VALUE, WELL-BEING, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

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We talk of lives and activities as being ‘meaningful’ in the sense that such lives or activities are worth living or doing without obligation. My dissertation explores what it means for an activity to be meaningful in such a sense. In doing so, I answer two questions about meaningfulness: “What makes an activity meaningful?” and “What is the relationship between meaningfulness and well-being?”

My answer to the first question has two parts, one critical and the other constructive. I begin by criticizing the dominant account of meaningful activity in the literature, on which activity is meaningful if, and only if, and because, it gives the acting agent some relevant qualitatively positive experience (e.g. fulfillment) befitting the activity. I deny that meaningful activity requires the acting agent to actually have the relevant attitude. Rather, meaningful activity just is activity valuable in such a way that positive attitudes befit. I then develop this notion of ‘valuable activity’ in my own account of meaningful activity, on which meaningful activity is that which makes a positive difference.

My answer to the second question is straightforward. Meaningfulness is not a constituent of well-being. Even if meaningful lives are better for those who live them, meaningfulness does not explain why such lives go better.
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INTRODUCTION

“What is the meaning of life?” In his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus famously takes this to be “the fundamental question of philosophy” (2007: 1). Moreover, since Camus thinks we must answer this question in order to judge “whether life is or is not worth living”, it is also “the most urgent of questions” (2007:1) Because “many people die because they judge that life is not worth living” and there are “others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them reason for living”, the question is a matter of life and death (2007:1). Whether Camus’ inference is sound or, even, his claims true, “What is the meaning of life?” is a compelling philosophical question. The trouble is that it is unclear what, precisely, that question is asking. This lack of clarity extends well beyond Camus’ work permeating the broader literature on the meaning of life.

The broad aim of this dissertation is to clarify the question of the meaning of life and work towards an answer. I argue that the urgent sense of the question is, “What is the positive significance of the life we lead?” This question informs the three papers that compose the body of the dissertation. In the first two, I set the conditions for an adequate answer to the question by establishing what essentially makes a life meaningful. In the third, I deny the widespread view that living meaningfully is a constituent of well-being.

Start with the familiar, yet troublesome, expression of the question: “What is the meaning of life?” We all know of the question even if we haven’t earnestly asked it ourselves. It is troublesome, as many philosophers have pointed out, in that the two words central to the expression, ‘meaning’ and ‘life’, can play a wide variety of roles in the English language. Given this ambiguity, there may not even be a univocal question being asked. To locate the precise
sense of the question that compels us, the sense that Camus appeared to be after, will therefore require us to evaluate the various possible senses of ‘the meaning of life.’ I will ask of each proposed sense of the question whether an answer to it would constitute an intelligible answer to the stereotypical person worried about whether life is worth living. That is, does the proposed sense of the question play the urgent life and death role that those concerned with ‘the meaning of life’ have in mind?

It is important to distinguish the aim of this introduction from other related aims. The aim is not an answer to whether there is a meaning of life. Nor is it to provide a substantive account of what the meaning of life might be. Rather, it is to provide an improved understanding of what the question is.

Section I: Evaluating Senses of ‘the Meaning of Life’

We are after the sense of the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ for which an answer best serves as an intelligible response to the person concerned with whether life is worth living. It is therefore important that we have a clear impression of this concern. Beside Camus, the stereotypical person with this concern is someone caught up in existential crisis.

As I use the phrase, existential crisis is a matter of doubt about the value of human pursuits. We all typically care about the way things are. When we are averse to how things are, we seek to change them. And when satisfied, we seek to preserve them. To do so, we set goals, formulate plans, and work to bring those plans to fruition. This process of setting, formulating, and working, at least partially, constitutes human agency. As agents, we make value judgments about how this project is worthwhile or that end is worth setting. The person in existential crisis
doubts these value judgments. They are unmoved by the typical goals – success, wealth, family – that motivate others. Lives which are spent in pursuit of these ends, they suspect, simply are not worthwhile.¹ This, often and understandably, leads to despair.

“What is the meaning of life?” can express the doubt within an existential crisis. Once we are in crisis, it is no longer clear to us whether those things typically taken to be worthwhile are actually so. And it therefore makes sense to ask what, if anything, is so worthwhile. The question is a plea for guidance. How should we live our lives?

The stakes, as Camus points out, are therefore very high (though not for the reasons he suggests). If life has meaning then answering the question provides us guidance as to how we should live. If life is meaningless then we are unjustified in living any sort of life. An answer to the question will vindicate or condemn the lives we live. But more is at stake than even Camus recognizes. Camus seems to think that life being meaningless would justify suicide. It is hard to see how. Choosing to commit suicide to avoid making any future choices, or even to simply refrain from choosing, is still to make a choice. Any choice – including whether to live or to die – would be unjustified if life is meaningless. This total lack of justification may be more terrifying than Camus’ alternative. Not only are we condemned to choose but, as agents, we crave justification for that choice.² While we can usually delude ourselves into thinking we are justified, recognizing that life is meaningless is to recognize that we are not. Absent such justification, our agency becomes a burden – a constant, unavoidable exercise in frustration.

¹ Of course, the people who live these lives might nonetheless have their own moral worth. Even if someone lives a life not worth living, that does not imply we may harm them, deny them care or political standing, or otherwise violate their rights. Nor does a person who lives a life of greater worth necessarily have greater moral worth whereby their rights have greater priority or deserve a greater quantity or higher quality of goods or protections. This is also true more generally. A person who lives a more valuable life does not thereby have more moral worth as a person. We should be careful to distinguish evaluations of a person’s life from prescriptions about how we ought to treat them.

² Both Christine Korsgaard (1996: 93) and David Velleman (2009: 137) have lengthy discussions of this point.
Section II: Senses of ‘the Meaning of Life’

2.1: The Meaning of ‘Life’

A remedy to existential crisis must then serve to justify choice. And it must do so by locating which ends, of those available to us, are choice worthy. While such a remedy will ultimately vindicate some choices, these need not be the typical ones. An intelligible answer to “What is the meaning of life?” need not justify the choices that people usually make. Rather, it need only justify some pursuits.

This immediately tells us something about the relevant sense of ‘life’ as it is used in the question. In common parlance, ‘life’ has at least two distinct senses: one biological and the other agential. Biological life is the sort studied within the biological sciences and in use when we talk of ‘life on earth’, ‘living things,’ or simply ‘being alive.’ It is a passive state of being rather than active thing that is done. In comparison agential life is the sort of life that is ‘lived.’ It is in this latter sense that we speak of ‘life choices’ or ‘the life we lead,’ or ‘the life we live.’ Antti Kauppinen characterizes “our lives”, in this agential sense of ‘life’, as being “comprised of self-relevant actions and events” (2012: 6). While the difference between biological and agential life is, perhaps, obvious, it is of paramount importance in understanding ‘the meaning of life.’

Some have taken the question of the meaning of life to be straightforwardly answered by the standard evolutionary explanations of biology (Kiritani 2012). On one picture of this type, the function – and thereby purpose – of living organisms is to reproduce. As I will discuss shortly, ‘purpose’ is often synonymous with the ‘meaning’ in ‘the meaning of life.’ So, the meaning of life is to reproduce. But this sort of answer only works as a reply to those concerned with the meaning of biological life. Biological processes are not the sort of thing that needs
justification. Hearts need no justification for beating nor do eyes for seeing. The meaning of biological life is not, therefore, our target. Indeed, thinking biological purpose is all there is prompts us to think life is meaningless! So, we are after the meaning of agential life. What justifies the actions that could comprise the living of our lives?³

2.2: The Meaning of ‘Meaning’

With the relevant sense of ‘life’ in hand, we can proceed in locating the relevant sense of ‘meaning.’ This task is more difficult. To begin, disambiguating the various senses of ‘meaning’ from one another is tricky. ‘Meaning’ may be used to refer to the signification relationship between signifier and signified, a thing’s significance, or the purposes of an agent in acting. Moreover, the contexts of use of these senses are much closer than those between the senses of ‘life’ and thus the difference between them less stark.

