

Recent Work on the Meaning of Life*

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I. INTRODUCTION

What, if anything, makes a life meaningful? This question is obviously important but has not received much attention from normative theorists. Although there is relatively little philosophical literature on life's meaning, there is more than most readers are probably aware. And this literature has reached a point at which it would be useful to reflect on where it stands and where it needs to go.

In this article, I survey a particular subset of recent work on the meaning of life. First, I am concerned with writings that take a meaningful life to be one desirable facet of a person's existence.¹ I set aside those that treat a meaningful life as a purely descriptive property or that discuss the meaning of anything supra-individual such as the human race or the universe.² Furthermore, I concentrate on the Anglo-American philosophical literature; I do not address the insights to be found in works of fiction, psychology, religion, or, say, Continental philosophy.³ In addition, I disregard pieces devoted to applied issues in favor of those with a decidedly

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²Note that deeming meaning in life to be desirable leaves open why and to what degree it is. In particular, it does not imply either that meaning in life is by definition intrinsically good or that it provides an overriding reason for action.

³For a representative recent instance of such theorizing, see Barlow 1994.

⁴For short statements about the meaning of life by novelists, psychologists, theologians, and some philosophers, see Moorhead 1988; Gabay 1996. For longer statements by religious scholars and a few philosophers of religion, see Runzo and Martin 2000.

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theoretical focus.⁴ Finally, I focus on literature that has appeared since 1980.⁵

Although I aim to show that contemporary normative analytic theorization of life's meaning is worth considering, it is frankly something of a backwater compared to the writing on right action, just distribution, or even the character virtues. On average, only about five works are published in a given year on the topic of what makes a life meaningful. The relative dearth of attention devoted to this topic means that the discussion lacks the level of sophistication found in the moral domain. An article that explores the trolley problem, a journal symposium that investigates political liberalism, and a book that develops a refined rule consequentialism are quotidian aspects of moral theory. As it stands, relatively few parallels can be found in philosophical reflection on the question of what, if anything, makes a life meaningful.

What has prevented theories of life's meaning from flourishing? One factor might be that the field is not aware of any clear and precise analysis of the question of the meaning of life. Philosophers are more confident as to the senses of "well-being" and "right action" than as to those of "life's meaning." An additional possibility is that common Kantian and utilitarian outlooks continue to colonize thought about normative categories. Normative theorists often divide their field into the two basic territories of happiness and ethics, making it difficult to find space from which to pose questions about the meaning of life. And if space for life's meaning does happen to be found, it is typically thought to be a no-man's-land, a place not amenable to reasoned inquiry.

These may be good explanatory reasons for the lack of interest in the meaning of life, but they are not obviously good justificatory reasons. Contemporary philosophers have worked to elucidate the sense of claims about the meaning of life and to show that it is a fundamental normative category that is distinct from welfare and morality. Furthermore, they have used the analytic methods commonly employed in other normative domains to provide theoretical answers to the question of what makes a life meaningful. In Sections II and III of this article, I review these theories of life's meaning, identifying their logical relationships, noting their strengths, pointing out their weaknesses, and suggesting some ways to develop them further. In Sections IV and V, I take up the more abstract issues such as the sense of statements about

⁵For analyses of life's meaning in the contexts of work and child rearing, respectively, see du Toit 1990 and Conly 1999.

⁶Analytic work on the meaning of life from the 1960s and 1970s was collected and reviewed in the 1980s. The key anthologies are Sanders and Cheney 1980; Klemke 1981; and Hanfling 1987*b*. For a brief survey of recent literature on death and the meaning of life, see Fischer 1993, pp. 66–73. For a collection of analytic literature on life's meaning from throughout the twentieth century, see Klemke 2000.

life's meaning and the formal properties of meaningfulness as a distinct category for appraising a person's existence. I conclude the article in Section VI by analyzing recent discussions of nihilism, the thesis that life is meaningless.

II. SUPERNATURALISM

In this section and the next one, I critically explore contemporary theories that are identified in the literature as being about the meaning of life.⁶ These theories are intended to be general, fundamental, and systematic accounts of the conditions that constitute a meaningful life. They are attempts to capture the "underlying structure" of a significant existence in as few principles as possible.

Note that these theories are not committed to saying that life is in fact meaningful. They are instead accounts of what would constitute a meaningful life, were it to exist. Furthermore, while these theories are accounts of what would make a *life* meaningful, many of them make claims about meaningful states, actions, and relationships. Relatively few believe that a person's life is meaningful solely in virtue of her existence as a biographical whole. Most instead hold that a life can be meaningful because it is constituted by meaningful parts.

There is something of a consensus in the literature regarding taxonomy. The great divide is between supernaturalist and naturalist conceptions of life's meaning. Supernaturalism is the view that one's existence is meaningful only if one has a certain relation with some purely spiritual realm. If neither a god nor a soul existed, or if they existed but one failed to relate to them in the right way, then one's life would be meaningless. Naturalism denies that life's meaning is contingent on the existence of a purely spiritual order. Naturalists can grant that a god or a soul could confer meaning on a life; they simply dispute that these are necessary conditions for a life to be meaningful. Instead, for a naturalist, a meaningful life can come from ways of being and acting in the world as known by science.

As in morality, there is logical space for a nonnatural theory of life's meaning that is neither supernaturalist nor naturalist. Some of Immanuel Kant's ideas, in particular the notion that noumenal rational agency is a precondition of a meaningful life, could be viewed as being a nonnatural account (cf. Williams 1999). Since almost nothing has been written in this vein, I do not address it but merely note that there is plenty of room for development.

⁶If an author deems her theory to be about life's meaning, then (in Secs. II and III) I provisionally take her to be correct. However, as I discuss below (in Sec. IV), reflection on the concept of life's meaning might lead us to revise our judgment about whether a theory is truly about it.

In this section, I address recent supernaturalist theories of life's meaning. Although many supernaturalists hold that a meaningful life is a function of both a god and a soul, it will be revealing to consider the possibility that only one is essential. Call a theory "pure" if it holds that only one supernatural element is necessary and sufficient for a meaningful life. A pure God-centered theory maintains that a certain relationship with God as understood in the theistic tradition is necessary and sufficient for a significant existence but that a certain state of one's soul is not, and a pure soul-centered theory holds the opposite. Examining pure versions of these theories will help one to determine exactly what one believes to constitute the meaning in life.⁷ Let us consider pure God-centered theories first.

A. God-Centered Theories

Most people who believe that a certain relationship with God is necessary and sufficient for anyone's life to be meaningful agree that the relationship just is the meaningfulness. However, God-centered theorists disagree about exactly which relationship with God would constitute a life's meaning. In virtue of what would meaning be conferred on a person's existence by the spiritual source of the universe who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good? The traditional answer that continues to dominate supernaturalist thinking is that meaning in our lives would come from fulfilling a purpose that God has assigned to us. According to this "purpose theory," a life is meaningful just insofar as it does what God intends it to do.

This theory faces several objections in the contemporary discussion. For one, many maintain that the purpose theory is false since God does not exist or that it is at least unjustified since we do not know that God exists (Dahl 1987, pp. 11–12 n; Hanfling 1987*a*, p. 50; Ayer 1990, pp. 191–92; Singer 1996, pp. 72–73; Gewirth 1998, pp. 176–77; Kekes 2000, pp. 22–26). It has not yet been appreciated that, strictly speaking, this objection is a non sequitur, for the purpose theory is a thesis about the conditions for a meaningful life, not about whether these conditions obtain. It says that life would be meaningful if and only if (or just to the extent that) God existed and gave us a purpose that we then fulfilled; it makes no claim about whether life is in fact meaningful. However, the objection can be reformulated. Suppose that we have a substantial degree of justification for thinking that at least some lives are meaningful. If we are more confident that meaningful lives exist than we are

⁸To bring out the logical possibilities, I cull ideas out of texts with a certain liberality. For example, if a certain thinker holds that God and a soul are jointly necessary for a meaningful life, but his text occasions awareness of an argument entailing that God alone is necessary, I might disregard the respect in which he believes that a soul is relevant.

that God exists (or that God is purposive), then we have reason to doubt that life's meaning turns on God's purpose.

