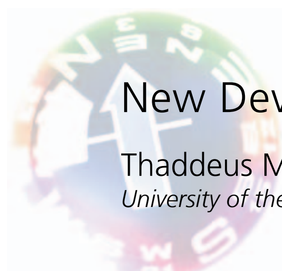
Philosophy Compass 2/2 (2007): 196–217, 10.1111/j.1747-9991.2007.00061.x



New Developments in the Meaning of Life

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Abstract

In this article I survey philosophical literature on the topic of what, if anything, makes a person's life meaningful, focusing on systematic texts that are written in English and that have appeared in the last five years. My aims are to present overviews of the most important, fresh, Anglo-American positions on meaning in life and to raise critical questions about them worth answering in future work.

I. Introduction

In this article I survey philosophical literature on the topic of what, if anything, makes a person's life meaningful. I focus on systematic texts that are written in English, are addressed to analytic philosophers, and have appeared in the last five years. While that target of course excludes much, in particular, recent anthologies (Benatar; Heinegg), new books aimed at the general educated reader (Belliotti; Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*; Thomson; Young; Baggini; Belshaw; Kernohan),[1] and literature prior to 2002,[2] it also includes plenty. My aims in this survey are to present overviews of the most important, fresh, Anglo-American positions on meaning in life and to raise questions about them worth answering in future work.

I begin by addressing supernaturalist accounts, the views that a spiritual realm is necessary for meaning in life (section II), and then I take up naturalist accounts, the views that certain ways of living in a purely physical world are sufficient for meaning (section III). Next, I consider abstract issues that are relatively neutral with respect to the debate between supernaturalism and naturalism, namely, the sense of talk of 'meaning' and the way it differs from related talk (section IV). I conclude by providing a rough, overall assessment of this recent work, and note some topics that I have not been able to address here (section V).

II. Supernaturalism

Supernaturalism in general is the claim that life is meaningless if the only world that exists is the one known by physics. According to this view, meaning in life must come from a spiritual realm that one relates to in the appropriate way. Supernaturalism is usefully divided into God-centred views,

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which hold that God but not a soul is necessary for one's existence to be significant, and soul-centred views, which maintain the opposite. Of course, many supernaturalist theories hold that both God and a soul are needed for meaning, but the arguments provided by supernaturalists often support only the more narrow views.

GOD-CENTRED THEORY AND ITS CRITICS

The standard God-centred account of what makes life meaningful is the view that meaning in life comes from helping to realise God's plan or fulfilling a purpose God has assigned, where God is a spiritual person who is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful. Most of those writing on life's meaning continue to criticise this view, at least in the plain version I have stated here. Critics maintain that, for meaning to obtain, the content of God's purpose must be of a particular, exalted and non-degrading sort, which suggests a standard for meaning that exists independently of God's purpose (Martin 190; Thomson 16–18, 54; Baggini 16–19; Belshaw 113; Kernohan 10, 13–14).

John Cottingham's work (*On the Meaning of Life*; *Spiritual Dimension* ch. 3; 'Review of E. Wielenberg') constitutes the best writing from the last five years defending the view that meaning logically depends on a purposive God. Cottingham's central argument for a God-centred perspective is that life would be meaningless without invariant moral norms and that invariant moral norms could come only from the will of God. Aware of Euthyphro problems regarding contingency in what God wills, Cottingham suggests that God's will would be constrained by his essential nature as goodness itself, a move familiar from contemporary friends of Aquinas such as Norman Kretzmann.

So far as I know, the field could use more analysis of what it means to say that God 'just is goodness' such that any goodness found here is had by virtue of being a part of God. I understand what it means to say that God has the highest nature, and that any value we have is a result of God's having created us, but neither of these claims is equivalent to the thesis that all value is found in God. Supposing rational nature, happiness and (the experience of) beautiful artworks are intrinsic goods, what does it mean to say that 'God is in them' or their goodness obtains by virtue of 'participating' in God's?

Even if we can make sense of what these claims mean, more needs to be done to analyze whether intuitively acceptable moral norms would fall out of a will that expresses God's nature qua intrinsic value as such. Consider a problem with an Aristotelian, self-realisation ethic at the human level: granted that rational nature is the most valuable human trait that we morally should develop, how should we develop it? We could do so by devising ingenious ways to be cruel. The natural reply to make is this is not the sort of rationality that is valuable, but the best explanation for this reply seems to appeal to some standard of morality that is logically independent of the idea of realising

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one's valuable nature. Hence, at the level of God, even if God's nature as spiritual creator of everything constituted intrinsic goodness as such and even if God's will were a function of this immutable nature, it would not be obvious how to derive an appealing morality from these considerations.

Another way to question Cottingham's argument would be to argue that an invariant morality is non-natural and apprehended through a priori intuition,[3] a view he does briefly address (*Spiritual Dimension* 54–7). More promising, perhaps, is to question the scope of the invariant morality needed for people to find meaning in life. While amoralists and relativists might deny that any objective morality is necessary for meaning, one could also maintain that invariance among all human beings, even if not all persons throughout the universe *à la* Cottingham, would be sufficient to ground meaning (Metz, 'Critical Notice' 224–5). Here, a naturalist morality that is grounded on some version of the causal theory of reference and that posits synthetic a posteriori necessities – ably defended by the Cornell moral realists[4] – might do the trick. Cottingham does not address this possibility, but it is well worth considering. Supposing that Cottingham is correct that life would be meaningless if everything were permitted, how far must the forbidden reach for meaning to be possible?

A second argument from Cottingham for a God-centred view appeals to the idea that life would be meaningless without a perfectly just order, something only God could achieve (*On the Meaning of Life* esp. pt. 3). Here, it is not the existence of objectively just ends that is key, as per Cottingham's first argument, but rather realisation of them, whether they be distributive, reparative, retributive or all three. This need for a redemptive God is also found in the work of William James, as Ellen Suckiel (32–3) has recently discussed.

Critics maintain that something like Karma would be sufficient to apportion the relevant reparations, penalties and rewards or otherwise achieve moral perfection (Metz, 'Critical Notice' 225). Supernaturalists of course need to claim that, even if an impersonal, natural force could conceivably bring about the relevant state of affairs, a personal, spiritual being would be more likely to be able to. Why believe such a claim?