By analyzing “the meaning of life” using these more explicit senses of ‘meaning’, we will see which sense, if any, best conveys the doubt central to existential crisis. A sense of ‘meaning’ does better at conveying the existential worry insofar as ‘the meaning of life’ is intelligible to someone in existential crisis when it is the explicitly operative sense of ‘meaning.’ The hope is that the analysis with the sense of ‘meaning’ that best captures existential crisis will make precise our understanding of, and set the parameters for an answer to, the question: “What is the meaning of life?”

³ Whether evolutionary theory can provide an answer to this question is far less straightforward and far more controversial. It has been famously suggested by G.E. Moore (1903) that to think so is a sort of ‘naturalistic fallacy’ but, as William Frankena notes (1939), this is a substantive matter of great dispute.
2.3: Signification

In asking “What is the meaning of life”, we might be asking a question analogous to ‘What is the meaning of ‘pizza?’’, ‘Der Schnee ist Weiß’, or the applause of an audience?’ These linguistic and non-linguistic expressions signify, or ‘stand-in’ for, something other than themselves. A name signifies a particular thing, a sentence stands-in for a proposition, and applause signifies the audience’s enjoyment. To ask “What is the meaning of life” in this sense would be to ask whether our existence as agents signifies an idea or thought in the same way the noise of a speech act or written symbol does in human language. We would be asking: “What does the life we lead signify?”

This interpretation fails to capture the justificatory role of the question. The meaning of life is supposed to provide normative guidance. Knowing the meaning of life is supposed to, at least partially, recommend some actions over others. Our lives are meaningful in this sense if they signify the number 42 or represent God’s boredom. But knowledge of these facts provides no guidance. If this understanding of the question were correct, the meaning of our lives could be their insignificance and worthlessness par excellence. Such an answer misses the point.

2.4: Purposive

Another straightforward way of understanding ‘What is the meaning of life?’ is as a question about intentional purposes.\(^4\) We are asking for the purpose of our agency in the same way that we ask “What is the meaning of this?” and “What do you mean to do?” of perplexing actions or “What is this meant to do?” of artifacts. In those cases, the intentions of the actor or

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\(^4\) Bertrand Russell (as quoted by Hugh Moorhead) (1988) adopts this position as does Alex Rosenberg (2011). In particular, both think the question is about what God’s intentions for us are. In conjunction with their atheism, this leads both Russell and Rosenberg to think that life has no meaning.
artificer determine the purpose of the act or artifact. To ask about the meaning of life in this sense is to ask about the intentions behind, and thereby purpose of, our agency. It is to ask, “What is the purpose of the life we lead?”

This view is initially attractive because it appears to capture the relationship between religion and the meaning of life. Many, both devout and faithless, take the divine to be necessary for there to be a meaning of life (Cottingham 2003; Fackenheim 2007; Craig 2008). God's will, either in the creative act or in command-form, sets us a standard for our behavior. Thus, meaning understood as an intentional or purposive can be normative in a way that linguistic meaning could not. It makes sense of the thought that the meaning of life tells us the way life is meant to be lived. And, crucially, it can provide normative guidance.

Though initially promising, an intentional or purposive sense of ‘meaning’ is not the sense of ‘meaning’ relevant to existential crisis. Whether endowed by a creator or one we assign for ourselves, not just any purpose or intention will do. If we found out our purpose is to serve as toothpicks for our much larger creators or if we were intended as the suffering playthings of a whimsical yet callous demon then the angst of existential crisis no longer seems unfitting. On the contrary, we might still reasonably wonder why we should bother getting out of bed in the morning. If existential crisis were just about having a purpose, then any purpose should do (leaving open the question of what properly counts as a purpose). But not all purposes make sense of the worry. Meaning is not to be found in being devoured even were we designed for such an end.\(^5\) What is promising about traditional religious answers is not that they include any mere intention or purpose but that these purposes are for an end believers stipulate to be worthy,

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\(^{5}\) In Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Trilogy* this absurdity is used to comic effect when a genetically engineered cow offers itself to the protagonist as dinner – recommending its various parts as particularly delectable. The response of the protagonist is to vomit despite, or perhaps in spite of, puzzlement by his comrades that he would prefer a cow who didn’t want to be eaten (2008: 115).
like Divine Providence. Having a purpose of our own is no solace. Those in existential crisis are rarely surprised that people act with purpose and that they too might do the same. Rather, they worry that such purposes are meaningless – perhaps the unseemly result of cultural indoctrination or delusional optimism.

2.5: Significance

We can distinguish between ‘significance’ in a technical sense of ‘signifying something’ and a looser sense with the common connotation of being important. An action with significance is important or noteworthy. A sentimental object left to us by a relative might “have meaning” for us in that it reminds us of that relative or evokes an emotional response even if such nostalgia was never anyone’s intent. We also say that a gesture is “meaningful” or that a gift “means a lot to us.” Here we appear to be speaking of the import that the action or object has for us or the influence it has on us. Though these acts still signify often as a “sign of goodwill”, there is this broader connotation to their significance, too. Given the inadequacy of understanding the question of the meaning of life in the technical sense, we might understand ‘meaning’ in the same sense in which we say a particularly thoughtful gift “means a lot to us” or the way in which a gesture might be “meaningful.” From this point on when I use the term ‘significance’ I am

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It is perhaps worth noting that in many non-English languages the translation for ‘meaning’ used in ‘the meaning of life’ is not the same translation used for the phrase ‘a meaningful gesture.’ The operative word used in the meaning of life is ‘νόηµα’ in Greek, ‘Sinn’ in German, and ‘sens’ in French while the operative word used to talk of a meaningful gesture is ‘σηµαίνει’ in Greek, ‘Bedeutung’ in German, and ‘significatif’ in French. Similar distinctions are made in Spanish and Polish but not in Korean or Mandarin Chinese. The difference is that in many languages there is a distinction between intelligibility (as in, “that makes sense”) on the one hand, used in ‘the meaning of life’, and signification, used in ‘meaningful gesture’, on the other (though the difference is not always so neat). It might be thought odd if the best analysis of the meaning of life understood via existential crisis turned out to be in terms of significance, when Camus, perhaps the most prominent contemporary thinker on existential crisis, persisted in using ‘sens’ instead of ‘significatif.’ However, this apparent oddity is more likely a reflection of Camus’ own (not unusual) presuppositions about what is required for a life to significant then a damning counter-example. Camus thinks that if life does not make sense then it cannot be significant. To muddy the water further, in other languages, such as Urdu, the idiom that plays the same cultural role as ‘the meaning of life’ is more literally translated as ‘the purpose of life.’ In all this it is important to keep in mind that surface grammar is not what is of ultimate importance in this discussion. This analysis is meant to improve our understanding of a question, the
using it in the looser sense with the connotation of being important. With these preliminaries out of the way, we can consider a third candidate understanding of “What is the meaning of life?”: “What is the significance of the life we lead?” ‘Meaning’ as ‘significance’ is one of the strongest contenders for being the operative sense of ‘meaning’ for the person in existential crisis asking about the meaning of life. We are unsurprised when a college graduate who wants their life “to mean something” then joins the Peace Corps, or a non-profit, or some other organization which they believe does worthwhile work. Such work is often thought of by those who do it to be ‘significant’ or, synonymously, as ‘mattering.’ Viktor Frankl writes of a man in a Nazi concentration camp whose, “suffering and death were meaningful; his was a sacrifice of the deepest significance” (2006: 91). The fear for this man was insignificance, “He did not want to die for nothing. None of us wanted that” (2006: 91). It’s clear that Frankl is not using ‘significance’ in its narrow technical sense of ‘signification’ here – as that would not be in doubt. Moreover, understanding ‘meaning’ as significance in the broader sense can explain why questions of the meaning of life arise in other contexts where the significance of our lives is in doubt. Cosmology, in particular, is good at casting doubt on our significance. When we contemplate how small, in size, and limited, in length, our lives are compared to the universe as a whole, it is not uncommon for people to wonder if their actions “really matter.” In a universe so large, our causal impact is miniscule and on a universal time-scale none of our projects are lasting.\(^7\) The point is well made in Percy Bysshe Shelley's “Ozymandias”:

> And on the pedestal these words appear:

> 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:

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\(^7\) Strictly, our causal effects last as long as the causal chain itself lasts and the gravitational pull of our atoms propagates out at the speed of light for infinity. A cold comfort, though.
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,

The lone and level sands stretch far away (Shelley 1826)

All our works, even those of the mightiest among us, will decay and fade away. So then, why do anything? Why not fade away right now, if fading away is the end result anyway? The worry at the heart of the poem is also at the heart of existential crisis. And by understanding the question of the meaning of life as being about life’s significance, then we can see why. If the significance of our actions is tied to their current existence, then the significance of our lives will inevitably fade away. My point is not that inevitable decay actually undermines the significance of our lives. Rather, it is that understanding the meaning of life as being about the significance of our actions can explain why worries about significance just are those same worries found in existential crisis about the meaning of life. This understanding makes sense of the worry.

Similarly, if existential crisis is about the significance of one’s actions, then we can explain how religion might be necessary for the meaning of life, as so many think it is. Both the religious and non-religious alike often think the existence of God or some other supernatural force is required for our actions to have value. For example, many hold that something’s being valuable is just a matter of it being commanded (or loved, or desired) by God. Without such a force, existence is nothing more than an arrangement of valueless particles in the void. And without value, nothing is of significance. So, nothing is of meaning if meaning just is significance. On the understanding of ‘meaning’ as ‘significance’, some supernatural force like God is necessary for meaning given those assumptions most who believe in such a force accept.
This understanding also captures the allure of the two previous analyses. Reading ‘the meaning of life’ as about what life signifies only makes sense of existential crisis insofar as it trades on the appeal of the common connotation of ‘significance.’ The mistake in understanding the existential crisis as a worry about signification is that the crisis is about the import of our actions and not merely whether our actions can signify. A teenager who lies awake pondering her significance is not pondering whether her actions can signify – she is not (usually) skeptical about sign language – but about whether her actions are, or can be, of import.

To say an action is significant also bears a relation to intentions and purposes. If there are significant acts then they are the sort of things that merit attention or engagement. Both attention and engagement require intentions. Significant actions therefore guide us in what to intend. In this way, these acts also give us a purpose – a plan or guide to our behavior. Significance provides normative guidance. As we've seen, existential crisis is not about there being just any purpose to our lives. Yet, if our actions can be significant – can merit intentional attention and engagement – then our lives can be purposeful.

Sometimes when we ask what ‘the meaning of life’ is, we are asking about the meaning of our own life, rather than of life in general. Understanding ‘meaning’ as ‘significance’ makes sense of this talk as well. As some philosophers have pointed out, there is a strong tendency among those who talk about the meaning of their lives express their desire for meaning as a desire to be “part of something greater” (Metz 2001; Nozick 2007). This is frequently understood to be a desire to transcend our individual concerns or ‘animal selves.’ The greatness of a project or an end is not, necessarily, in its size or independence from us. Rather, the greatness of a project can be in the value it promotes or instantiates. It is no surprise to hear of greatness ascribed to campaigns for justice or the alleviation of suffering. These activities are valuable and,
thereby, significant. But on this understanding we can also make sense of someone who characterizes parenthood or the caring for a seriously ailing friend as having a kind of greatness. Being part of such greatness is significant. And so we can explain why even these relatively small scale acts can be meaningful.

Moreover, we can also explain why ‘being part of something greater’ is meaningful while simultaneously explaining why being replaceable or ‘just another face in the crowd’ seems to undermine it. If our desire to transcend ourselves is our desire for meaning then it is not clear how we can simultaneously regard losing our identities or becoming just another cog in a machine as undermining meaning. But if our desire is for significance, then it is immediately intelligible why losing our identities undermines meaning. Whether actual or not, the value of uniform replaceable parts, like cogs, is not immediately apparent. It isn’t obvious why such a thing matters to the greater machine. That is, the significance of the cog is in doubt. And it is this doubt that feeds our worry that being replaceable undermines our significance.

For all its advantages, understanding the meaning of life to be about the significance of life runs afoul of a great difficulty. Acts of great evil can be significant. It is clear that if any human endeavors are significant, the Holocaust was. Nihilism aside, to call the horrors and loss inflicted upon people in such a grandly evil event ‘insignificant’ is to display the faults in one’s conception of significance. Yet, if the Holocaust was significant then this candidate understanding suggests an unfortunate response to those in existential crises: “Don’t worry. You could be the next Hitler.” Such a response fails to address the central worry of existential crisis. The operative sense of ‘meaning’ in ‘the meaning of life’ is therefore not ‘significance.’

We can distinguish between an action being worthy of attention or response and an action being worthy of doing. The desire central to the phenomenology of existential crisis is not
merely to be significant at any cost, even though such actions might be noteworthy or merit a response. It is the desire for our actions to be worth doing (though not merely). Those who seek meaning in religion are not indifferent between God and the Devil. Someone who joins a charity organization does not see a scandalous life of violent crime as an equally meaningful alternative. Tellingly, those who lead lives they take to be of meaningful significance do not see themselves as villains but as the heroes. Crusaders, murderous revolutionaries, and tyrants like Hitler are often convinced of the righteousness and ultimate value of their actions. On the other side, those who come to significance they see as negative do not see their actions as meaningful. Richard Feynman writes of the deep despair he felt after helping to develop the nuclear bomb (2005). But despair is an emotion we see as a fitting response to meaninglessness. It is antithetical to one who sees themselves as engaged in a meaningful project. Robert Oppenheimer’s now famous quotation of the Bhagavad Gita at seeing the results of his nuclear research, “Now, I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds” are clearly him seeing such research as significant (“The Eternal Apprentice” 1948). But his avid opposition to the acquisition, use, and proliferation of nuclear weaponry are not the actions of one who sees the fruits of his labor as meaningful (though he still saw the engineering problems themselves as attractive).

2.6: Positive Significance

Despite its ultimate inadequacy, understanding the ‘meaning of life’ to be about significance captures much of the concern found in existential crisis. The challenge is in developing a new understanding of the question which retains those advantages while avoiding its failings. I take it that understanding ‘the meaning of life’ to be about actions which are of

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8 Feynman also discusses this despair in anecdotes about his time on the Manhattan Project in the documentary of the same name.
positive significance does just that. We arrive at the fourth, and most promising, candidate for an understanding of “What is the meaning of life”: “What is the positive significance of the life we lead?”