Another common objection to the purpose theory is that God would degrade our autonomy in assigning us a purpose, undercutting the possibility that fulfilling it would make a person's existence significant. This argument, initially voiced by Jean-Paul Sartre (1948, p. 45) on the Continent and by Kurt Baier (1957, pp. 118–20) in the United States, continues to be influential: "We pride ourselves on being free and autonomous, capable of heroic achievements when we live in accordance with our ideals. If, however, we are constituents of a cosmos that has been designed to fulfill a purpose, our status does not differ greatly from that of a tool or instrument fashioned with a predetermined end in mind" (Singer 1996, p. 29; see also Murphy 1982, pp. 14–15; Kurtz 2000, pp. 17–19). On behalf of the purpose theory, some maintain that our autonomy would not be compromised since we would have the choice of whether to fulfill God's purpose (Moreland 1987, p. 129; Jacqueline 2001, pp. 20–21) or since God's purpose would be for us to pursue our own purposes (Davis 1986, pp. 155–56). Others reply that, since our own broad intention is to do what's good and since God's purpose would in fact be good, God's will would sufficiently accord with our own (Levine 1988, pp. 27–28). In addition, some point out that God could be conceived as assigning us the purpose with a polite divine request, rather than a coercive divine command (Metz 2000, pp. 297–302). Another response is that even if God did assign us the purpose in a manipulative or condescending way, it would not be disrespectful since God is a higher being than we are (Hanfling 1987*a*, pp. 45–46). And still another reply is that meaning could come from fulfilling God's purpose, despite any degradation of autonomy involved (Walker 1989). Critics have yet to consider whether these responses work.

In addition to the worry that it would be degrading for God to assign us a purpose, critics charge that the content of God's purpose could also be degrading or otherwise undesirable. Specifically, there is a substantial amount of concern in the literature that God's purpose for us could be to serve as food or entertainment for intergalactic travelers (Nozick 1981, pp. 586–87; Murphy 1982, p. 14; Garner 1989, p. 6; Ellin 1995, pp. 319–20; Sharpe 1999, p. 15; see also Nielsen 1981, pp. 184–87; Flanagan 1996, pp. 8–9; Kekes 2000, p. 25). Those willing to bite the bullet by maintaining that such a purpose would make life meaningful if it were indeed God's do so at the risk of cracked teeth. Most are instead inclined to buttress the purpose theory by adding the condition that God's purpose must be noble or exalting. However, critics then suggest that it would be the nobility or exaltation of the purpose that would enhance one's significance, not the fact that the purpose is God's. At this point, the burden is on the purpose theorist to explain why we should think that it is God's

purpose that makes life meaningful (as opposed to something else about God) and why the purpose must be God's (as opposed to one that merely has the proper content).

Purpose theorists have suggested four major ways to answer these pressing questions. First, many respond by appealing to divine command theories of morality according to which moral reasons for action are constituted by whatever fulfills God's purpose (Davis 1987, pp. 296, 304–5; Moreland 1987, pp. 124–29; Craig 2000, pp. 44, 48–49, 54–55). Such a response is, of course, plagued by some notorious problems.

Second, others maintain that God's purpose is key because of the grace or deserved reward that God would bestow on those who fulfill it (Davis 1987, pp. 290–91, 295–96, 300–302; Craig 2000, pp. 49–50). However, there are formidable objections to this proposal. First, it appears that it would be the happiness or its apportionment to virtue that constitutes life's meaning, for which the fulfillment of God's purpose would be merely instrumental (Jacquette 2001, pp. 22–23). Second, since a Karmic, impersonal force could distribute happiness or apportion it to virtue, this account cannot even show that God's existence is instrumentally necessary for meaning in life.

A third view is that God's purpose is what counts since it would prevent our lives from being contingent (Craig 2000, pp. 45–46, 50–51). The ideas associated with talk of 'contingency' need to be sorted out, as theorists use the term in a variety of ways (see, e.g., Gordon 1983, pp. 238–41; Haber 1997; Jacquette 2001, pp. 10–12). Assuming for now that a contingent existence is one that was not created for a reason, could have been lived differently, or proceeds in an unpredictable manner, then it would seem that good family planning, a deterministic physical world, and super-duper scientific knowledge, respectively, would be sufficient to avoid contingency. In addition, this rationale fails to show that fulfilling God's purpose is necessary for life to have meaning, since it is the mere condition of planned, determined, or predictable existence that matters.

This latter problem also plagues a fourth rationale, that God's purpose is necessary and sufficient for the universe to constitute an intelligible aesthetic object (Gordon 1983, pp. 241–46). Just as sounds constitute a piece of music only if they are the product of an agent's intentional activity, so on this rationale the world would be imbued with meaningfulness only if it were likewise created. But if one's life is meaningful just insofar as one's environment has meaning in the way that aesthetic objects do, then freely doing something to realize God's purpose seems to be unnecessary.

Elsewhere I contend that it is no accident that it has been so difficult to find a rationale that would explain why fulfilling God's purpose constitutes the meaning of life (Metz 2000, pp. 304–11). I argue that the

most plausible motivation for God-centered theories in general is in tension with the purpose theory, the most influential instance. I point out that the best explanation of why God could be the sole source of life's meaning must appeal to features that are utterly unique to God. The more God's proposed meaning-conferring features are like properties we have, the more reason we have to think that a relationship with our fellow humans would be sufficient for meaning in life. So, I suggest that the most promising account of why a relationship with God alone could make a life significant is that significance comes from orienting one's life toward a being with perfections such as atemporality, simplicity, and immutability, qualities that humans cannot manifest. And since these qualities are widely taken to be logically incompatible with purposiveness, God is unlikely to be a purposive agent if he alone could confer meaning on our lives.

One way the purpose theorist could respond to this objection would be to argue that atemporal, simple, and immutable purposiveness is possible, a task that will be taken up by friends of Kant and Aquinas. Another response would be to question whether qualities such as atemporality are what best explain why God alone could confer meaning on our lives. One alternative explanation is that it is God's being the creator of the universe in virtue of which God has the unique ability to ground life's meaning.⁸ However, since the universe presumably includes space and time, it would seem that God must be an atemporal being to be the creator of the universe—and the initial objection about the conflict between atemporality and purposive activity resurfaces.

Regardless of the strength of the objections to the purpose theory of life's meaning, it is worth elaborating plausible God-centered alternatives to it. Here are the major contenders in the literature, each of which could use more development. First, Robert Nozick sketches an account that is grounded in God's infinity rather than God's intentionality. Nozick begins with the idea that any meaningful element of a life is a matter of a relationship with something that is already meaningful. For example, an act may be meaningful for actively promoting the cause of justice, but for justice to confer meaning on a life, it must already be meaningful and have obtained its meaning from something else that has meaning. "About any given thing, however wide, it seems we can stand back and ask what its meaning is. To find a meaning for it, then, we seem driven to find a link with yet another thing beyond its boundaries. And so a regress is launched. To stop this regress, we seem to need . . . something which is unlimited, from which we cannot step back, even in imagination, to wonder what its meaning is" (Nozick 1989, p. 167, see also 1981, pp. 594–608). The utterly all-encompassing thing

⁹Philip Quinn suggested this to me in correspondence.

that is the unconditioned condition for all other meaningful conditions is, of course, God.

Charles Hartshorne (1984) has proposed a God-centered theory that appeals to God's love for all creatures (see also Runzo 2000). For Hartshorne, love involves making another's experience one's own, that is, paying attention to her life, remembering it, and rejoicing when it goes well. According to Hartshorne, God is the key to a meaningful life, not because of a role we play in God's plan, but because "our welfare is appreciated and immortalized in God, along with the welfare of all those we care about" (1984, p. 160). The meaning of our lives, on this view, consists in our experiences being assimilated into an everlasting unity with those of others, something possible only in God's eternal recollection of our existence.

A third God-centered theory that needs more investigation is a perfectionist account according to which a life is more meaningful, the more it is positively oriented toward the highest possible nature. Such contouring could be a matter of, say, helping to constitute the temporal life of a perfect being (Hartshorne 1996, pp. 16–18; Smith 2000, pp. 255–59) or loving it (Morris 1992, chap. 11). It could also be a matter of worshipping "the being than which none greater can be conceived" in this life or communing with it in an afterlife.

So far, I have addressed theories maintaining that God is the key to a meaningful life, playing down the role that a soul might have. Although there are more pure God-centered theories than there are pure soul-centered ones, it is similarly worth considering what a theory would be like if it held that a certain orientation of one's soul were necessary and sufficient for life's meaning and that a relationship with God were not.

B. Soul-Centered Theories

A soul-centered theory maintains that the meaning of a person's life essentially depends on her soul being in a certain condition. 'Soul' here means an immortal spiritual substance that could be embodied in time or disembodied in an atemporal realm. In this section, I examine pure soul-centered theories, ones that are not tied to any God-centered theory.