A third recent argument for a God-centred take on life's meaning comes from David Cooper, who borrows much from Robert Nozick's influential discussion of meaning as constituted by certain relationships that must be ultimately grounded in God (ch. 6). Cooper suggests that for a certain aspect of a person's life 'A' to be meaningful, it must be related to something 'B' that is itself meaningful, which, in turn, must obtain its meaning from something 'C' that is itself meaningful, and so on. Eventually, it must be human life as a whole that confers meaning on any particular part of it, but, by the relational account of meaning, human life as a whole must obtain its meaning from something beyond it, too. And that which is most clearly beyond human life is what Cooper calls the 'ineffable', something that we cannot conceive or articulate with precision, something without limits, something we call 'God'.

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There are many ways to criticise this argument. One is to deny its 'trickle-down theory of importance', to use Daniel Dennett's pithy phrase (cited in Baggini 14). For instance, perhaps altruistic actions are meaningful in themselves, not needing to obtain their meaning from anything else such as the fact that the person being helped is important or that the help will result in some other significant activity (see also Thomson 25, 48; Kernohan 19). Another criticism is to accept that meaning is relational, but to deny that a condition must obtain its meaning from another meaningful condition. Nozick himself ultimately concludes that a condition could obtain meaning by virtue of being related to something intrinsically valuable and not necessarily meaningful (see also Thomson 25–6). A third is to accept that meaning is relational and that a condition must obtain its meaning from another meaningful condition but to deny that the regress on meaningful conditions must stop with the unlimited or God. Supposing the regress must stop at what has no relation beyond it, might not the physical universe as a whole do, especially if the evidence for the existence of a realm beyond the natural is scant?

In my view, the field should develop more God-centred alternatives to the purpose-based (Cottingham and Suckiel) and relationship-based (Nozick and Cooper) rationales, which are both open to the basic objection that a purely natural world could ground the relevant purposes and relationships. Here is one strategy that I have suggested (Metz, 'Recent Work' 786–7; 'God's Purpose'). In order to account for why only God could ground meaning, supernaturalists should appeal to features that only God could conceivably have and that other, natural beings such as us could not. These features are, most plausibly, spiritual characteristics such as atemporality and immutability, which cannot be found in the physical world. If these features had a superlative value so as to make a being perfect, and if meaning came only from orienting one's life toward a perfect being, then a God-centred view would have some prima facie force. Could a being that lacks extension in these ways assign us a purpose? If so, how? If not, how could we relate to it so as to obtain meaning in our lives? And why think that a superlative value is necessary for meaning in life? Why would a less than perfect value fail to provide a less than ideal meaning, but some meaning nonetheless?

SOUL-CENTRED THEORY AND ITS CRITICS

The link between perfection and meaning also typically underlies the view that the meaning of a person's life crucially depends on having a spiritual substance that will forever outlive the death of her body. Contemporary friends of a soul-centred theory continue to proffer the two classic arguments for the view. One argument, famous from Tolstoy, is that life is meaningless if nothing is worth doing and that nothing is worth doing if nothing one does will make a permanent difference to the world (Suckiel 32). The other argument, from Ecclesiastes, is that 'all is vanity' since, without an afterlife,

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often the wicked prosper, the righteous languish and more generally we cannot realise our moral ends to perfection (Suckiel 32–3).

As they stand, these two arguments are not even strongly inductive, let alone valid. One's life can make a permanent difference to the world without oneself being permanent, e.g. by influencing an infinite chain of mortal humans or being eternally remembered by God. And even if a life after the death of our bodies were necessary for moral perfection of a certain sort, it is far from clear that an eternal afterlife is necessary.

I have worked to reconstruct these arguments so that they avoid these problems, i.e. so that a soul-centred conclusion does follow from them (Metz, 'Immortality Requirement'). Specifically, I suggest that Tolstoy and his supporters should say that meaning in one's life requires one to honour a perfect or 'infinite' value, which honouring would plausibly require an eternity. And I propose that rewarding those who have been most virtuous requires satisfying the strongest desires they would have absent heteronomous influences (such as adaptive preference formation and ignorance of possibilities) and that the object of one such desire would be eternal, ideal flourishing. Supposing the inferential structure of these arguments has been patched up, the next question to consider is whether either is sound. How convincing are these reconstructed arguments, both of which include the claim that meaning in life requires perfection of a sort (whether a perfect object to appreciate or a perfect reward to enjoy)?

Another argument for soul- or immortality-centred views appeals explicitly not to perfection but rather to externality. The idea here, familiar from the work of Thomas Nagel, is that there are a variety of standpoints available to the human agent, ranging from the most internal or narrow, which is, basically, the interests of an individual at a given moment, to the most external or broad, roughly, the interests of all conscious beings in all places and at all times, or what is known as the 'standpoint of the universe'. When we take the standpoint of the universe and view our mortal life from the perspective of all space-time (or even just the Hubbell Telescope, when it was working), then nothing about it appears to matter much, if at all.

Although no one has defended this argument of late, philosophers still find it of interest and seek to criticise it. For instance, Andrew Kernohan (22–1) maintains that the standpoint of the universe is inhuman, at least for being emotionless, and is therefore not relevant for appraising a human life. However, why think that the most external standpoint is one not informed by emotion? Why could it not be a point of view from which one empathises with all sentient beings and then judges that our mortal lives lack significance because they do so little to make the universe a better place?

In general, the field still needs careful reflection on the nature of a standpoint. What essentially constitutes a standpoint: emotions, cognitions, affections? Is a certain norm inherent to a given standpoint, or can different evaluations be made from the same standpoint (cf. Martin 222–4)? How is one to know whether the (most) external or broad standpoint is relevant

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for evaluating a life, apart from it being 'a bummer' and appealing to some other, apparently question-begging standpoint (cf. Belliotti 81–2, 90)?