What does it mean to say the significance of some acts is ‘positive’? Consider an intuitive difference between acts of significance. Some are worth pursuing, such as the abolition of slavery in the Antebellum South and the elimination of smallpox. Others, like the ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Jewish people in Europe during the Holocaust, are emphatically not worth pursuing but are significant nonetheless. Call the former ‘positively significant’ and the latter ‘negatively significant.’

Furthermore, an understanding of ‘the meaning of life’ as ‘the positive significance of life’ sheds light on the intuitive relationship between ‘the meaning of life’ and ‘a meaningful life.’ It is assumed by some philosophers working on the meaning of life that an account of meaningful lives makes clear the meaning of life (Metz 2001a; 2002; 2007; Smuts 2013). Yet, it is never spelled out how. ‘Meaning’ as ‘positive significance’ shows us how. Except perhaps in the most cautious philosophical discussions, we can freely substitute the terms ‘significant’ used in this extended sense and ‘meaningful’ in the context of discussing lives. “I want a meaningful life” is interchangeable with “I want a significant life.” The significance of life just is that which makes life significant. However, this substitution only works in a positive context. While we use the term ‘meaningful’ with respect to gifts and gestures to refer to their importance, we would not call a particularly offensive gesture ‘meaningful’ in the same sense. So, our understanding ‘meaning’ as ‘positive significance’ can illuminate the relationship between ‘the meaning of life’ and ‘a meaningful life.’
In light of its explanatory power, I think the best available understanding of ‘the meaning of life’ in the sense that concerns those in existential crisis is as ‘the positive significance of life.’ Specifically, on this understanding, the question at the heart of existential crisis is about which of the ends we could adopt have significance worth pursuing. An answer would provide normative guidance and purpose and tell us what really matters.

Conclusion

This introduction serves only to clarify the nature of ‘the meaning of life’ and to bridge the gap between that expression and the concept of a ‘meaningful life.’ If what I have said here is correct then a substantive account of meaningfulness will also inform an answer to the question “What is the meaning of life?” The meaning of life is that condition accordance with which is living meaningfully.

The three papers that follow all address substantive issues regarding life’s meaningfulness (understanding life as a sort of activity one leads). In the first, I argue that – contra numerous philosophers – meaningfulness does not require any positive attitude on the part of the actors, like satisfaction or fulfillment. Someone need not feel good about what they have done, or judge what they did worthwhile, for it to actually be meaningful.9 In the second, I argue that meaningfulness consists in making a positive difference. That is, doing something meaningful is a matter of making the world a better place. In the third, I argue that meaningfulness is not a constituent of well-being. Even if something is in your self-interest, it does not make you better off because it is meaningful. Though the following papers build on

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9 Philosophers who endorse the position I reject (seem to) include (Taylor 1999; Wolf 2010; Kauppinen 2012).
each other, the arguments of each are written to stand alone. As a result, the repetition of some ideas is unavoidable.
NIHILISM, ATTITUDES, AND MEANINGFUL ACTIVITY

We often claim that some activities are “meaningful” such that it is in some way better to have them in one’s life. Paradigmatic examples include the scientific research of Darwin and Einstein, Picasso and van Gogh's painting, and campaigns for justice such as those led by Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. We also speak of more ordinary activity, such as caring for a child or working for a charity, as meaningful. Contrast these sorts of activities with those we tend to find meaningless: prolonged navel gazing, the assiduous avoidance of cracks in the pavement while walking, or insistently bashing one’s head against the frame of every door through which one passes. The former are worthwhile in a way the latter aren’t. But meaningful activity is not merely worthwhile. Fulfilling one’s moral obligations is worthwhile but not necessarily meaningful. You would not act meaningfully by breaking people’s windows and then fulfilling your obligation to replace them. Meaningful activity is worthwhile independent of any such moral requirement.

What features of meaningful activities make them meaningful? The dominant view is that an activity is meaningful when it satisfies two conditions: i) the actor bears some specified sort of positive attitude towards the activity and ii) the activity is valuable in some specified sense (Frankfurt 2002; James 2005; Kauppinen 2012; Kekes 2007; Levy 2005; Nozick 2007; Schlick

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10 This is enough of a rough ostensive definition of ‘meaningfulness’ for my purposes here. I give a fuller analysis of the concept elsewhere in the dissertation including both the preceding and following papers. Nevertheless, there are still a few comments worth making about the sense of ‘meaningful’ I operate under here. When people say activities like Martin Luther King Jr.’s were meaningful they are making a normative or evaluative claim. This category of normative or evaluative assessment is logically distinct from other kinds of normative or evaluative assessment. It is not simply that the activity was good for the person engaged in it: the production of van Gogh’s artwork might be meaningful but considerations of well-being may recommend against fostering the psychology necessary to create his works. Nor is meaningful activity just that which is morally required. Einstein had no duty to discover his works.
The precise nature of the relevant attitude and value is disputed amongst those who adopt this view (but this doesn’t matter right now). Call theories that adopt these two requirements Hybrid Theories – of which Susan Wolf’s influential Fitting Fulfillment Theory, wherein an activity is meaningful if and only if the actor is fulfilled by successfully doing it and such fulfillment is fitting – is one example (1997a; 1997b; 2007; 2010). These theories are ‘hybrid’ in the sense that they take both attitudes and the value of the act to be relevant to its meaningfulness; where theories in the literature had previously been divided along exclusive support for one or the other.

In this paper, I challenge the first condition, what I call the Positive Mental State Requirement (PMR), while raising a novel defense of a particular version of the second, what I call the Valuable Activity Requirement (VAR). Although it has not been fully appreciated, the

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11 Explicit endorsement of the claim that value does partial explanatory work is made by (Kekes 2007; Nozick 2007; Wolf 2010; Wiggins 1988). That an activity is valuable explains why that activity is meaningful. I emphasize this point because there is a related but crucially distinct question in the philosophical literature. We can ask what explains the meaningfulness of an activity and we can ask what explains the value of an activity. And even if the same thing might explain both why an activity is valuable and why that same activity is meaningful, the meaningfulness of the activity need not explain why the activity is valuable (nor vice versa). For example, an activity might be both meaningful and valuable because it is fitting of fulfillment yet not meaningful because it is valuable. In such a case, the fittingness of the activity would do double explanatory duty while the value and the meaningfulness of the activity would not bear an explanatory relationship to each other. The issue is further complicated as some analyze the concept of ‘value’ in terms of its fittingness. If such analyses are correct, then to say the meaningfulness of an activity is explained by that activities’ being fitting of fulfillment is logically equivalent to saying that the meaningfulness of that activity is explained by its value. It would make no sense to say that the meaningfulness of an activity is explained by its fittingness for a relevant attitude and not by its value since the two are equivalent. I take no stand on whether such analyses are correct as such a matter does not affect my arguments here.

12 In a later response to critics, Wolf backs off her commitment to fulfillment as the relevant mental state and claims, “there is a range of […] attitudes and conditions, which includes love and fulfillment, and which reflects the kind of intentional, but also qualitatively positive, attachment to an object or activity that an agent must have in order for engagement with it to contribute to the meaningfulness of his life” (Wolf 2010: 114). Beyond this rough sketch, Wolf never characterizes the relevant range of attitudes. Since none of my objections hinge on such a precise detail as the specific nature of the positive mental state, I set the matter aside.