The most influential argument for the thesis that a soul is necessary for meaning in life is based on the idea that for a life to be meaningful it must be worth living. The concept of a life worth living is roughly the idea of a life for which there is enough (expected) net value to be worth continuing.⁹ The present argument maintains that a finite life

⁹The concept of what makes a life worth living is distinct from the concept of what makes a life meaningful. A substantial conception of choice-worthiness can be used as a

cannot have enough value in it to be rational to live. A choice-worthy life requires having an infinite effect, and, so the argument goes, a life can make a permanent difference only if it will not end (Craig 2000, p. 42; cf. Morris 1992, pp. 25–29, 197–202). The roots of this “ultimate consequence” argument famously go back to the writings of Leo Tolstoy (e.g., 1905, pp. 13–18).¹⁰

One response to the ultimate consequence rationale is to suggest that the badness of death, which soul-centered theorists accept, entails the goodness and choice-worthiness of a finite life (Ellin 1995, p. 310). However, a fair reply is that the badness of death lies in preventing the good of eternal life, not in ending a good that would have continued had death not come (Levine 1987, pp. 464–65). A more common response is to point to cases where it seems that life can be worth living even if it will make no permanent difference. Many philosophers have the firm intuition that lives contributing to human welfare or excellence are worth living in the absence of any infinite ramifications (e.g., Schmidtz 2001, esp. pp. 174–79). However, those wedded to the ultimate consequence rationale naturally have contrary intuitions about such cases (Craig 2000, p. 42). And they can buttress their position by pointing out that while an action might seem worth doing from a narrow point of view, from a broader perspective it does not (Hanfling 1987*a*, pp. 22–24). The literature needs more reflection on the nature and relevance of standpoints, but let me put off discussion of this issue until the concluding section of this article (when I take up Thomas Nagel’s work on nihilism).

Some have bypassed the thorny issue of standpoints and pointed out that the ultimate consequence rationale is invalid (Levine 1987, p. 462). Even if one must make a permanent difference to avoid having a meaningless life, one need not have an immortal nature to have this effect. For example, angels could eternally sing one’s praises.

A similar problem apparently plagues the other major arguments for the soul-centered perspective; even granting their premises, they fail to support the conclusion that having an immortal, spiritual nature is necessary for life to be meaningful. Consider the argument that for people’s lives to be meaningful, ideal justice must be done. The innocent who have been harmed deserve compensation, those who have been good deserve reward, and those who have been bad deserve punishment. Desert is obviously not perfectly meted out in this world, so that if a

premise for a conclusion about life’s meaning (and vice versa). For recent literature on the question of whether life is worth living, see Wollheim 1984, pp. 244–48; Baier 1988, 1997, pp. 67–69; McDermott 1991.

¹¹There has been some debate about whether Tolstoy in fact held a soul-centered theory, with some saying “no” (Perrett 1985, pp. 236–42) and others responding “yes” (Levine 1987, pp. 463–64; Flew 1999, pp. 18–19).

meaningful life depends on this, an afterlife is necessary for meaning (Davis 1987, pp. 290–91, 295–96, 300–302; Craig 2000, pp. 49–50). However, it does not follow that an eternal afterlife is required (Perrett 1986, p. 220).

An argument for the soul-centered view that may be attributed to Nozick fails for a similar reason. Like Nozick's argument for a God-centered view, this argument appeals to the idea that meaning in life is a matter of transcending limits. "A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one's life. . . . Mortality is a temporal limit and traces are a way of going or seeping beyond that limit. To be puzzled about why death seems to undercut meaning is to fail to see the temporal limit itself as a limit" (Nozick 1981, pp. 582, 595). The problem with this argument is that there are many different limits one could transcend, and the reader is given no reason to believe that the temporal limit is one that must be crossed in order for life to be meaningful. Why not merely transcend the limit of self-interest by loving a spouse, educating others, or promoting justice?

In a forthcoming article (Metz 2003), I seek to resolve the problem that the major arguments for a soul-centered perspective are not even strongly inductive, let alone valid. I reconstruct the above arguments so that they do entail that a soul is at least necessary for life's meaning. However, the reconstructed arguments turn out to provide comparable support for a God-centered perspective. Pure soul-centered theorists clearly need to think hard about the fundamental motivations for their view. In addition, they need to address some objections facing a soul-centered theory, pure or impure.

One common objection is that if a finite life would not be meaningful, then neither would an infinite life. The claim, often ascribed to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1961, p. 149), is that there is nothing about the bare fact of more time that could make life meaningful (Griffin 1981, p. 61; Perrett 1985, p. 237; Solomon 1986, p. 241; Levine 1987, p. 458; Singer 1996, pp. 134–35; Schmidtz 2001, p. 175). The claim is probably true but is irrelevant. No soul-centered theorist maintains that mere extension is sufficient for life's meaning. Some of them instead hold that an infinite amount of time is a necessary condition (either contributory or instrumental) of other states that constitute a meaningful life. For example, immortality might be deemed necessary for obtaining perfect justice or having an ultimate consequence. Furthermore, other soul-centered theorists believe that the relevant form of immortality requires transcending extension altogether in an atemporal realm.

A better argument against soul-centered theories is one that Bernard Williams (1973) spelled out with care some time ago. Contem-

porary theorists continue to defend Williams's claim that an immortal life would be boring and hence meaningless (Murphy 1982, p. 14; Perrett 1986, pp. 223–24; Ellin 1995, pp. 311–12; Kurtz 2000, p. 18). Roy Perrett (1986) has argued that key responses to the boredom problem resolve it at the high cost of losing one's identity. For example, one might respond that a reincarnated immortal life, that is, one that included forgetting large portions of the past, would not get boring. However, Perrett suggests that continuity of soul here would not be sufficient to maintain a person's identity through reincarnation, that the loss of memory would constitute a loss of oneself (1986, pp. 224–27). One might also respond that immortality could take an atemporal form; presumably the concern about boredom arises only in the temporal world in which remembrance is possible. But Perrett also maintains that entering an atemporal realm would in effect amount to suicide (1986, pp. 231–32). Since we are essentially beings who reflect and act, events that take time, any entity that continues in an atemporal realm would not be us.

A different kind of response to the boredom problem comes from John Martin Fischer (1994), who draws a distinction between repeatable and nonrepeatable pleasures. Repeatable pleasures are those that we have some desire to experience again, at least after a certain amount of time has passed and we have undergone other experiences. Fischer argues that, given the existence of repeatable pleasures, we could find immortality fulfilling. Many of the pleasures Fischer points to are physical ones such as the taste of food, but, assuming that the soul could remain embodied, this is not a problem for soul-centered theory. A deeper worry is that forever is a very long time and that repeatable pleasures might not be able to repeat that long.

Perhaps what needs to be questioned is the idea that boredom undercuts meaning in life, something few have done. Some theorists view boredom of any degree to be incompatible with life's meaning (so that, necessarily, the more bored one is, the less meaningful one's life). But a more plausible view might be that boredom prevents a meaningful life only to the extent that it makes us incapable of constructive action. Then the question would be whether immortality would bore us to such a degree that we just stay in bed in the morning (whether it would bore us to death, so to speak).

Another argument against soul-centered theories comes from Richard Wollheim (1984, pp. 265–67), who argues that immortality would upset the value of our choices. To do well in a finite life, a person must figure out what she wants deep down and then ascertain which actions will maximize her (expected) desire satisfaction within a limited time-frame. In contrast, to do well in an infinite life, Wollheim suggests that a person would not have to choose which actions to perform on the basis

of introspection but, instead, only when to do them in light of external circumstances. "Weather reports would gain an immense importance in our lives" (1984, p. 266), which would make our lives absurd. Now, this argument does not strictly speaking tell against any soul-centered theory, for it is the belief in immortality and not immortality itself that is the potential culprit. Even so, it would be interesting to consider whether Wollheim's claims are true of people who know they will never die.

One way around many of the problems facing a soul-centered perspective would be to weaken it to say that a certain kind of afterlife, but not an eternal life, is necessary and sufficient for a meaningful life. The arguments for a soul-centered view would much more easily support this less extreme position, and the negative concerns about immortality could be neatly avoided. However, if one is keen to retain immortality as an essential ingredient in a meaningful life, then one might do well to drop a pure version of the soul-centered theory and instead to conjoin it with a God-centered theory. A promising explanation of why meaning in life requires having an immortal, spiritual substance is that life's meaning comes from uniting with God, something not possible in the physical world. Indeed, the idea that the meaning of life consists in, say, merging with God or enjoying the beatific vision is particularly influential among supernaturalists (e.g., Morris 1992, chap. 11; Quinn 2000, pp. 59–60).

In sum, I suspect that if one finds a soul-centered theory attractive, one should also be moved to hold a God-centered theory. It would be worthwhile to determine whether this hunch pans out. It would also be revealing to consider whether the converse is likewise plausible, that is, whether a pure God-centered theory is not as well motivated as one conjoined with a soul-centered theory.