Brooke Alan Trisel ('Futility'; 'Human Extinction') has done the most of late to refute the idea that either a perfectionist ideal or an external standpoint that would require an immortal soul is relevant to meaning in life. Trisel aims to rebut people he calls 'futilitarians', those who claim that a mortal life would not be worthwhile (and hence would lack meaning), since everything we do is unavoidably futile. Drawing on intuitive notions of futile treatment in a medical context, Trisel provides a revealing analysis of what a futile life is, roughly, one that repeatedly fails to achieve valued ends ('Futility' 68–70). Futilitarians, Trisel argues, are incorrect that immortality is necessary for worthwhileness or meaning, since their desires for perfection, or their desires from an external standpoint, are unrealistic. Life would indeed be futile if one strove for something that does not exist and cannot be brought about. However, Trisel suggests that we could and should then simply change our desires to avoid futility. If we were to desire something less than perfect, or to form desires in light of an internal standpoint, then life would not be futile since we could then have a good chance of obtaining our ends. 'When futilitarians wonder why striving is futile, they need not look much further than to their own towering expectations' (79).

Trisel is a subjectivist about value, such that a state of affairs possible for a human being is worth striving for just because one desires it or has set it as an end. Beatitude or bliss, if possible for us, have no worth apart being sought by us; for Trisel, if we were to stop seeking them, then they would lose their value. Appealing to subjectivism is indeed one way to try to undermine perfection- or externality-based arguments for soul-centred accounts of life's meaning. However, many find subjectivism implausible, and it would in any event be more interesting if an objective account of value were invoked to discredit these rationales for soul-centred theory. Supposing that the value relevant to meaning in human life is logically independent of people's pro-attitudes, is there any reason for thinking that the perfection- and externality-based arguments for soul-centred theory posit too high a standard for evaluating meaning?

At times, Trisel implicitly offers an answer to this question, namely, that a sufficient condition for a state of affairs to count as 'too high a standard' is that it cannot be controlled, where a certain immortal state is not something we can control ('Futility' 73–6; 'Human Extinction' 377, 385–6).[5] But as I have pointed out in recent discussion of Kurt Baier's similar view (Metz, 'Critical Notice' 221–2), if something can affect the meaning of our lives only if we can control it, then, oddly, the death of one's child or spouse could not affect the meaningfulness of one's life.

Note that this counterexample also seems to apply to Pedro Tabensky's suggestion that if an end is necessarily, and not merely contingently, unachievable, then it is not relevant to appraising our lives. Since, in his

view, the aim of remaining a person and being immortal is necessarily unrealisable, immortality is 'beyond the pale' when it comes to appraising the goodness (meaning) of an agent's life. Besides questioning the claim that immortality and personhood are necessarily incompatible (Vice), one can point out that the logic of this position oddly entails that the death of my child or spouse cannot affect the value (meaning) of my life, supposing the end of preventing them from dying and of them remaining persons is necessarily unachievable.

The key question, again, is: which possible worlds are relevant to invoke in comparison with our actual world when judging whether there is meaning in our lives? If perfection is too remote a possible world, which world is near enough? And if the external standpoint is too far removed from our own, which standpoint is far enough from ours to provide a critical vantage point but close enough to count?

Trisel and Tabensky offer purportedly sufficient conditions for worlds or standpoints that are not relevant to appraising the meaning of a human life. In contrast, E. M. Adams (80–1) offers a purportedly sufficient condition for a world or perspective that is relevant. She suggests that one should compare one's life to the condition in which one maximally does good, given one's particular abilities, circumstances and lifespan. While this is not a subjectivist standard, one might find it too relative all the same. Suppose someone is severely handicapped and lives only ten years. My intuition suggests that part of the best explanation of why such a life is undesirable is that it lacks the meaning available to a more normal life.

The field needs to reflect much more systematically on the proper standards to use when appraising the meaning of human lives. Relatively few these days believe that a perfect world or the point of view of the universe – and hence an immortal soul – are relevant to judging meaning, but, as should be clear, there has been insufficient reflection on what less than perfect world or more restricted point of view is relevant.

SUPERNATURALISM IN GENERAL AND ITS CRITICS

The most influential religious account of meaning among laypeople is probably the view that meaning lies in uniting with God in an afterlife. I suspect any argument for that position will have to invoke considerations critically discussed above in the context of more 'pure' God-centred or soul-centred views. In particular, plausible defences will appeal to the need for a perfect life or the demand to satisfy the norms of an external standpoint, involving eternal communion with a perfect being.

There are not many analytic philosophers who explicitly argue for a supernaturalist account of meaning in life. Even religious philosophers are often willing to admit that a kind of meaning could exist in a world lacking any spiritual elements (e.g. Audi, 'Intrinsic Value' 335–6, 350). Some of them claim that a 'minimal' meaning could but that a 'deep' meaning could

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not (Cottingham, *Spiritual Dimension* 53). However, it is unfortunately not clear what it means to speak of 'deep' as opposed 'shallow' meaning and whether such a distinction among types of meaning is really useful (Metz, 'Recent Work' 809–10; Belshaw 122–5). Supernaturalism is on the defensive and could use some systematic philosophical support, principally, I submit, by defending the view that perfection or externality of some sort is the relevant standard to use when evaluating our lives, at least if we want a 'deep' kind of meaning that is as yet unarticulated.

III. Naturalism

Most of those writing on life's meaning these days are naturalists in the sense that they believe that a significant existence is possible in a purely physical universe or a world as known by science. It is customary to distinguish between subjective naturalists, who believe that meaning is entirely relative to people's variable mental states such as desires and goals, on the one hand, and objective naturalists, who maintain that meaning is substantially mind-independent and therefore invariant, on the other.[6]

Before considering subjectivism and objectivism, I note that there is, logically speaking, a theoretical alternative to both supernaturalism and naturalism, namely, non-naturalism, the view that life's meaning consists in relating to certain abstract properties that are neither spiritual nor physical. Only Robert Audi ('Intrinsic Value' 337–41) has recently expressed any sympathy toward such a view, suggesting that intrinsic value is necessary for meaning in life and that intrinsic value is a non-natural property. Here, again, the metaethical debate on ethical naturalism is of key relevance.