13 I am not hereby excluding the possibility that the only valuable activities are those towards which the actor has a positive attitude. What we are after is not merely what is true of meaningful activities but what explains why those activities are meaningful. Even if positive mental states are necessary for meaningful activity, they do not explain why those activities are meaningful.
PMR appears to conflict with many widely held judgments about which activities are meaningful. Furthermore, it fails to explain why certain activities are meaningful even when it appropriately identifies an activity as meaningful. Seeing how the PMR fails will be illustrative of the strengths of the VAR. In diagnosing why the PMR has been attractive to so many, I argue that support for the PMR is the result of conflating important distinctions between various senses of “meaningful” and that any remaining support for the PMR ends up also supporting the VAR. Moreover, the case for the VAR is even stronger than usually thought. The VAR is bolstered rather than undermined by nihilistic concerns. Many worry that our actions are meaningless unless God exists, or because the universe is so large, or because all our projects will fade away in time. Only the VAR straightforwardly accounts for these worries as they are worries about the value of our activities. In concluding, I will motivate the position that value is by itself sufficient for meaningful activity given the failure of the PMR.

Section I: Theories of Meaningful Activity

In order to see the failings of the PMR, it is helpful to look at why people have accepted it in the first place. Start with the question behind accounts of meaningfulness: “What makes an activity meaningful?”

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14 ‘Value’ is ambiguous. We can distinguish between value which merits promotion and value that merits respect. This distinction can be made quite intuitive. An individual might merit my respect as I am not to harm them but not require me to replicate them as meriting promotion would require. Put another way, certain things are worth bringing about while others are worth leaving alone. I am concerned here with those activities worth bringing about. For more information on this distinction see (Anderson 1993; Coons 2006; Velleman 1999).
1.1: Pure Attitudinal Theories

One popular view of meaningfulness in the literature is that the mental states of the person acting fully or partially ground the meaningfulness of what they do (Frankfurt 2002; Kauppinen 2012; Kekes 2007; Nozick 2007; Schlick 2007; Richard Taylor 2007; Wiggins 1988; Wolf 2010). This requirement seems plausible on its face given that when we call our work meaningless, we're likely to find it boring, alienating, and of no importance to us. Worries about whether our lives and activities are meaningful usually don’t come upon us when we are happily engaged in an activity. Instead, familiar worries that what we do is meaningless seem to require a kind of detachment; only when an activity ceases to engage us we might wonder whether it is meaningful. The person who finds his or her life or projects meaningless is a person we assume is, if not in despair, at least not satisfied, joyous, or pleased. So, perhaps meaningful activities just are those which the subject finds valuable, or those that excite, or engage her. The subject’s mental states would then completely explain why her action is meaningful. On this view having a certain mental state, usually a pro-attitude or positive feeling of some sort, is both necessary and sufficient for an endeavor to be meaningful (Frankfurt 1982; 2002; 2006; Richard Taylor 2007). Call these theories – on which the PMR is the only requirement – Positive Mental State Theories of meaningfulness.

As has been traditionally argued, Positive Mental State Theories are too permissive. They implausibly imply that any activity which gives rise to the relevant mental state – no matter how insignificant or pointless – is meaningful. Consider that paradigmatic case of meaninglessness, Sisyphus futilely attempting to roll a boulder up a hill for all eternity. Richard Taylor gives us a modification of the tale:
Let us suppose that the gods [...] waxed perversely merciful by implanting in [Sisyphus] a strange and irrational impulse; namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones. [...] He has but one obsession, which is to roll stones, and it is an obsession that is only for the moment appeased by his rolling them—he no sooner gets a stone rolled to the top of the hill than he is restless to roll up another. (2007: 136)

It is implausible that, even though Sisyphus is doing what he most wants to do, that his action is meaningful. It might be good for him, or even seem meaningful to him, but it is not meaningful that he roll the boulder up the hill. Rather, it seems like a pointless futile task that doesn’t matter at all. But all this talk of gods and their punishments might unnecessarily complicate the issue.15

No matter. We can make similar remarks about more mundane cases. Wolf gives the example of, “a man who lives to make handwritten copies of the text of War and Peace” (2010: 16). The point is not to cast aspersions on those with the temerity to like different things but to point out that merely liking something isn’t sufficient to make it meaningful.

1.2: Hybrid Theories

A current prominent view in the literature avoids this result while preserving the thought that our attitudes are at least part of the story. To recap, on this view the mental states of the actors involved are only part of what makes an activity meaningful. Certain mental states, again usually a pro-attitude of some sort, are necessary but not sufficient for an endeavor to be meaningful. For an endeavor to be meaningful it must also meet a further standard independent

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15 An advocate of a Positive Mental State Theory may reply that desires implanted by gods aren’t authentic in the relevant way. I don’t have the space here to carefully characterize this authenticity and the prospects for this reply but I don’t think the prospects are good. I think even authentic mental states are insufficient for meaningful activity when they are inappropriate or unjustified.
of the actor’s mental states.\textsuperscript{16} Usually, this further standard is that the endeavor also be valuable (in some specified sense). So, Hybrid Theories preserve the PMR in Positive Mental State Theories and then add a VAR.

Section II: Why there is no Positive Mental State Requirement

2.1: Positive Mental States

Central to the PMR is the idea of positive mental states. How might we understand a mental state as being ‘positive’? A mental state might be positive given the way it feels. Pleasure, enjoyment, and fulfillment are all types of mental states one associates with ‘feeling good.’ Sometimes this feeling is oriented towards an object, as when we take pleasure in a loved one’s excitement or the completion of a difficult task. Other times the feeling has no particular object, as when we take a stimulant like caffeine. In either case, it is the qualitative experience of the attitude itself that is positive.

Alternatively, the mental state itself may not be positive in the sense of how it feels but positive in its representational content. For example, believing something to be good, valuable, or rewarding is to have a mental state with positive content. But believing something need not having any qualitative feel in itself.

These two ways of characterizing positive mental states need not be exclusive of one another. An attitude may have both a positive feel and positive content such as when we take

\begin{footnote}{16} I use the phrase ‘independent of the actor’s mental states’ instead of the more common terminology of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ in an attempt to bypass confusion based on the ambiguity of those terms. For example, this further standard might be subjective in the sense that it is based on agreement between persons or that it is not empirically verifiable when the standard has been met. Alternatively, it might be construed as objective in the sense that the standard’s being met is not dependent on the psychological states of any one individual.\end{footnote}
satisfaction in a job well done, in meeting an obligation, or seeing the good consequences of our actions. We often characterize our emotions as both representing the way the world is and feeling a certain way. For example, when I am enjoying the fruits of my labor, I might both feel good and also see our labor as worth doing.

2.2: Against a Qualitative Positive Mental State Requirement

Whether we construe the relevant mental state as being positive in feel or positive in content, the PMR excludes too much. Consider first the PMR construed as a requirement that an activity have a positive feel if it is to be meaningful, as in Wolf’s Fitting Fulfillment Theory. Call this construal the QPMR. The QPMR cannot adequately accommodate the following case:

*Painful End:* Sigmund is in extreme agony and will shortly die. This agony overwhelms all other qualitative experience. Yet he continues to struggle to finish his life's work.

Since extreme agony can overwhelm positive qualitative experience the QPMR implies that any activity undergone in the face of an experience like that in *Painful End*, including the completion of one's life work, is not meaningful.

Accepting this implication seems like a mistake. So *Painful End* shows us that, even as a partial explanation of why some activities are meaningful, the QPMR fails. What is relevant to the meaningfulness of Sigmund's last struggles is not the quality of his experience but the quality of his life's work. If he completes a manuscript of staggering insight and genius that revolutionizes how we think about the world then that is meaningful despite the pain. The
difference between meaningful activity and meaningless activity does not here hinge on the existence of a better painkiller.