III. NATURALISM

In this section, I critically explore contemporary naturalist accounts of what makes a life meaningful. Such theories maintain that life can be meaningful even if there is neither God nor a soul and that certain ways of living in a purely physical world can be sufficient for meaning in life. There is a fair amount of agreement among theorists on broad taxonomic issues here. Specifically, it is standard to draw a distinction between subjective and objective naturalist theories. I explore subjectivism first.

A. Subjectivism

A subjective theory maintains that what makes a life meaningful depends on the subject (where this subject need not be a spiritual substance). More specifically, it is the view that whether a life is meaningful essentially is a function of whether it is (or its parts are) the object of some

proattitude or other. An objectivist can grant that a certain positive mental orientation helps to constitute life's meaning; subjectivism's defining point is that such a disposition is sufficient for meaning in life.

Subjectivists differ in the first instance with respect to which mental capacities constitute the meaning in life. Some contend that feelings are key, so that life's meaning consists in being satisfied with one's choices or absorbed by one's activities (Ayer 1990, pp. 189–96; Martin 1993, pp. 593–95). Others hold that life's meaning is a function of inclinations, for example, desiring something and getting it (Griffin 1981, esp. pp. 55–58) or obtaining what one would favor from a certain standpoint (Darwall 1983, pp. 164–66). Still others believe that choices are essential to life's meaning, namely, adopting purposes and acting to realize them (Nielsen 1981; Smart 1999, p. 16). Finally, there are those who maintain that meaningful aspects of a life turn on beliefs, say, achieving what one judges to be important (Garner 1989, p. 12). As this last example indicates, combinations of these elements are to be expected. One carefully articulated view that combines several subjective conditions is that of Harry Frankfurt (1982), who maintains that one's life is significant if one loves something.

Subjectivists have not much debated the issue of which mental states do the work. Invariably, subjectivists have been concerned merely to articulate a position and weigh it against supernaturalism or objectivism. They have not systematically addressed the issue of whether it is affection, conation, volition, cognition, or some combination that fundamentally matters, sometimes unwittingly shifting between capacities. Subjectivists need to consider in depth whether and why some capacities do more work than others. Setting aside disputes internal to subjectivism, I now address major arguments for and against subjectivism as such.

The subjective view was popular for much of the twentieth century. Theorists with quite different philosophical commitments, in particular pragmatists (James 1900), logical positivists (Ayer 1947), existentialists (Barnes 1967), and Humeans (Williams 1976), found common cause in a subjective account of life's meaning. However, as many of these philosophical sources have dried up, there is much less of a confluence toward subjectivism these days.

Metaethical considerations are important but often implicit reasons why theorists continue to find subjectivism plausible. Suppose traditional concerns about divine command theories have led one to reject the possibility that value could be grounded in God. And now suppose that one also finds queer the idea that nature independently of us could be a source of value. What else is left? If one thinks that some lives are meaningful, one will be driven to think that life's meaning must be constructed by us, that is, must be a function of the responses of valuers.

The rich debate on moral realism will of course be relevant to evaluating this line of argument.

On the normative level, the central motivation for subjectivism comes from the idea that it best explains a cluster of commonsensical intuitions about life's meaning. Many believe that several different types of meaningful lives are possible, that a life full of boredom would be meaningless, and that a meaningful aspect of a life involves something's being meaningful *to* someone. Now, supposing these judgments are correct, which theory best accounts for them? Subjectivism is surely a plausible candidate.

One way to question this argument is of course to deny the intuitions. Perhaps boredom as such does not detract from life's meaning, and maybe it is not always the case that significant aspects of a life are meaningful to someone. Another response is to grant the intuitions and maintain that there is a version of objectivism that can account for them at least as well as subjectivism. Relevant here is the view captured so well by Susan Wolf's slogan: "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (1997*a*, p. 211). This popular theory holds that a meaningful life is one in which certain mental capacities are positively engaged with intrinsically valuable projects, where the intrinsic value is not entirely constructed out of the mental capacities. By virtue of making certain mental capacities necessary (but not sufficient) for a meaningful life, this objective theory accommodates the intuitions well.

Another major argument for subjectivism has been best articulated by Charles Taylor (1992; see also Frankfurt 1982). Taylor contends that the appeal of authenticity is a driving force behind subjectivism. He suggests that what leads people to think that meaning in life is utterly constructed by the subject is the idea that life's meaning consists in being true to oneself.

Taylor ultimately rejects this argument, for an interesting reason. He contends that the idea of being true to oneself is incoherent unless one accepts that the meaning of life is at least partially independent of one's subjective responses (Taylor 1992, esp. chap. 4; see also Darwall 1983, pp. 164–66; Wiggins 1988, esp. pp. 135–41). "Which issues are significant, *I* do not determine. If I did, no issue would be significant" (Taylor 1992, p. 39). Why? Because the very idea of significance includes not being arbitrary. A less bold objection would be to point out that subjectivism accounts for the ideal of authenticity no better than does the objective theory mentioned above, the view that life's meaning turns on the engagement of an individual's mental capacities with mind-independent intrinsic value. Even if the idea that being true to oneself grounds life's meaning does not logically imply that one must identify with an objectively worthwhile project, being true to oneself could well

be a substantive matter of so identifying (Railton 1984, pp. 164–71; Flanagan 1996, chap. 1).

The most important argument against subjectivism is that it has counterintuitive implications about which lives count as meaningful. Ironically, one of the theorists most known for advocating subjectivism has made this objection. Richard Taylor (1970, chap. 18) famously once defended subjectivism by constructing a series of thought experiments about Sisyphus, the mythic figure condemned by the gods to push a rock up a hill forever. Taylor initially concluded that Sisyphus's life would be meaningful so long as the gods implanted in him an intense desire to roll the stone. Now Taylor objects to this view in two ways (1981, pp. 6–8, 19–24; 1987, pp. 679–82; 1999, p. 14). First, Taylor argues that such a life would not be meaningful because of the way that the aim originated (see also Kekes 1986, pp. 80–84). Since Sisyphus's goal is the product of manipulation, it is not truly his, and hence its satisfaction confers no meaning on his life.

One could of course amend subjectivism to require that the relevant mental attitudes be autonomously formulated. However, Taylor's second objection would still apply. Even supposing Sisyphus of his own accord wanted to spend his life rolling a stone, it is simply absurd to think that such a life would be meaningful. Critics point out that, so long as the relevant mental states obtain, subjectivism oddly entails that a person's existence could become significant by merely staying alive (Kekes 1986, p. 81), harming others (Dahl 1987, p. 12), gearing her life around a certain color (Morris 1992, p. 58), having 3,732 hairs on her head (Taylor 1992, p. 36), collecting bottle tops (Singer 1996, p. 113), or eating ice cream (Wolf 1997*b*, p. 304).

Is there any way for subjectivism to avoid such implications? Perhaps the most promising strategy is to invoke Stephen Darwall's intersubjective theory (1983, esp. pp. 164–66). According to Darwall, a state of affairs confers meaning on a life roughly insofar as all human agents would prefer it to obtain, when reflecting on it from an impersonal standpoint. Reflecting on a state of affairs from an impersonal standpoint is to consider its properties dispassionately while abstracting from the way in which they would bear on one's own life. This theory is subjectivist in that preference is ultimately doing the work of determining what makes a life meaningful. However, it differs from typical subjective theories in that everyone must have the same preference, and the preference cannot be formed in light of the way that a state of affairs would affect anyone in particular. These alterations promise to rescue subjectivism, for presumably not all human agents would prefer collecting bottle tops, when they coolly and calmly consider the nature of this activity apart from its bearing on their particular lives.

Darwall's intersubjective account has not been taken up in the

literature. One problem with it that needs to be addressed is that it might have a different sort of counterintuitive ramification, namely, that no one's life is meaningful. The worry is that there is in fact no state of affairs that everyone would prefer when reflecting on it from an impersonal standpoint. Darwall's theory can entail that some lives are meaningful only if there is, dubiously, a striking uniformity in the motivational makeup of human beings. All agents must be moved not only by the same things but also to the same degree (assuming meaning in life comes in degrees). The most straightforward way for Darwall to deal with this problem would be to focus on a community of agents smaller than the class of all human persons. However, since idiosyncratic communities of bottle-top collectors are possible, the original objection to subjectivism presumably reemerges. Subjectivism would become a bigger player in today's field if it could be shown that Darwall's theory (or some other Kantian account) entails that some lives are meaningful but not in virtue of intuitively trivial conditions such as pushing a rock or collecting bottle tops.

B. Objectivism

Objectivism is attractive to those who deny that rolling a stone could confer meaning on a life, even supposing it is enjoyed, wanted, or chosen. An objective theory maintains that certain features of our natural lives can make them meaningful, but not merely in virtue of any positive mental orientation.