SUBJECTIVISM AND ITS CRITICS

Like supernaturalism, subjectivism is largely out of favour among most of those English-speaking philosophers writing on the meaning of life today. Subjectivism entails that if one strongly wants or aims to count grains of sand on a beach and this state of affairs comes about, then one's life is very meaningful, an implication few are willing to countenance (e.g. Belliotti 75, 86–7; Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* pt. 1; Belshaw 114–22; Wielenberg 18–23). Most deem merely wanting or aiming for something and getting it to be insufficient to confer meaning on life. Instead, a majority of contemporary analytic philosophers believe that there are certain things one ought to want or aim for, in order for one's life to be meaningful.

However, in the last five years, there have been three vocal defenders of a subjectivist perspective on meaning in life. One is Arjan Markus, who would likely object to being categorised as a 'subjectivist', since he ostensibly aims to present several ways in which mere personal preference does not exhaust the ability to rightly judge the meaning of someone's life. Markus aims to develop a way to explain why collecting vintage cars would not be

as meaningful as being (the stereotypical) Mother Teresa, but I do not see that the criteria he offers enable him to do so. I am disinclined to call Markus an 'objectivist' since the requirements he places on a life for it to count as 'meaningful' are merely formal, appealing to conditions such as logical consistency, integration with non-evaluative beliefs about reality, coherence with worldviews one accepts at a deep level, and integrity in the application of values to one's life. At no point does Markus explicitly appeal to any substantive notions of objective worth or intrinsic value. He does include a universalisation requirement, namely, that meaningful values must be ones that all people can live by, but it is far from clear whether that implicitly appeals to anything objective of the sort either that most self-labelled 'objectivists' have in mind or that seems necessary to account for the claim that helping others confers more meaning on life than collecting cars.

Another recent defence of subjectivism comes from Trisel, whose central rationale for favouring subjectivism is Jean-Paul Sartre's famous argument that since there is no God, since only God could ground objective values, and since there are values, all values are subjective (Trisel, 'Futility' 73, 79; 'Human Extinction' 379). Although there are value nihilists who would dispute the claim that there is anything good or bad,[7] most of the debate centres on the nature of good and bad. The claim that mind-independent, universal norms could come only from God in some way is notoriously controversial, and here is yet another place where the plausibility of contemporary arguments for naturalistic moral realism is important to establish.

The attractiveness of moral realism also bears on Harry Frankfurt's contemporary defence of subjectivism with respect to meaning.[8] According to Frankfurt, what is significant for a person's life is a function of what she cares about or loves (a particular sort of caring). For Frankfurt, caring about or loving something is sufficient to confer importance on one's life; one does not need to appeal to the idea that there are things that one ought to care about, apart from the perspective of something else that one cares about. 'Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved' ('Reply to Susan Wolf' 250). Frankfurt's major argument for such a view is that 'efforts to make sense of "objective value" tend to turn out badly' (250); however, it might be that developments in moral realism in the last twenty years have turned out rather well.

Another argument from Frankfurt is that meaning is ultimately a function of losing oneself, i.e. getting absorbed in, or taken over by, an awareness, activity or relationship (Frankfurt, 'Importance' 89–91). That well explains why intense work and passionate love are what many people take to be central to meaning. However, the idea that subjectivism follows from the fact that one realises oneself by losing oneself is open to the criticism that there are better and worse ways to do so. To be authentic or to realise one's true self arguably requires getting in touch with valuable aspects of reality;[9]

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otherwise, being utterly captivated by an experience machine or a virtual reality would suffice for meaning.

Moving now to an evaluation of Frankfurt's account of meaning in life, as opposed to his arguments for it, one could consider whether his interpretation of care or love is correct. For instance, Frankfurt conceives of love as essentially (among other things) a matter of acting for the good of the beloved, but one might question whether love, or the sort of loving that makes life meaningful, essentially involves that kind of volition or, indeed, any volition at all. David Velleman is well known for arguing that love is not essentially an action done for the sake of others, but rather an arresting apprehension of another's value that tends to break down emotional barriers (Velleman, 'Love' 338). In the current context, the claim would be that the sort of love relevant to meaning is one including such an other-appreciating perception and not necessarily any other-regarding volition.

This sort of criticism is one that can be made within the subjectivist camp; it is about which precise mental attitudes are logically sufficient for meaning. A deeper criticism is one made by Susan Wolf, who maintains that there are mind-independent standards governing what one ought to care about or love. Intuitively, she notes, more meaning would come from loving people than, say, loving torture of them, which seems well explained by the idea that some things are objectively worth loving more than others. As an alternative to Frankfurt's account of the role of love in conferring meaning, then, one might be tempted by the principle that meaning comes from loving what is worth loving and in proportion to the degree of its worth. However, Wolf doubts this particular version of objectivism. She points out, for example, that this view implies that a parent ought to love her children unequally if one is more worthy (perhaps because less selfish) than the other. And she suggests that the 'dominant view' is that all people are equally worth loving.

Now, it is not obvious that this is indeed the dominant view – Jeffrie Murphy, for instance, has called the view that all deserve love (let alone equally deserve it) 'a claim whose intrinsic implausibility is staggering' (793). And it might not be counterintuitive to think that one has *pro tanto* reason to love one's children unequally, so far as meaning is concerned: suppose one's child is a young adult with psychopathic tendencies that he could correct but chooses not to. Furthermore, it could be that, even if reasons of meaning counsel unequal love, morality provides weightier reason not to love one's children unequally, given that one has promised or otherwise voluntarily undertaken not to do so, or given the harm that would likely result if one did.

Obviously, the role of objective value in determining the meaningfulness (as opposed to the morality) of love needs more exploration. Even if it is unclear how objective value ought to determine what one loves and to what degree when it comes to meaning in life, Wolf's suggestion that objective

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value plays some essential role in the way love makes our lives matter will seem plausible to many. And so will her attempt to ground meaning on an objective account of love, discussed in the next section.

OBJECTIVISM AND ITS CRITICS

Although most of the recent English-speaking work on life's meaning supports the view that it is constituted by natural, mind-independent facts, relatively little of this literature proposes full-blown objective theories, attempts to capture in a single principle all the variegated ways to make one's life meaningful in the physical world. More piecemeal discussions of objective grounds of meaning from the last five years include: in what ways altruism promotes meaning in life (Baggini ch. 4); to what degree leaving traces upon one's death makes one's life more significant (Trisel, 'Human Extinction'); the kind of achievements that enhance meaningfulness (James); the sort of work that makes life matter most (Levy); the ways moral character makes life meaningful (Thomas); and the respect in which family relationships confer meaning on life by enhancing self-understanding (Velleman, 'Family History'). Lack of space precludes detailed analyses of these different factors.[10] Although this work 'from the ground up' is important and worth much more attention from analytic philosophers, in the rest of this section I instead focus on 'top down' attempts to unify these diverse conditions into one, basic and comprehensive theoretical account of meaning in life.