*Painful End* also indicates a broader failing in the QPMR. At the end of an arduous struggle, when we hope that it was meaningful, what are we hoping for? Usually, we are hoping that our efforts made a difference or were not in vain. We are not hoping that we are somehow deluded about the difficulty of the struggle. The QPMR cannot make sense of this since arduousness would undermine meaningfulness as well. A great sacrifice might be terrifying and unpleasant but still noble and heroic in a way that we think is meaningful. It would be shocking to think that saving comrades by leaping on an explosive could only be meaningful if we are satisfied by the leaping.

A couple of easy modifications to save the QPMR suggest themselves here. The first is modifying the requirement to say an activity is meaningful only if the actor would have a positive mental state under normal conditions. Sigmund is disposed to feel fulfilled with his work under normal conditions, even if his current agony undermines his capacity for such positive feelings. The obvious difficulty for this response is in specifying what normalcy amounts to in this case. If normalcy is simply a descriptive matter of what is typical of humans, then it is unclear why reference to normal conditions figures into an explanation of why some activities are meaningful. While it might be true that humans typically have positive mental states with respect to meaningful activities in virtue of some feature of our psychologies, this is not enough to say that these mental states explain why an activity is meaningful. If normalcy involves a normative standard – about how someone should feel – then the modified QPMR threatens to collapse into the VAR. For example, we might stipulate that normal conditions are those conditions in which a person is feeling the appropriate attitude. If Sigmund’s life’s work is
worth completing in the face of agony, then the appropriate attitude towards it is a qualitatively positive one like fulfillment. But why would such an attitude be appropriate in this case? Either a qualitatively positive attitude towards Sigmund’s work is appropriate because such work is valuable or for something to valuable just is for positive attitudes to be appropriate towards it.\textsuperscript{17} In either case, the VAR is what is relevant.

The second modification is to claim that having a history of positive mental states towards an activity is necessary to make it meaningful. This modification implies that last minute acts that lack history, such as deathbed revelation or heroic sacrifice, cannot be meaningful especially if they are done in their entirety under conditions of agony or depression. This implication is implausible for the same considerations as \textit{Painful End}. Given their costs, neither modification is a good save for the QPMR.

2.3: Against a Content Positive Mental State Requirement

Any Hybrid Theory on which having a qualitatively positive mental state is required for meaningful activity – like Wolf’s – gets the wrong result in \textit{Painful End}. But we might understand the relevant mental states for the PMR as being those with positive content rather than a positive feel. Call this construal the CPMR. I do not think construing the PMR in this way will work.

The paradigmatic mental states with content are the propositional attitudes – beliefs and desires.\textsuperscript{18} If the relevant mental state is just a desire with no accompanying qualitative feeling then the PMR is trivial because the requirement is met in every case of activity. Desires (in the

\textsuperscript{17} I discuss these issues in greater detail in an earlier footnote as well later in the paper.

\textsuperscript{18} There is some skepticism about propositional attitudes in the philosophical literature. However, such skepticism, with which I am sympathetic, does not undermine my argument. Denying propositional attitudes is not the denial of beliefs and desires as paradigmatic non-essentially qualitative mental states.
technical ‘propositional attitude’ sense used here) just are those mental states that motivate us to action.\textsuperscript{19} So, the possibility of activity itself requires that the actor have a desire to do that activity. To say a desire to act is necessary for an activity to be meaningful is just to acknowledge that meaningful activities are a subset of activities. As I noted earlier, the issue at hand is an explanation of what makes some activities meaningful. The fact that meaningful activities require a non-qualitative desire cannot explain, even partially, why some activities are meaningful and others aren't.\textsuperscript{20} All activities require non-qualitative desires.

What about belief? A supporter of the CPMR may think that meaningful activity requires the actor to believe the activity valuable or important. But this understanding of the CPMR also conflicts with commonplace judgments. Consider:

\textit{Depression:} Teresa has devoted her life to tending to the sick and dying in an impoverished part of the world. Despite outward appearances, she doubts whether anything really matters at all and believes that her own activities are without value. She becomes deeply depressed thinking her actions are meaningless.

On the considered formulation of the CPMR, Teresa must be correct. Her actions are not meaningful. But, this seems mistaken.

\textsuperscript{19} This point is not meant to be substantive. I am stipulating ‘desire’ to be the word I use when I refer to whatever elements of our psychology motivate us to action.

\textsuperscript{20} To defend against this objection, an advocate of a non-qualitative PMR need only specify a particular non-qualitative motivating state that differs in some respect from the others. This difference would then be relevant to the advocate’s explanation for why some activities are meaningful. I’m unaware of anyone who has made such an attempt.
Moreover, even if it were correct that Teresa’s activities are meaningless in *Depression*, it offers the wrong explanation for *why*. On the CPMR, Teresa is not correct about the meaninglessness of her works because of standard nihilistic concerns – that God is dead, human existence is finite, or there is nothing but atoms in the void. Rather, she is correct because she is depressed. Her depression explains why her activities are meaningless. This is surely wrong. Teresa is depressed *because* she thinks her works are meaningless!Were an angel to come and show Teresa the positive difference she made like in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, Teresa may be overjoyed. The angel has revealed to her that her life *was* meaningful even though she failed to recognize it as such. Yet the CPMR indicates that joy at the angel’s words *would* be misplaced. After all, on the CPMR her actions *were* meaningless.

This worry for the CPMR suggests a possible modification to the view. Teresa is overjoyed at what the angel showed her because she wanted to save lives and ease suffering. She was disposed to believe her actions were of worth when the relevant facts are fully disclosed. Perhaps then, it is not *having* the relevant attitude that is important but being *disposed to have* that attitude. Meaningful activity requires that the actor would have the relevant attitude given full disclosure.

I do not think this modification succeeds. Teresa’s attitudes might not shift even given full disclosure. Indeed, she may become all the more keenly aware of the lives she didn’t save or how she only alleviated some suffering and merely made lives less bad rather than good. Her high standards don’t make her actions less meaningful.

There is temptation to say that, especially given full disclosure, Teresa *should* see her works as valuable or that such an attitude would be fitting or appropriate. But this move, as was
the case with the QPMR, is an endorsement of the VAR not the CPMR. Valuable activities are appropriately valued and seen as valuable. I will develop this point further in the next section.

2.4: Against any Positive Mental State Requirement

I conclude that the PMR fails both when the relevant mental states are understood to be qualitative, like fulfillment, and when they are understood to be non-qualitative, like desire or belief that your activity is valuable. *Painful End* and *Depression* highlight the oddness of the PMR generally. Typical talk of meaningful activities – scientific breakthroughs, the overthrow of injustice, the alleviation of suffering, creating great works of art – omits any discussion of the actor involved or their mental states. We do not cast doubt on the meaningfulness of Martin Luther King Jr.’s life by asking whether he was fulfilled by it. Similarly, people who wonder whether their lives are meaningful often have no doubt about whether they or others are loved, fulfilled, feel pleasure, or believed that they were doing something valuable. As even a partial account of why some activities are meaningful, the PMR fails.

Section III: Diagnosing the Positive Mental State Requirement’s Appeal

Given all this, we should re-examine our motivation for thinking positive mental states have an important role to play in meaningful activity. My diagnosis for the popularity of the PMR is that the ordinary talk which motivates it often obscures subtle distinctions.21 Once these distinctions are made clear, we can see that this talk fails to support the PMR.