Most of those currently writing on the meaning of life are objectivists of some kind. As I bring out below, there are several distinguishable views in the literature, most of which tend to be either too vague or too narrow. That is, either one has trouble applying the objective theories because they are too imprecise, or one can apply them, but there are conditions that intuitively make a life meaningful that the theories fail to accommodate.

Let us first consider the objective theory encountered earlier in this section, the view that a meaningful life consists of certain mental capacities being attuned to mind-independent values. This is the most widely held objective view (Bennett 1984; Perrett 1985, pp. 243–44; Kekes 1986, 2000; Wiggins 1988; Graham 1990, pp. 181–84; Wolf 1997*a*, 1997*b*, 1997*c*; Dworkin 2000, chap. 6; Kurtz 2000, p. 56; Raz 2001, chap. 1; Schmidtz 2001, pp. 176–77, 182–83). Wolf nicely sums up the “subjective attraction to objective attractiveness” conception:

[A] meaningful life must satisfy two criteria, suitably linked. First, there must be active engagement, and second, it must be engagement in (or with) projects of worth. A life is meaningless if it lacks active engagement with anything. A person who is bored or alien-

ated from most of what she spends her life doing is one whose life can be said to lack meaning. Note that she may in fact be performing functions of worth. . . . At the same time, someone who *is* actively engaged may also live a meaningless life, if the objects of her involvement are utterly worthless. (1997*a*, p. 211)

Different versions of this theory have competing conceptions of what active engagement amounts to and of which projects are worthwhile.

Against this theory, one can reasonably deny that meaning in life always involves a person being stimulated by what she is doing. Suppose a medical researcher discovers a cure for cancer after long years of work done without anticipation or enjoyment. Even if the researcher has been bored by her work, it seems plausible to suggest that it would confer some meaning on her life. Perhaps such a case shows that active engagement can enhance life's meaning, without being necessary for it. This is another place where the way that boredom affects life's meaningfulness could use careful consideration.

It is natural to ask of the present theory what makes a project "worthwhile," "objectively attractive," or "intrinsically valuable." Unfortunately, no advocate of the theory has articulated a precise answer. Some proponents have not done so because they believe that there is a wide plurality of answers that cannot be reduced to a single principle or handful of them (Kekes 2000; Schmidtz 2001; cf. Wolf 1997*c*, pp. 12–13). However, to have substantial justification for believing that there is no underlying unity among the many objectively valuable projects, one must have searched diligently and come up empty-handed. Given how nascent the field is, the search has arguably not gone on long enough. The rest of the discussion in this section can be viewed as contributing to this search, for the objective theories of life's meaning that remain to be considered could be characterized as general, unified accounts of which projects are objectively attractive.

Consider, first, Richard Taylor's creativity theory, according to which a life is meaningful just insofar as it is creative (1981, 1987, 1999). Returning to the Sisyphus thought experiment, Taylor argues that the best explanation of the lack of meaning in Sisyphus's life is that his life is full of repetition and empty of novelty. Sisyphus's life is insignificant because he makes nothing beautiful and original. Taylor celebrates poetry, painting, and musical composition, and he would, if asked, presumably praise intellectual discovery as well (consider the aesthetic qualities often ascribed to theories).

Although few objectivists deny that the exercise of one's creative powers makes a person's existence significant, many question Taylor's view that it is the only condition that does. For example, it is common to hold that moral dispositions and deeds, in particular feeling com-

passion and acting beneficently, are sufficient conditions for making life meaningful (e.g., Dahl 1987, pp. 5–10, 13–19; Rescher 1990, pp. 161–65; Teichman 1993, pp. 159–60; Baier 1997, pp. 52–53, 57–58).

Some theorists have gone a step farther and contended that some kind of morality is also necessary for meaning in life. There are two versions of this view that are worth distinguishing. First, the metaethical version of the morality theory maintains that life would be meaningless if there were no absolute moral standards, universal norms that obtain independently of variable mental states (Murphy 1982, pp. 12–17; Tännsjö 1988, pp. 258–60; Jacques 2001, pp. 12–16; cf. Wiggins 1988). Objectors maintain that conforming to a relativist morality is sufficient for life's meaning (Margolis 1990) or that making others well-off is sufficient, regardless of whether there are invariant moral norms prescribing such action (Ellin 1995, p. 327).

The second, normative version maintains that the more a life is moral, the more a life is meaningful. Consequentialists Peter Railton (1984, pp. 164–71), Peter Singer (1993, pp. 325–34; 1995, pp. 218–33), and Irving Singer (1996, chap. 4) suggest that a life is meaningful only if and to the extent that it promotes well-being or other intrinsic goods. In his examination of Kant's doctrine of the highest good, Thomas Pogge (1997, esp. pp. 378–82) seems to endorse the view that life's meaning is solely a function of realizing just institutions, right actions, and good dispositions. And from the Aristotelian tradition, E. J. Bond (1983, pp. 119–22) can be read as saying that a meaningful life crucially turns on realizing moral virtues. Although the normative version of the morality theory might implicitly rely on certain metaethical theses (in particular the denial of moral nihilism), it is more concerned that people act in a particular way than that this action fall under the heading "moral" and be prescribed by norms with a universal validity.

In response to this view, some maintain that lives can be meaningful even though any plausible moral theory would entail that they are immoral. Most strongly, John Kekes (2000, p. 30) holds that lives can be meaningful in virtue of their immorality, so that Hitler's life was meaningful precisely because he was responsible for mass murder. Even more believe the weaker claim that lives can be meaningful in spite of their immorality or lack of morality. Many think that a life can be significant for a variety of nonmoral projects, "which may be athletic, aesthetic, horticultural, erotic, or scholarly, or may involve collecting, learning languages, travel, connoisseurship, the invention of ingenious gadgets" (Kekes 2000, p. 30). Some may seek to "moralize" these activities, deeming them to be significant in virtue of, say, contributing to human welfare, but such attempts strike many as a stretch.

Let us suppose that morality confers meaning on a life and that creativity also does so (but not because it supervenes on morality). It

would be interesting if there were a theory that could explain why these two elements, among others, make a life meaningful. The remaining objective theories that I explore here promise to fit the bill.

Although sympathetic to supernaturalism, Nozick offers an influential and attractive naturalist theory (1981, chap. 6; 1989, chaps. 15–16). Recall that Nozick understands meaning in life to be a matter of transcending limits or making connections. Nozick must of course specify which limits are relevant and how to cross them, for presumably driving over the New Jersey state line does not count. At the core, the relevant limits are those which keep one from a valuable organic unity (or something already meaningful) that is located beyond one's person. And transcending such limits in the right way for Nozick involves some positive relationship with what lies beyond them, for example, producing, protecting, or honoring. This theory provides a plausible basis for thinking that both creativity and morality make a life meaningful. Helping another person is a matter of supporting a highly valuable being who incorporates diverse experiences into a unitary self. And making artworks consists of producing valuable objects that bring elements of form, color, symbol, and technique together into a coherent whole.

However, there are some ways that meaning can intuitively be conferred on a life that Nozick's theory does not capture as it stands. For example, many judge certain types of knowledge to make life meaningful. Stephen Hawking's life is presumably significant for his discoveries in astrophysics. Hawking's knowledge can be viewed as connecting with something external to his person, but black holes, singularities, and the direction of time hardly seem to be valuable organic unities. Nozick might respond that Hawking is connecting with a complex theory, a set of principles that unifies diverse data about the physical world (cf. Nozick 1981, pp. 619–27). One might doubt, however, that this best explains what makes knowledge meaningful, for then a theory about anything at all would confer meaning on a life.

A second source of counterexamples to Nozick's theory is excellences that are internal to a person. For example, it is reasonable to think that meaning in life could come from exhibiting integrity, standing up for what one reflectively believes to be right. The view that life's meaning is solely "a transcending of the limits of your own value, a transcending of your own limited value" (1981, p. 610) on the face of it fails to accommodate such a case.

In one place Nozick (1989, p. 168) suggests broadening the kinds of things one can relate to in order to obtain meaning in one's life. Perhaps reality and virtue can also make one's life significant when one connects with them in certain ways. The problem with this suggestion is that talk of "transcendence" and "connection" now becomes murky. Transcendence can be easily understood when dealing with other people

or artworks, objects that are spatio-temporally external to an embodied individual. But what does it mean to “transcend limits” when the item beyond the limits is a state internal to a person? The idea of transcendence might still be apt, but it must be made clear what a person is going beyond, something Nozick does not do.