Wolf presents and defends such a theory when she claims that loving what is worth loving constitutes meaning in life. If one loves nothing, then one's life lacks meaning, and if one loves something but it is objectively unworthy of love, then, again, no meaning accrues to one's life. For Wolf, there are some projects or conditions that are intrinsically valuable and that, when valued intrinsically by the agent, make one's existence significant. As she says, 'meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness' ('True' 237). For reasons mentioned above, Wolf eschews a proportionality criterion such that one's life is the most meaningful by virtue of loving most intensely what is most worth loving; she instead maintains that objective value has some essential, but as yet insufficiently understood, role to play in determining the importance of love.

Against Wolf, one might question whether one must love (or even care about) what one is doing in order to obtain meaning from it. For instance, Charles Starkey accepts that a significant life is a function of subjective attraction to objective attractiveness, but denies that subjective attraction must be a function of love. For Starkey, it is instead, roughly, a matter of an intense emotional state that need not be positive in the way that love is and that is the object of another, second-order emotional state. Furthermore, it might be that no subjective attraction of any sort is a necessary condition for obtaining meaning. I suspect that great work is sufficient for significance, even if it is true that a person would find more significance if she were also

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'into' her work, whether by loving it, by having some other kind of emotional attachment to it, or by contouring any number of her pro-attitudes toward it (Metz, 'Utilitarianism' 63–7).

A different sort of problem with Wolf 's theory, as it stands, is that the concept of those objects worth loving is left open.[11] Wolf 's account would be much more rich if it specified what counts as 'objectively attractive'. How might this be done?

A recent article by Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith can be viewed as an answer to the question of how to put some flesh on the skeletal claim that objective attractiveness is the key to meaning in life. Like Wolf, and most others writing on life's meaning these days, they take meaning to require not only what they call 'internal' or subjective factors such as freely wanting, planning and trying, but also 'external' or objective factors that involve non-trivial pursuits. They spell out non-triviality in terms of, roughly, ranking highly on public measures of success. Whether a project is trivial or not is a function of whether there are criteria that one's community uses to rank projects of its kind as having gone better or worse, whether the community is in a position to apply the criteria to the project at hand, and how well the project measures up with respect to the criteria. So, to use their examples (446–7), day-dreaming, killing innocents and making bad art are not significant projects; the first lacks any widely accepted measures of better and worse, the second is not one that can be done with the community's awareness and the third fails to measure up to the community's standards.

Brogaard and Smith's account of non-triviality is 'objective' in the thin sense of independent of a given individual's evaluation, but one might wonder whether it is objective enough (Metz, 'Introduction' 326). Their account oddly entails that intimate love-making, which might not be practicable if it had to be made public, is not a significant activity. In reply, one might revise their account, dropping the requirement that the community must be aware of the activity. Their view would, however, still render what is worthwhile hostage to majoritarianism; it could not, for example, count avant-garde art as significant, since it lacks widely accepted measures of success. It is plausible to take Brogaard and Smith's intersubjective test of non-triviality as a reliable epistemic marker of significance, and it is even appealing to think that a project would be more significant if one's community appreciated it. But is it as plausible to think that satisfying public measures of success essentially constitutes what it is to be a non-trivial pursuit?

There are two major theoretical accounts of objective attractiveness from the last five years that do not appeal to the content of an individual's or community's propositional attitudes and hence are 'objective' in a thick sense. One comes from Audi, who grants that certain subjective factors such as believing one's life to be meaningful can enhance the meaning of one's life, but denies that they are either necessary or sufficient for meaning ('Intrinsic Value' 344). According to Audi, important projects are largely,

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if not exclusively, constituted by rewarding experiences, either those to be found in one's life or those that one promotes in the lives of others. Such experiences typically involve the exercise of rational agency *à la* John Stuart Mill and in a variety of ways *à la* Aristotle. Notice the explanation Audi would give of why day-dreams, murder and bad art do not confer meaning on a life: they do not involve many rewarding experiences for oneself or others. Furthermore, note that Audi's view could account for the significance of avant-garde art that is not yet widely appreciated and of passionate love-making that can be practised only in the dark; both are rewarding for those engaged in them.

I have objected that Audi's theory falls prey to experience machine counterexamples. Audi presumes that one's own positive experiences can enhance the meaning of one's life, but such a view entails that life in an experience machine would foster meaning in one's life to some, substantial degree (Metz, 'Introduction' 313–14). I suggest that one's own pleasure is relevant more to one's happiness or well-being than one's significance.

The other mind-independent account of objective attractiveness in the recent literature avoids the experience machine counterexample that Audi's faces. It is the view that meaning in life comes from transcending one's animal self (Metz, 'Utilitarianism'; cf. Levy). From this perspective, there are different kinds of intrinsic values that correspond to different parts of our nature. On the one hand, there are the values of the animal self, e.g. the bare fact of being alive, the experience of pleasure (even the higher pleasure associated with intellectuality) and the satisfaction of desire. On the other hand, there are the values of the distinctively human self, principally the capacity for rationality and its exercise in certain creative and beneficial ways. According to transcending the animal self theory, promoting one's own life, pleasure or desire satisfaction are not sufficient to confer meaning on one's life, for they are largely the domain of well-being; however, being contoured toward one's own rational nature, as well as the animal and rational natures of others, is sufficient. One's life is more meaningful, the more it is positively oriented toward intrinsic value beyond one's animality. Daydreaming and life in an experience machine are clearly animal functions, while murder and bad art fail to exercise reason in the right ways, perhaps by failing to be contoured to the rational nature of others. Furthermore, avant-garde art involves the exercise of one's rational nature, while sex that expresses love is obviously a way to cohere with a rational being beyond oneself.

