grateful to David Friedell, Robert Gruber, and (especially) Iddo Landau for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

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