Some of Alan Gewirth’s ideas arguably fill in what is missing in Nozick’s account (Gewirth 1998, pp. 174–89; see also Metz 1998, 2002). For Gewirth, a meaningful life is one that exceptionally employs reason. On this view, what a meaningful life goes beyond is the extent to which human beings characteristically realize their rational nature. Again, self-transcendence involves going beyond one’s animal self to a greater degree than people typically do. Gewirth’s Kantian version of the transcendence rationale accommodates the counterexamples to Nozick’s version. Certain types of knowledge overcome “the limitations set by the restrictive purview of ordinary sense experience” (Gewirth 1998, p. 178), while exhibiting integrity in the face of great temptation to do otherwise is to manifest an unusual strength of will. And since creating artworks and going beyond the call of duty are both ways of exercising one’s rational faculties to a superior degree, Gewirth’s theory can also underwrite the intuition that these activities confer meaning on a life.

Gewirth’s Kantian theory seems to be the most promising of the extant contenders. However, that does not mean that this theory is free of problems. There are at least two major kinds of counterexamples to consider. First, this theory does not account for the way that the overall pattern of a life could help to constitute its meaning. Many people believe that a life with unity or progression is more meaningful than one with fragmentation or repetitiveness (e.g., Taylor 1981, 1987; cf. Hurka 1993, pp. 84–97, 121–23; Brännmark 2001). For example, suppose that on a certain day one exercised one’s rational capacities in an outstanding manner and that, from then on, one continually relived this day.¹¹ The repetitive element in this life plausibly detracts from its meaning, but Gewirth’s Kantian theory neither entails that nor explains why this is so.

A second sort of problem with this account concerns certain ways that a life can passively obtain meaning. For example, one might think that the life of a person who has been good would be more meaningful if she received reward for it (and perhaps if others who have been wicked received punishment). Gewirth’s Kantian theory cannot account for the intuition that life’s meaning might be constituted by the apportioning of happiness to virtue, and not merely by having acted so as to be worthy of happiness. Consider, too, the view that encountering wild and natural objects on occasion would make one’s life more meaningful than living

¹²See the movie *Groundhog Day* once Bill Murray’s character has become virtuous.

only in a prefabricated and artificial environment (Schmidtz 2001, p. 183). Again, since there is no exercise of reason in this case, the present theory cannot accommodate it.

Can a new objective theory be developed that accounts for all firm intuitions about what makes a life meaningful? Committed pluralists will say “no,” but at this early stage of analytic inquiry, I believe that it would do the field well to seek to answer this question in a systematic way.

IV. THE MEANING OF “MEANING”

What are the theories discussed in the previous two sections all addressing? What makes them accounts of life’s meaning as opposed to something else such as right action or well-being? In short, what is the central sense associated with philosophical statements about the meaning of life? In this section, I review contemporary answers to these abstract linguistic and conceptual questions.

It is worth remembering that it used to be common to believe that statements about life’s meaning are not well-formed propositions. There were two influential arguments for the view that talk about the meaning of life lacks sense (see Ellin 1995, pp. 322–24), both of which are typically rejected these days. One argument is that since to be meaningful is just to be a symbol, and since life cannot be a symbol, life is not the sort of thing that can be meaningful. Although Gewirth (1998, pp. 184–85) aims to show that life can be a kind of symbol, most reject this argument since there is no reason to believe that all senses associated with the term ‘meaningful’ include the property of being symbolic (e.g., Smart 1999). After all, synonyms of ‘meaningful life’ include phrases such as ‘significant existence’ and ‘life that matters’, which do not inherently denote something symbolic.

The second deflationary argument appeals to a logical positivist philosophy of language. If a statement expresses a proposition only if it can be demonstrable to all rational inquirers (perhaps on the basis of sense-experience), then statements about the meaning of life probably do not express propositions. In response, some philosophers seek to reinterpret statements about life’s meaning so that they satisfy the logicist and verificationist (and sometimes empiricist) criteria of cognitive sense. For example, saying that someone’s life is meaningful is, Rudolf Wöhlgenant (1981) suggests, just a matter of saying that a person feels satisfied upon achieving her aims. Although this analysis probably satisfies the criteria, the trouble is that it is much too narrow. It counterintuitively implies that it would be logically contradictory to say that a person’s life could be meaningful despite feeling dissatisfied with her achievements. Rather than seek to meet any positivist criteria for cognitive sense, most philosophers now reject them.

Contemporary theorists tend to believe that statements about life's meaning express something that can be true or false, or at least that it is appropriate to act as though they do. Inquiry has focused on determining which proposition most people are expressing when they say that an individual's life has meaning (or lacks it). Many believe that the content of this proposition has to do with the purposes that a person ought to pursue (Nielsen 1981, pp. 181–94; Garner 1989, pp. 1–2, 5, 12; Hartshorne 1996, pp. 10–11). Specifically, perhaps to say that an individual's life is meaningful is just to say that she has done well at achieving the goals that people should strive to achieve. On this analysis, God-centered theories, soul-centered theories, subjective theories, and objective theories are all different accounts of the ends that people should seek to realize.

In a recent attempt to analyze the concept of life's meaning (Metz 2001), I question the purpose analysis (pp. 140–45). First, I note that the purpose analysis is too narrow for excluding the logical possibility of meaning in life being bestowed rather than chosen. For example, since having certain ancestors, being one of God's chosen people, and realizing a condition in which happiness is proportionate to virtue are not things that we can bring about, the purpose analysis oddly implies that it would be logically contradictory to say that such conditions are possible candidates for a meaningful life. Second, I point out that the purpose analysis is too broad in that it fails to differentiate the meaning of life from other normative categories. For instance, right action no less than life's meaning involves pursuing choice-worthy ends.

I am critical not just of the purpose analysis but of any attempt to specify necessary and sufficient conditions for a statement to be about the meaning of life. I examine several different analyses of the concept of life's meaning and argue that none captures all and only the conceptions that are historically prominent. If I am correct that there is no single idea that unifies all the diverse views that have been deemed to be about the meaning of life, then what are such theories about? How can life's meaning be distinguished from welfare and morality? And how can people avoid talking past one another when they seek to answer the question of what makes a life meaningful?

I maintain that theories of life's meaning are united in virtue of family resemblances (Metz 2001, pp. 150–51). Claims are about the meaning of life as opposed to something else in that they address members of a group of related ideas. Specifically, I contend that a theory can be identified as one about life's meaning if it answers questions such as these: what should an agent strive for besides obtaining happiness and fulfilling obligations? Which aspects of a human life are worthy of great esteem or admiration? In what respect should a rational being connect with value beyond his animal self? And, from Charles

Taylor (1989, chap. 1), the following could be added: which goods command our awe? How may an individual identify with something incomparably higher? What is worthy of our love and allegiance?

My negative claim is that no one of these six questions captures all historically prominent inquiry into life's meaning, and my positive claim is that all such inquiry is united by addressing at least some of these questions. Even if my negative claim is on firm ground (consider the widely acknowledged difficulty of finding necessary and sufficient conditions in other philosophical domains), I do not thoroughly defend the positive thesis, and it could use some critical evaluation. Against the positive thesis, one might hold that the concept of the meaning of life is a primitive notion that cannot be articulated in any substantial way. However, the idea of life's meaning does not seem unanalyzable in the way that the ideas of having a reason for action or tasting salty are; the questions that I and Taylor associate with the question of life's meaning are more revealing than mere synonyms. One might also seek to reduce the meaning of life to a more familiar normative category such as well-being. But, again, the six questions above are intensionally distinct from the questions of what is good for a person, what is to a person's benefit, or what makes a person happy. And we need to keep separate the categories of life's meaning and well-being in order to make routine judgments such as the following: life in the experience machine would promote a person's happiness but would be meaningless, and donating a kidney to a family member would be meaningful but bad for the donor.

The most promising alternative to my family resemblance approach to finding unity among the variegated theories of life's meaning would, I think, involve some attempt to pare them down. There are two ways this might be done. First, suppose one weeded out theories that most people deem to be false on substantive grounds. For example, few people today hold the view that a person's life could be meaningful utterly apart from any choices that she makes. Is there a single idea that unifies the domain of theories excluding this and other views that are particularly implausible?

Second, one might try to divide up normative categories in a more fine-grained manner. For example, suppose there is a category of perfection, the good of developing certain aspects of one's nature (Hurka 1993, pt. 1). Suppose, too, that there is a category of impact, the good of having an identifiable effect on large regions of space-time (Nozick 1989, chap. 16). Certain theories currently deemed to be about the meaning of life might be more usefully described as theories of perfection or impact. Is there a common denominator among those theories that one cannot judiciously recharacterize as being about something other than life's meaning?

Regardless of the precise identity conditions for statements to be about the meaning of life, there is enough information about such claims to know that philosophers are in a position to have intelligent and productive discussions about them. Or at least rational inquiry into life's meaning is just as possible as is rational inquiry into morality and welfare, a claim that I hope is clear in light of the previous sections of this article.