This theory is more concrete than Wolf's blanket talk of 'objective attractiveness', while apparently avoiding counterexamples to Brogaard and Smith's and Audi's and hence being more comprehensive than they are. However, it is still far from complete, as the following three counterexamples indicate. Note that these objections apply not just to transcending the animal self theory; any objective theory would benefit from considering how to address them.

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First, it is unclear how transcending the animal self theory accounts for 'impersonal' goods such as wilderness, ecosystems or retributive justice (Metz, 'Recent Work' 800–1). Such goods are part of neither one's rational nature nor others' animal or rational natures, and they need neither be rewarding (Audi) nor satisfy public measures of success (Brogaard and Smith). In reply, perhaps one can point out that they are at least goods beyond one's animal nature; transcending one's animal nature need not require connecting positively with any personal good.

A second, deeper concern is that the present theory does not adequately explain why certain exercises of reason confer more meaning than others. Above I suggested that murder and bad art confer no meaning because they are not 'the right' uses of reason, but what makes them improper? It is plausible to say that murder fails to be contoured to the rational nature of others, but this explanation is less convincing in the case of bad art. True, others cannot (properly) appreciate bad art, but I am inclined to think that the deeper reason bad art confers no meaning on a life has more to do with the art's nature; for instance, it might fail to be revealing with regard to a universal theme. Similar remarks go for intellectual reflection on the 'wrong' sort of object. Great meaning in life can come from developing a theory of human evolution but not a theory of belly button lint, even though developing or learning about both could well require the substantial exercise of reason.

It appears that rational activity must be directed toward appropriate objects (Metz, 'Utilitarianism' 69), but the present theory, as it stands, says nothing about which objects are appropriate. What makes an object of intellectual reflection one that confers meaning on a life? And what makes a work of art the sort of object that confers meaning on a life? I suspect that the relevant thought- or art-object must be fundamental in some way (Metz, 'Non-Consequentialist Theory'), but this hunch needs systematic exploration and defence.

A third lacuna in transcending the animal self theory (and most objective naturalist theories) is that it does not address the issue of meaning arising from the overall pattern of a life. Much recent reflection on life's meaning indicates that life as a whole can be a bearer of meaning, not (solely) parts of a life such as relationships, actions or states (Brännmark; Kamm 221–33; Thomson ch. 12; Levinson; Fischer; Blumenfeld). The views that meaning arises from loving what is worth loving, freely engaging in pursuits that measure up to public criteria of success, promoting reward in one's life or others', or transcending one's animal nature all seem to wrongly reduce life to being a 'container' of meaning, to use Johan Brännmark's useful extension of Rawls' criticism of utilitarianism (330).

Among holists, there are those with fascinating, extreme views that life as a whole is the only bearer of meaning or that the meaning of the whole is lexically superior to any meaning inhering in its parts (Brännmark; Levinson; Blumenfeld). More common and less bold, however, are those who think that both the parts and the whole have independent weight that

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must be balanced against each other. Supposing this more moderate view is correct, can one theoretically capture how to weigh these different dimensions of meaning? Can one say anything at a general, principled level about how to weigh parts and whole, or is that to be done entirely on a contextual, case-by-case basis?

Focusing now exclusively on the holistic dimension, I distinguish four different ways in which recent literature has proposed that life as a whole might confer meaning on a life.[12] They can be logically ordered as follows. First, there is a concern to avoid repetition in a life, such that even if the parts of a very repetitive life were very meaningful, sacrificing some meaning in the parts in order to avoid repetition in the pattern would thereby enhance the meaning of the whole (Metz, 'Recent Work' 800; Blumenfeld). Second, there is the view that, supposing one's life avoids repetition and has better and worse parts (where 'worse' means not as good, not necessarily downright bad), it would be more meaningful for the life to end on a high note than to have started out good and then declined (Kamm 221–33). Third, some maintain that, supposing one's life has better and worse parts and the better parts come later, it would be more meaningful for the worse parts of a life to have caused the better parts to come about, as opposed to the latter having being caused by something else (Metz, 'Introduction' 317). Fourth, one finds the view that, supposing one's life has better parts toward its end that have been caused by its worse parts, it would be more meaningful for the better parts to have come by a process of personal growth or self-realisation (Fischer 381–4; Blumenfeld).

How might a friend of the aggregative or additive perspective try to explain away these apparent holistic instances of meaningfulness? Do these cases exhaust the plausible ways in which holism affects meaning? Are they best understood in terms of narrative value, i.e. is any holistic meaning a function of literary notions of self-expression or life-stories, as John Martin Fischer seems inclined to believe, or are there holistic meanings that are not narrative values, a view to which Brännmark is sympathetic (323–4, 331)? The field is wide open for important contributions on mereology and meaning in life.

IV. Issues Independent of Supernaturalism and Naturalism

So far, I have critically addressed particular supernaturalist and naturalist theories of what can make a life meaningful, and I have also discussed some reasons for favouring either supernaturalism or naturalism more generally. I now turn to issues that are relatively neutral with respect to these theoretical debates, specifically, the more abstract issues of the sense of talk of 'life's meaning' and of how it differs from the senses of similar but distinct terms. In previous sections, I have been working with an intuitive notion of what it means to speak of 'meaning in life', but here I critically discuss recent literature that aims to be more explicit and self-reflective with respect to it.

THE CONCEPT OF LIFE'S MEANING

When reflecting on the meaning of 'meaning', it is standard to distinguish between the meaning of human life as such, on the one hand, and the meaning of an individual's life, on the other. And it is furthermore typical to hold that the most important issue concerns the latter and that an answer to the former need not entail anything with respect to it. That is, the human species might lack meaning, but that need not be regrettable since that fact would not obviously entail anything about whether individual people can find varying amounts of meaning in their lives.

Even given a focus on the question of whether and, if so, how a given person's existence can be significant, the field has found it difficult to reduce this question to a single basic idea. For instance, I have argued (Metz, 'Recent Work' 801–4; 'Critical Notice' 216–19) that this question is associated with a variety of closely related but not entirely overlapping questions, such as: What ought one most strive for besides achieving happiness and satisfying moral requirements? How can one do something worth of great esteem or admiration? What is particularly worthy of love and devotion? My claim is that all the major supernaturalist and naturalist theories, many of which I canvassed in the previous sections, constitute answers to at least one of these questions, which exhibit family resemblances.