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21 It is worth emphasizing that I do not take philosophers like Wolf to have missed these distinctions. Rather, I take it that these distinctions are conflated within ordinary talk and ordinary talk is taken as support for the PMR.
I have already discussed the most crucial distinction. We think there can be an important difference between a meaningful activity and an activity that merely *seems* meaningful. We can imagine a deluded Sisyphus who has somehow become convinced that his boulder rolling is the most meaningful task anyone has ever undertaken. Nonetheless, Sisyphus does not act meaningfully. As Antti Kauppinen notes, “Thinking your life is meaningful doesn’t make it so. We are not *infallible* about meaning” (forthcoming: 5). This is vindicated in our own behavior, “When you aspire to lead a more meaningful life, you don’t aspire to have a different attitude toward your actual activities, but to do something different” (forthcoming: 5).

Even if we recognize our fallibility about meaning, we might mistake a typical correlate of an act seeming meaningful as a constituent. There is evidence to suggest a strong correlation between a belief that life is meaningful and happiness (R. Baumeister et al. 2012). From this correlation, someone might provocatively suggest that meaningfulness *consists in* happiness or other, similar, positive attitudes. But such a move would be too hasty, on par with thinking that acting morally consists in sleeping soundly at night. A better explanation seems to be that believing that nothing you do is meaningful is a cause of unhappiness. Even if, as Camus famously intones, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy,” we are not thereby committed to thinking Sisyphus’ efforts *meaningful* (1955: 74).

We can also distinguish between an activity that *has meaning for* someone and an activity that is meaningful. There is a trivial sense of ‘meaningful’ in which a gesture that means a lot to someone, like a heartfelt gift or apropos flowers, is meaningful. But it is intelligible to ask whether such a gesture is meaningful in the sense we are after (and vice versa).\(^{22}\) For example, a

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\(^{22}\) That such talk is intelligible suggests that the two ideas are logically distinct. It does not eliminate the possibility that no meaningful activity *actually* fails to mean something to someone.
smuggled file in a birthday cake might be meaningful to Al Capone in prison but need not be actually meaningful. So, to speak of what is “meaningful for Sisyphus to do” is ambiguous between i) what Sisyphus can do that has meaning for someone, including himself, and ii) what Sisyphus can do that is meaningful. Sisyphus’ eternal striving, and failure, to roll a rock up a hill could mean a lot to someone – perhaps the Gods themselves, the families of those he wronged, or even himself – in this first sense. So it is true, in that sense, that Sisyphus’ rock rolling could be meaningful. In that sense, an attitudinal response is relevant to an act’s meaningfulness. But it would be inappropriate to take that as support for the PMR. We are interested those activities that are meaningful.

The PMR might also receive such widespread support because the explanatory prowess of the VAR has not been exploited to its fullest. When we are detached from a project, we don’t see it as valuable. And when a project engages us, and satisfies us in its accomplishment, we see it as valuable. So, the VAR explains the apparent connection between positive mental states and meaningful activities that motivated Positive Mental State Theories. It vindicates how the projects appear to us in these cases. Valuable projects and ends merit certain attitudes –

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23 I suspect this is at work when people object to the VAR on the grounds that it unfairly discriminates against certain types of lives (Cahn 2007; Wolf 2010). According to this objection, the VAR holds the meaning of our activities hostage to whether they are valuable. If certain activities are without value – like Wolf’s favored examples of lawnmower racing or creating handwritten copies of War and Peace – then such activities are meaningless given the VAR. According to the objection, it is unwarranted to claim these activities are meaningless. People report finding meaning and satisfaction in all sorts of activities – riding and caring for horses, rooting for the Cleveland Browns, spending all day in the basement playing video games. Therefore, the VAR is too restrictive. As Wolf correctly notes, the obvious problem with this argument is that the VAR is compatible with these activities not being meaningless. It might instead be that these activities have value. The satisfaction a person derives from these activities may advance their well-being, something plausibly valuable. Alternatively, their very act of enjoying may be a source of value in itself. It seems no less elitist to claim that Wolf’s (or my own) chosen examples are valueless than to claim they are meaningless. Yet, the VAR explains that judgment. In fact, judgment that an activity is without value appears to coincide with judgment that that activity is meaningless. It is more plausible to say then that this objection is an objection not against the VAR but against the operative theory of value. And, as Wolf notes, it is just as easy to withdraw support from a particular theory of value as from the VAR (2010: 39-40, 124).
desire, pleasure, pride, joy, love, or fulfillment to name a few.\textsuperscript{24} The specific attitude merited varies depending on the specifics of the project or end. If this is right, given the VAR, all meaningful activities merit some such attitude because all meaningful activities are valuable.

Section IV: Supporting the Value Requirement

The VAR can succeed where the PMR fails and it can also explaining what motivated the PMR. However, there is powerful further support to be had for the VAR. As we shall see, only the VAR can readily explain the relevance of nihilism and absurdity to meaningfulness.

4.1: Nihilism about Value

Stereotypically, reflections on death or the end of the universe are frequently accompanied by worries that all human activity is meaningless. Given that the end of the universe (or the end of humanity, or our own end) seems inevitable, then human activity can make no “ultimate difference.” Whatever we choose to do, the universe will end up the same way. What is so special about making an ultimate difference rather than merely some sort of difference? The worry must be that the worth of a difference is tied to its existence, as the difference goes away so too does its value. There’s no point trying to keep the sidewalk clear of snow in a blizzard. If no ultimate difference can be made then no difference is valuable.

This is precisely the position of the nihilist who denies that anything is valuable. Value nihilism entails that no one can ever “make a difference” that is worthwhile. The VAR explains why skepticism about whether any of our activities are meaningful is taken to be implied by

\textsuperscript{24} These are the terms in which some analyze value. As mentioned in the previous footnote, I need not take a stand on such analyses to make my point here. We can think we ought to desire goodness without saying that goodness is logically equivalent to that which we ought to desire.
nothing mattering. Nihilists think there are no projects worth pursuing or ends worth having. Yet, those are frequently the same expressions used to discuss what is meaningful. It is cliché to talk of meaningful activity “mattering”, “making a difference”, and being “worth pursuing”. I claimed above that judgments about value and judgments about meaningfulness correlate. If worries about value come paired with worries about meaningful activity then the VAR offers an explanation. Worries about value nihilism support the VAR.

4.2: Absurdity

So called “absurd” actions are meaningless. Sisyphus is forced to endlessly roll a stone up a hill only to see it roll back down every time. David Wiggins’ pig farmer “buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs” (1988: 342). Xerxes orders the sea lashed and fettered for disobedience. The (stereotypical) despairing teenager who believes everything is meaningless sees human action as absurd – a tedious repetition of birth/wake, struggle, and death/sleep. In each instance the absurdity of the act is antithetical to its meaningfulness.

But what precisely is absurdity and how might our actions be absurd? Joel Feinberg analyzes the concept of “absurdity” as incongruity between action and result (2007). Albert Camus finds absurdity in the lack of a recognizable plan or pattern (1955). Thomas Nagel claims that absurdity arises because a person can see their endeavors both from their own engaged point of view and from the dispassionate perspective of the universe (1971). Michael Smith sees absurdity in our lack of a decisive rebuttal to the nihilist (2006).