V. THE VALUE OF MEANING IN LIFE

In this section, I take for granted certain instances of meaningful and meaningless aspects of life and from them raise issues about the value-theoretic structure of life's meaning. Specifically, I presume that supererogatory actions and creativity confer meaning on a life, while harmful actions and destructiveness do not. While the vast majority of theorists accept these intuitive judgments (on different grounds), not all do. Hence, although this section does not examine full-blown theories of what makes a life meaningful, it is more theory-dependent than the issue from the previous section (namely, the concept of life's meaning that is neutral among competing conceptions).

A. *Temporal Location*

To some, meaning in life and well-being differ in that they bring forth contrary judgments about when it is preferable for these conditions to occur in a life-span. To see the issue, consider a thought experiment that Derek Parfit (1984, pp. 165–66) originally concocted. Imagine that you have temporary amnesia. You are told that you could be one of two people. Either you are person A, who had a certain number of units of pain prior to the onset of the amnesia, or you are person B, who will have fewer units of pain than A but in the future. You are asked who you would rather be. Most would prefer to be person A, even though A's pain is larger. Parfit says that this thought experiment shows that there is a "bias toward the future."

Such a bias is also manifested when the thought experiment is applied to pleasure. Would you rather be person A, who experienced some pleasure in the past, or person B, who will have less pleasure than A but in the future? Most would prefer to be person B, even though B's pleasure is smaller.

While there seems to be a bias toward the future with respect to welfare, there seems not to be such a bias with regard to meaning in life (Hurka 1993, pp. 60–61).¹² Would you rather be person A, who

¹²Hurka makes this point in the context of the perfectionist value of realizing one's higher nature, but it also applies to the value of meaning in life (perhaps because it extensionally includes perfection).

painted a masterpiece in the past, or person B who will write a mediocre poem in the future? Most would prefer to be person A, an answer that has an inverse structure to that given in the welfare cases.

It is tempting to infer from these thought experiments that the temporal location of welfare in a life matters in some way that the temporal location of meaningfulness does not. However, such a conclusion would be a bit hasty. It would be useful to consider more variations of the thought experiment. For example, does the bias toward the future emerge only when the welfare is conceived in hedonic terms? And are there some conditions of meaning in a life for which we do have a bias toward the future?

Now, supposing that there is indeed bias toward the future with respect to (hedonic) welfare but no such bias regarding (at least some cases of) meaning in life—why is this? Is it possible to say in virtue of what there is bias in one category but not in the other, or is it just some primitive fact about them? And what exactly are our responses to Parfit's thought experiment tracking? What precisely is "bias toward the future" or the lack thereof? Is the bias a normative-theoretic one or (also) a value-theoretic one? For example, is there just less reason to have certain attitudes toward certain past goods, such as caring about experienced pleasures? If we have less reason to care about certain past goods, is this because their goodness has "worn off" (Perrett 1985, pp. 242–44), so to speak? That is, does the thought experiment suggest that certain past goods are in some sense less valuable than future goods? Answering such questions would illuminate not just the value of life's meaning but also that of other normative categories.

B. Dimension

Both welfare and morality clearly have negative and positive dimensions, but it is a matter of controversy whether meaning in life does. Consider welfare first. There are lives that are, on the whole, happy or satisfying (positive), and there are lives that are, on balance, unhappy or dissatisfying (negative).¹³ Unhappy lives are not merely lives that lack happiness—they are worse! Happiness is well represented with a positive number and unhappiness with a negative.¹⁴ A life with a zero score is not happy, but it is also not unhappy, for a miserable life has a disvalue beyond the mere lack of happiness.

Similar remarks apply to the category of morality. A life full of

¹⁴This discussion focuses on life as a whole as the relevant bearer of welfare, morality, and meaning, although the point applies equally well when the bearer is a part of a life, say, an action or a state.

¹⁵Others have had a different view, e.g., Arthur Schopenhauer holds that happiness is merely an absence of the negative.

permissible, required, and supererogatory actions is a moral life, whereas a life full of wrong actions is an immoral life. An immoral life has a negative dimension beyond the mere lack of moral actions. A score of zero on the morality scale would mean either that one had no opportunity to perform (im)moral actions or that one's moral and immoral actions canceled each other out exactly.

Now, there is equivocal evidence regarding the existence of a negative dimension of meaning in life. On the one hand, common linguistic practices suggest that the category of life's meaning does not have a negative dimension. We speak of 'meaningful' and 'meaningless' lives, where the latter seems to signify merely the lack of a positive dimension. A meaningless life would appear to have a score of zero (or, if we are speaking metaphorically, a very low positive score). Similar remarks apply to 'insignificant', 'unimportant', 'trivial', 'pointless', and 'senseless'; they all seem to denote simply the lack of something, namely, significance, importance, substance, point, and sense, respectively. There is apparently no English word denoting the negative correlate of a meaningful life. Our terminology points to a monopolar scale that has a zero and positive numbers, but no negative numbers.

On the other hand, there seems to be conceptual space for a bipolar scale. Lives that are worthy of great esteem, identify with something greater, and connect with goods worthy of love and allegiance have correlates: lives that are worthy of great shame, identify with something lesser, and connect with bads worthy of hatred and opposition. Even if we do not have single terms for such lives, they might substantively count as disvaluable aspects of meaning in life all the same. Indeed, many are inclined to judge meaningless lives to be downright bad, not merely lacking in goodness. As Thomas Morris suggests, "An utterly absurd, meaningless life is a bad thing. . . . Could anyone maintain with any plausibility that an absurd and meaningless life is a *good* thing? Nor would it seem to be of neutral value" (1992, pp. 49–50; see also Munitz 1993, pp. 89–91). In addition, talk of behavior that "ceteris paribus, reduces the meaning of the agent's life" (Nozick 1981, p. 612) suggests that some actions lacking significance are best represented with a negative number. From this perspective, a term needs to be coined for a negative dimension of life's meaning. Suppose we call the converse of conditions that matter "antimatter."

How can one determine whether or not there is a disvaluable side to life's meaning, namely, whether antimatter exists? First, one could reflect on cases to ascertain whether there is a negative dimension. Consider a life composed of actions such as killing one's spouse for the insurance money and blowing up the Sphinx for fun. Does this life merely lack meaning or does it contain antimatter? Is it more akin to an impoverished life, one that lacks money, or to an unhappy life, one

that contains misery? Another strategy would be to question the evidence elucidated above. For example, is calling a life ‘really meaningless’ a matter of invoking an extant term for a negative dimension of life’s meaning? Or when we say that a meaningless life is bad, might we not be speaking from a perspective other than the meaning of life? Suppose we thought that the best life is one that has substantial shares of meaning, welfare, and morality. Then it would be natural to say that a meaningless life is bad for hindering the best life, without implying that there is a disvaluable side to life’s meaning itself. Further reflection on these questions will be useful for making accurate appraisals of the worth of people’s lives.

C. Ends and Means

Some remarks of David Wiggins suggest a puzzle for the way to understand the value of life’s meaning with respect to the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction. Something is an intrinsic value insofar as it is good for its own sake. In contrast, something is an extrinsic value in that it is good as a means to something else that is valuable. Now, let us suppose, with Wiggins, that helping one’s community to dig a drainage ditch confers some meaning on one’s life. The puzzle is that, while the helpful action is meaningful and hence is intrinsically valuable, the value of that help is clearly extrinsic. “Shall we say here that the man’s helping dig the ditch is instrumental and has the meaning or importance it has for the helper only derivatively? . . . Or shall we say that the ditch-digging is worth while in itself? But it isn’t. It is end-directed” (Wiggins 1988, p. 162). Ditch digging is good as a means to the end of promoting the welfare of one’s neighbors, but, insofar as it is a meaningful action, it is good for its own sake. It is important to see that the puzzle is not easily dissolved by noting that some things, for example, eating a meal, are both good for their own sake and good for what they bring about. The puzzle is that helping seems to be an action that is intrinsically good insofar as it is extrinsically good. Helping apparently differs from eating in this way, for consuming a meal is not intrinsically good because it is extrinsically good. Eating a green curry tofu dish is good for its own sake, not because it helps us to stay alive but rather because it is pleasurable. In contrast, according to Shelly Kagan, “helping is not a case of ‘mere’ instrumental value, but rather a case of intrinsically valuable instrumental value. . . . In helping someone else, my own life has intrinsic value—by virtue of this instrumental fact about me” (1998, p. 288).

Kagan contends that there is ultimately no incoherence or paradox here. He suggests that the puzzle is resolved once we note that something can be good for its own sake in virtue of its relational properties, for example, an object could be intrinsically valuable in part because

of its rarity. Kagan argues that if the relational properties of an object can affect whether it is good for its own sake (or the degree to which it is), then it will be reasonable to expect that extrinsically valuable relational properties can too (1998, pp. 281–88).