There are two alternatives to my proposal that have lately been defended systematically. First, Neil Levy is apparently seeking to articulate the sense of the question of 'life's meaning' when he says that its 'definition' is a matter of asking about what goods there are beyond the animal self or which values are not merely subjective (177–80). Such an analysis of the question of life's meaning can account for why supernaturalism and objectivism are about meaning in life, and, in my view, this analysis also has the advantage of excluding hedonism as counting as a theory of life's meaning (a life in the experience machine is not a prima facie candidate for meaning, but rather an alternative to it). However, as Levy acknowledges (180n), his articulation of what we are asking when posing the question of life's meaning entails that subjectivism does not count as a theory of life's meaning at all. Levy bites this bullet. However, it does not strike me that, say, Frankfurt is conceptually confused when he asserts that life's meaning is a matter of caring about anything at all. Is there a way to revise Levy's suggestion so that it can exclude hedonism as a theory of meaning but include subjectivism?

The other recent analysis of the question of life's meaning has been proffered independently by both Markus and Garrett Thomson (8–13). Both submit that the question of whether and, if so, how an individual's existence is meaningful can be understood in three basic ways, namely, in terms of the degree to which a life achieves some purpose, contains value, and is either intelligible (Thomson) or has parts that cohere in some way (Markus). I submit that it is too narrow to suppose that, when enquiring about meaning in life, we are necessarily asking about whether it achieves some purpose. There are states or experiences that one cannot bring about, or

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that one might not have made an end, but that are prima facie candidates for conferring meaning on life nonetheless. Perhaps good examples are conditions in which reward is perfectly apportioned to virtue or in which one lives in a natural rather than prefabricated environment (Metz, 'Recent Work' 800–2). Is there a sense in which these conditions could count as 'purposive' in some way even if not intentionally sought?

I also question whether a meaningful life must, by definition, be intelligible, perhaps by virtue of exhibiting some kind of coherence. We can imagine lives that do not cohere well in any straightforward sense and that lack the narrativity that typically 'makes sense' of a life, but that are meaningful all the same. Consider the life of a political refugee or concentration camp survivor who has made the best of oft-changing and chaotic circumstances and in a variety of ways, e.g. by maintaining self-respect, helping others and having a sense of humour.[13] Must such a person have some underlying virtues that render her life coherent or intelligible?

It is also worth considering whether a theory of life's meaning could be viewed as seeking to answer any one of these three questions regarding purpose, value and intelligibility/coherence (Thomson 12–13). However, the problem with this manoeuvre is that the three questions taken individually clearly fail to carve out the territory unique to meaning. For instance, a moral life no less than a meaningful life contains value, and right action no less than a meaningful condition involves achieving some purpose. The question is, which purposes or values are centrally relevant when it comes to enquiring about meaning? Is this question adequately answered by my proposal that the relevant ones are basically those we are right to greatly esteem, admire or love?

RELATED CONCEPTS

Several recent texts discuss concepts that are related to, but apparently not identical to, the concept of a meaningful life. I do not have the space to consider the sundry ways in which these concepts might figure into arguments with conclusions about meaningfulness. I instead simply articulate these related ideas and provide some sense of how they differ from one another.

Think first about the concept of an absurd existence. As Michael Martin points out (219–24), the concept of absurdity, at least if we are (usefully) narrow in our interpretation of it, essentially involves the idea of incongruity. Nagel famously argues that the internal and external standpoints inherent to our personhood render our lives absurd since they posit contradictory judgments about whether our lives matter. And Albert Camus famously maintains that a world without God fails to fit our expectations of the universe for order and justice. Note that ascriptions of absurdity naturally

apply to human life as such, leaving open the possibility that individual lives can obtain meaning.

A second concept related to meaning is futility, recently analysed with care by Trisel ('Futility'; 'Human Extinction'). Futility is more or less the idea of a repeated failure to obtain one's ends. Human life as such might be absurd in some way, but it does not follow that a given individual's life is futile; for she might do a good job of realising her contingent ends or at least ends that are worth pursuing ('Futility' 375–8, 382–5).

A third concept is the idea of a worthwhile life. Sometimes this concept is equated with a meaningful life, but it is worth keeping them distinct. A worthwhile life is one that is worth living, where it is logically possible for a meaningless life to be one worth choosing, e.g. perhaps a life in the experience machine, or a life of sit-coms and sun-tans. Most of those who have analysed worthwhileness have been, to use David Blumenfeld's apt term, 'talliers', people who believe that whether a life is worthwhile is a function of how much good it includes added up against how much bad. Given this aggregative conception of a worthwhile life, a life could be futile but still worthwhile; imagine a person who routinely fails to achieve her goals but happens to wind up with many good experiences and relationships in her life (Trisel 'Futility' 76–9; 'Human Extinction' 378).

A fourth concept is that of a wasted life, recently considered carefully by Frances Kamm (210–14). Kamm distinguishes a number of different senses in which a life could be a 'waste', but the core idea is that of a life in which not much was accomplished, given the opportunity. Notice the difference between a life that is not worthwhile and a wasted life: a life could be so short as not to be worth living and yet not have been wasted at all, since one did what one could with what one had (Kamm 213).

A fifth concept that is related to the idea of a meaningful life but that is logically distinct from it is the idea of a life that would be unreasonable to reject. A meaningless life might be reasonable to accept, at least in light of the experience machine case discussed above in the context of the worthwhile. That might lead one to suspect that a life that is worthwhile is equivalent to, or necessarily entails, a life that would be unreasonable to reject. However, Blumenfeld argues otherwise. He asks us to consider cases in which the good heavily outweighs the bad of a life, making it worth living, but in which there is a short period of sheer torture, or in which there is a very long period of repetitiveness. One might reasonably reject living such a life, even though one grants that it would be worthwhile (qua tallying) to live it.

While there is little literature on the topic of life's meaning, at least compared to that on rightness or justice, there is even less on the above concepts. The field has moved far beyond thinking that hedonism or even well-being is the sole dimension by which to evaluate a life, but it is not yet near having fully captured all relevant dimensions.