There is of course a lot to question about Kagan's claims. One might wonder whether the fact of an object's being good for its own sake can depend on its relational properties. Or one might grant that certain relational properties can affect the intrinsic value of objects but deny that extrinsically valuable relational properties ever can. Since the current topic is the value of life's meaning, let us consider whether it is true that helping, a meaningful action, is intrinsically valuable because of its extrinsic value.

One could plausibly hold that the intrinsic value of helping is a function of something other than the realization of a state of affairs in which someone is better off. Consider this alternative possibility: help is intrinsically valuable just insofar as one fundamentally intends to confer a benefit on someone worthy of it and acts on the justified belief that one's action will likely confer the benefit. Perhaps it is only a good will, and not the good results, in virtue of which helping is intrinsically valuable.

Is the good will account true? The strongest argument for it is probably a thought experiment in which luck prevents one's action from achieving its aim. Suppose, for example, that digging the drainage ditch does not do any good because of an unforeseeable flood. Many think that, because of help's good will elements, the intrinsic value of the ditch digging would still obtain when fortuitous circumstances prevent good outcomes (e.g., Schmidtz 2001, p. 180).

However, it is worth noting that, even if one has Kantian intuitions about this thought experiment, one can still hold that the intrinsic value of help is constituted by its extrinsic value. One can grant that part of help's intrinsic value is independent of the results but deny that the intrinsic value of help in general is independent of them. Specifically, perhaps the moral intrinsic value of help obtains regardless of the results but the intrinsic value of help with respect to meaning in life does not. The ditch digging's intrinsic worth in terms of meaningfulness could increase when it actually benefits the community, although its intrinsic worth in terms of morality might not.

To resolve this issue, it would no doubt be useful to reflect on more than one case. In particular, creativity is another example worth considering. Many are inclined to find creative behavior meaningful and hence intrinsically valuable, but creative behavior is simply rational action that results in intrinsically valuable art objects (or that results in art objects, which in turn produce intrinsically valuable experiences).

To what extent can an analogous good will theory capture the intrinsic value of creativity?

Summing up, Kagan responds to the puzzle by welcoming the idea that the intrinsic value of meaning in life sometimes is constituted by extrinsic value. In contrast, the good will theory denies that the intrinsic value of life's meaning ever does so. I note here a third possible response to the puzzle, namely, to deny that the meaning of life is (always) intrinsically valuable. Specifically, one might hold that the value of help is only extrinsic but that extrinsic value can ground a basic reason for action.

Perhaps the following is a case suggesting that there can be a fundamental reason to promote extrinsic value that is not also intrinsically valuable. Consider a person who faced an untimely death, dying before being able to finish a certain project. If the project were not completed, his activities would be wasted, but suppose his friends are in a position to complete the project on his behalf. Assuming they have reason to finish the project, maybe this is because it would enhance the instrumental value of their friend's activities without thereby improving the intrinsic value of these activities. Likewise, it is worth considering whether there is a basic reason to dig a ditch for the sake of one's neighbors because of the extrinsic value that would accrue to one's life by doing so (without this extrinsic value being intrinsically valuable). We are used to thinking that, if values ground reasons for action, only intrinsic values ground nonderivative reasons. However, further reflection on what makes a life meaningful might instruct us otherwise.

VI. CONCLUSION: QUANTITY AND QUALITY IN THE MEANING OF LIFE

I bring this article to a close by noting the need for discussion about different kinds of meaning in life and by addressing contemporary nihilist views that life has no meaning. To enter into these issues, let us return to the naturalism versus supernaturalism debate.

In Sections II and III, I addressed arguments for and against particular naturalist and supernaturalist theories but not arguments that target naturalism and supernaturalism in general. Now, there is an important problem facing any version of supernaturalism, that many have the firm intuition that meaningful lives are possible in a world utterly lacking supernatural elements. Suppose that neither God nor a soul exists and then reflect on the lives of Gandhi and Einstein. Many thinkers, including supernaturalists (e.g., Quinn 2000, p. 58), have the sense that such lives have some meaning even in the absence of a purely spiritual realm.

Some of course have contrary intuitions, but a more interesting response is to modify the central thesis of supernaturalism. Specifically,

some maintain that while a life can have a limited or superficial kind of meaning in a world without God or a soul, it cannot have an ultimate or deep sort of meaning (Nozick 1981, p. 618; Craig 2000, p. 42). Using this distinction, supernaturalists then seek to turn the tables on the naturalist: the relevant kind of meaningful life is not possible in a world lacking a purely spiritual realm.

This distinction among different kinds of significance needs to be critically addressed. Are there in fact different types of meaning possible in a life? Does speaking of different “types” or “kinds” of life’s meaning say anything more than that a life unrelated to a spiritual order has some meaning but not enough to be meaningful on balance? In short, is a qualitative distinction necessary or will a quantitative one do? And supposing there are different types of meaningful lives, how does one determine which type is relevant?

Sorting out the issue of types of meaningful lives will substantially affect the debate on nihilism, the view that there is no meaning in any human life. On the face of it, it is more likely to be the case that a certain kind of meaningful life does not exist than that no meaningful life *simpliciter* exists. However, some recent discussions do seem to be taking the more extreme position.

One might have thought that supernaturalism would be the most common theoretical underpinning for nihilism. Given contemporary skepticism about the existence of God or a soul, a supernaturalist theory of what makes a life meaningful would quickly lead one to doubt that any life is meaningful. However, the central arguments for nihilism in the analytic literature from the last two decades appeal to naturalism. For one, Raymond Martin (1993, pp. 593–95) suggests that our lives are meaningless because the amount of satisfaction available to us is allegedly quite scant. Note that by the logic of this Schopenhauerian argument, even if no human life is meaningful, this is not necessarily the case. Since there are likely possible worlds in which there is enough satisfaction, some human lives could have been meaningful (for the view that the actual world is one of these possible worlds, see Baier 1997, pp. 59–69; Blackburn 2001, pp. 75–79).

Martin’s contingent nihilism differs in this respect from Jeffrie Murphy’s view, which deems nihilism to be inherent to the human condition, at least from a certain inescapable viewpoint. According to Murphy (1982, pp. 12–17), nihilism follows from the impossibility of justifying moral claims, at least from an external or skeptical stance that is constitutive of personhood. Murphy’s view is similar to Nagel’s influential discussion (1986, pp. 214–23; 1987, chap. 10). For Nagel, part of what it is to be a human agent is to be able to take a very objective stance with respect to one’s life, that is, to be able to step back and view oneself as one member of an enormous class, say, as one sentient inhabitant of

the universe among countless others. When viewing one's life as occupying one of innumerable spots in the purview of the Hubble Telescope, nothing of one's life appears to matter.¹⁵

A number of theorists purport to see something different from Nagel when they take up the objective standpoint. Some see us as children of a caring God (Quinn 2000, pp. 65–66), as beings whose sufferings all count equally (Singer 1993, pp. 333–34; 1995, pp. 222–33), and as people capable of realizing goods that others can appreciate (Wolf 1997*c*, pp. 19–21). Other theorists question whether the objective standpoint is even relevant to appraising a human life (Blackburn 2001, pp. 79–80; Schmidtz 2001, esp. pp. 174–79). These responses raise deep and tricky issues that have yet to be thoroughly addressed. For instance, what exactly is a standpoint? Does a point of view by definition come with a certain normative judgment, or are different normative judgments compatible with the same point of view? Does it make sense to rank standpoints, or are they equally valid or even incommensurable facets of our nature?

Like the other questions posed in this article, I submit that the field would benefit from seeking systematic answers to these. I have worked to show that many interesting and intelligible questions about the meaning of life have received some attention in the analytic philosophical literature but that they also need a lot more attention. Beyond the academic world, Western people clearly have a growing interest in issues of life's meaning. Psychics, televangelists, and self-help gurus are extensively addressing them, but academic philosophers are not. For example, the value of marriage, central to most people's lives, is something that Anglo-American philosophers have not adequately accounted for. This results from a lack of philosophical resources. No theory of well-being can alone explain the desirability of marriage, since most would choose marriage even if it meant somewhat less happiness. Moral theories are also not sufficient, since the issue is largely why one should make a vow in the first place, not just whether one should keep it. The most natural category to account for the worth of marriage is meaningfulness, the black sheep of the normative family. Developing theories of what, if anything, makes a life meaningful is what laypeople imagine us philosophers to be doing. May this article help the stereotype become more of a reality.

¹⁵Nagel distinguishes between the meaninglessness of a life and its absurdity (1986, pp. 215, 218; 1987, p. 101). A life is absurd, for Nagel, when its meaninglessness from the objective standpoint is juxtaposed to the importance ascribed to it from the subjective standpoint.

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