V. Conclusion

Although the number of English-speaking philosophical publications devoted to the topic of life's meaning in the last five years is not enormous, I hope this review indicates the great breadth and depth of discussion in them. I conclude by providing a very rough gloss of the trends I have found in the literature and of the major directions I have suggested for future work.

Very broadly speaking, in terms of theory there is a clear preference for naturalism relative to supernaturalism. To make progress in this debate between the two, and perhaps to underwrite the naturalist's perspective, the field needs to reflect on the proper way to evaluate a life. Naturalists believe that the most external standpoint or a perfectionist ideal are standards that are too high for appraising a human being's existence. However, they have yet to develop an attractive, principled alternative, and at least the supernaturalists can claim the virtue of simplicity.

Of naturalists, most reject the subjectivist view that meaning does not depend on objective value of any sort, instead favouring the notion that meaning comes from intrinsically worthwhile activities that one loves, is emotionally tied to or finds meaningful. I have suggested one major way that such an objectivist view needs to be developed, concerning the nature of the intrinsically worthwhile activities. It would be useful for the field to try to ascertain what, if anything, they all have in common, being sure to include the respects in which holism apparently bears on meaning in life.

In this review, I have covered what I take to be the most salient and important discussions in the recent literature. However, there are other useful and interesting topics that have been discussed and that I have not had the space to take up here, among them these: which, if any, sort of free will one must have in order to obtain meaning (Pereboom; Baggini 118–20; Brogaard and Smith 456–8; Fischer); what role, if any, luck plays in making life meaningful (Brogaard and Smith 453–56); whether meaning can come from activities performed with ease, or whether it must result from substantial effort (Martin 206; James; Brogaard and Smith 445–6; Metz, 'Introduction' 324); whether success at realising one's ends is necessary for meaning in life, or, in contrast, whether achieving goals would reduce life to mere instrumental value, rob life of any remaining point, or lead to utter boredom (Belliotti 61, 76; Martin 193, 205; Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* 66–73; Thomson ch. 4; Baggini 28–33, 106–18, 183; Levy); and whether a life that has brought about immoral ends can be meaningful in some respect (Belliotti 61, 87–8; Metz, 'Utilitarianism' 56–60; Belshaw 120–1). I hope this review prods colleagues to take up these and other important questions posed here.[14]

Short Biography

Thaddeus Metz works on a variety of topics in normative ethics and political philosophy, including contractualism, respect for persons, African ethics,

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the meaning of life, liberalism, economic justice and the philosophy of punishment. His research on these topics has appeared in journals such as *Ethics*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *Law and Philosophy*, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, *Religious Studies*, *Ratio* and *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Metz's current projects involve the development of an African normative ethical theory that could compete with Western theories, an exploration of the idea that human rights violations are primarily unloving rather than degrading actions, an attempt to reconcile liberal politics with retributive punishment, a defence of a certain non-consequentialist conception of which knowledge is important to discover, and the presentation of a unified theory of the true, the good and the beautiful. He lectured at a number of universities in the US, including UCLA and the University of Missouri, before relocating to South Africa in 2004 and joining the University of the Witwatersrand, where he is now Associate Professor of Philosophy and Honorary Associate Professor of Bioethics. Metz holds a B.A. in Philosophy and Sociology from the University of Iowa and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Cornell University.

Notes

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[1] I do not ignore these texts in this review, but focus on points in them that I consider novel or otherwise of interest to professional normative theorists.

[2] For a survey of the literature published in 1980–2001, see Metz, 'Recent Work' and for a broader overview of the field not limited to any narrow span of time, see Metz, 'The Meaning of Life'. In this article, I refer to literature prior to 2002 when needed to provide context for the more recent literature.

[3] For the best recent defence of this view, see Audi, *Good in the Right*.

[4] E.g. Boyd; Sturgeon; Brink; Miller esp. ch. 2.

[5] Trisel and others have recently offered additional arguments for thinking that immortality is not necessary for meaning in life, but they are either prima facie weak or echo views voiced in the 1950s and 1960s by thinkers such as Kurt Baier, Paul Edwards and Anthony Flew. Specifically, there are the suggestions that: the best explanation of why soul-centred theorists are correct that death is bad is that it ends the good of a finite life (Trisel, 'Futility' 76; Thomson 21; Kernohan 16–17); if death rendered meaning impossible, then we would counterintuitively have no reason to prevent suffering (Trisel, 'Human Extinction' 384–5); since we do not refuse to go to movies that we know will end, we should, by analogy, not refuse to live a life that we know will end (Kernohan 17); and immortality would get boring (Belshaw 82–91). Against the first argument, soul-centred theorists can object that death prevents the good of eternal life that would have been realised had death not come; against the second, they can claim that there might be moral requirements, if not reasons of meaning, to prevent the suffering of mortals; against the third they can point out that the reason we do not mind a movie ending is that we expect another one (or something else good) to come after it, quite unlike a life that will end; and against the fourth, they can argue that an immoral life need not be a boring one (Wisnewski).

[6] There is logical space for an intermediate, Kantian view that what is meaningful is a function of people's invariant mental states qua rational, a view defended in Darwall esp. 164–6.

[7] See Mackie ch. 1.

[8] Frankfurt is naturally read as a subjectivist, but there are passages that do suggest otherwise. In one place Frankfurt suggests that while loving anything is sufficient for meaning, loving some things rather than others could confer more meaning in virtue of the worthiness of the object of love ('Reply to Susan Wolf' 246). However, in the same text, Frankfurt suggests that there is reason to care about morality as opposed to immorality only on the basis of other things one

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actually cares about (248). I find a similar ambivalence in Frankfurt's initial essay on the subject, 'Importance of What We Care About'.
[9] For a full defence of this point, see C. Taylor.
[10] For critical discussion of some of these texts and issues, see Metz, 'Introduction'.
[11] And intentionally so. See Wolf, 'Meaningful Lives'.
[12] Some key older discussions of the issue include: Slote; R. Taylor; Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time'; Hurka esp. 84–97, 121–3.
[13] Cf. Frankl.
[14] For useful comments and suggestions, I would like to thank the editor, Kit Wellman, and an anonymous referee.

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