The VAR neatly explains why absurdity in each instance undermines meaning. Consider each in turn. For Camus, activity without a plan or pattern is absurd. This claim is puzzling
because clearly not all plans would do the trick (1981: 586-7). If humans were intentionally
created for extraterrestrial farmers to use as toothpicks then this would not provide the plan or
pattern Camus requires. The plan must be worthwhile like the Divine Providence of Christian
theology. And worthwhile activities are valuable. Moreover, value can function as a plan in our
decision making. Value is action-guiding. If we know what is valuable we know what is worth
pursuing. Only if nothing is valuable can we be without any plan. The VAR thereby explains
how lack of a plan might undermine meaningfulness. If there is no plan then nothing is valuable
and hence, nothing is meaningful. The absurdity of human activity for Nagel is a matter of each
individual’s capacity to both act as if his or her projects matter and to judge those same projects
as being without import in the grand scheme of things. As he puts it:

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making
choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we
have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives,
from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints
collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. (1971: 719)

Our seriousness is gratuitous only if the things we take to be valuable aren’t really so. Mere
doubt about the warrant of our engagement isn’t sufficient for absurdity if such engagement is
ultimately vindicated. And if some human activity really is valuable then earnest human behavior
is sometimes warranted. Nagel’s absurdity only undermines meaning if nothing really is
valuable. On Nagel’s account of absurdity, the VAR explains how absurdity undermines
meaning. Smith takes our lack of a decisive argument against the nihilist to render our activities
absurd. Without such an argument doubt about the existence of value is to some extent
reasonable. The VAR captures this result. If nihilism is reasonable then so is doubt about the
meaningfulness of our activities. Finally, the relationship between value, absurdity, and meaningfulness is more explicit in Feinberg. Pointless activities are meaningless and for “an activity to be utterly without point or meaning is first of all for it to have no value in its own right, and only then, for it to have no further purpose the achievement of which explains and justifies it” (2007: 168). These valueless activities are absurd.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have primarily argued for two claims in this paper. First, the Positive Mental State Requirement of meaningfulness is a poor explanation of why some activities are meaningful. A person’s activity is not less meaningful because he or she cannot derive pleasure or fulfillment from it, as with Sigmund in Painful End, or because he or she does not believe the activity to be valuable, as with Teresa in Depression. The failure of the PMR implies that the theories belonging to two dominant groups in the meaningfulness literature, Positive Mental State Theories and Hybrid Theories, including Susan Wolf's Fitting Fulfillment Theory, also fail. Where these Hybrid Theories attempted to improve on Positive Mental State Theories by adding, they should have instead substituted a Valuable Activity Requirement. My second claim is that the VAR has more going for it than the literature has recognized. A minimal VAR draws novel support from the incompatibility of nihilism and meaningfulness. On the VAR, meaningful activities are valuable (i.e. worth promotion or pursuit). The VAR therefore explains why value nihilism – the denial that any activities could be so valuable – excludes the possibility of meaningful activity. Moreover, since absurdity is often rooted in nihilistic concerns, the VAR can also show how absurdity might undermine meaning.
My arguments raise an interesting possibility for a theory of meaningful activity. Supporters of Hybrid Theories take the PMR and the VAR to be jointly sufficient for meaningful activity. I claimed both that the PMR fails and the VAR can capture the phenomena we took to support the PMR once we clearly distinguish the ways in which an activity might have meaning or seem meaningful and yet not be meaningful. So maybe value is all there is to meaningfulness. Meaningful activity would just be that activity which is valuable (in the sense I have specified). Theories of this sort are not especially novel. However support for them in the literature is relatively scarce – perhaps due to the popularity of Hybrid Theories. If I am correct, these theories fail. Rather than trying to patch Positive Mental State theories, we should deny that meaningful activity essentially involves mental states.

25 Examples, intimations, or similar views can be found in (Audi 2005; Singer 2011; Singer 2012; Smuts 2013) or by G.E. Moore in (Moorhead 1988)
CHAPTER II

MEANINGFULNESS AS MAKING A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE

What feature(s) must an activity have to be meaningful? In this paper, I defend the account that activities are meaningful because they make a positive difference. I argue that this account better explains why activities are meaningful than the other accounts available in the philosophical literature. Before beginning this argument, some preliminaries are in order to locate what is meant here by ‘meaningful activity.’

Section I: Preliminaries

1.1: Existential Crisis

Janne Teller’s short novel Nothing begins, “Nothing matters. I have known that for a long time. So nothing is worth doing. I just realized that” (2012: 1). Pierre Anthon – the character behind these words – represents the stereotypical teenager in existential crisis. Such crisis, as those familiar with it will recognize, usually involves bouts of despair or hopelessness. But existential crisis is not just depression. Many accounts of depression describe it as an alien force – like a black dog – that hounds and traps the real self (Foley 2005). Existential crisis is not always, or merely, like that. Rather, it is a way of seeing the world antithetical to living. An apt account of what it is like comes from Tolstoy: “A person could live only so long as he was drunk; but the moment he sobered up, he could not help seeing that all that was only a deception, and a stupid deception at that! Really, there was nothing funny and ingenious about it, but only something cruel and stupid” (2007: 9). Here, to ‘live’ is not merely to be biological alive. It is the
exercise of agency in pursuit of ends. And crisis sets in when we worry that nothing matters. Life is otiose with nothing to live for.

For those in existential crisis, an answer to the question – “Why should I do something rather than nothing?” – is hard to come by. Appeals to current health and well-being, to future fulfillment and satisfaction, or to potential success are not merely ineffectual but frustrating in that they miss the point. The concern isn’t with what is good for those in crisis, what they want, how they might eventually feel, or what they might find meaningful in the future. The concern was whether anything was worth caring about – whether anything they could do had meaning.

1.2: A Sense of Meaning

Those in existential crisis lack what we might call a ‘sense of meaning.’ Many people have a sense of meaning regarding the activities and projects they engage in (including their life as a whole). Understanding this sense of meaning as involving a propensity to agree with sentences like “In general I consider my life to be meaningful” and “taking all things together, I feel I am living meaningfully,” psychologists have explored the conditions under which this propensity arises by looking to how it correlates with various activities (R. Baumeister et al. 2012).

But my interest is in the nature of this ‘sense of meaning’ and how it might inform an account of meaningfulness. Like a belief, a sense of meaning is a representation of the way things are. A sense of meaning is about something. This is because – as Antti Kauppinen notes – “it is possible for one to be mistaken about how meaningful one’s life is” (forthcoming: 4). That we are so mistaken is, after all, what those in existential crises usually think about the rest of us. And there could be no mistake in representing how meaningful one’s life is without there being
an attempt at representation. Dis-analogously from some other sensations like pain, “the concept of meaningfulness is distinct from the concept of sense of meaning” (forthcoming: 5).

Unlike a belief, a sense of meaning does not represent the way things are generally. Rather, it only takes agential action as its target. We judge that acts – whether a singular action, an extended activity, or an entire life – are meaningful (or not). A single sacrificial act like leaping on an explosive to save others might be meaningful but so too might a sustained scientific inquiry into antibiotic research or a lifetime devoted to resisting oppression. While some might doubt that ‘meaningful’ refers to the same relation when used to describe both acts and lives, this is only plausible when we neglect the particular sense of ‘living’ as agential pursuit of ends with which we are concerned. Talk of ‘the act of living’ or ‘the life we lead’ expresses this natural sense of ‘to live.’ We specify the particular end pursued – and often thereby the implied worth of that end – when we state what we ‘live for.’ In this sense ‘living’ is an activity just as donating to charity, dancing the mambo, or philosophizing on the meaning of life are activities. To have a sense of meaning is to judge that some activity is meaningful.

From this, it follows that the representative aim of a sense of meaning is meaningful activity. Whatever it is that a sense of meaning represents the world as having is what makes activity meaningful. So by reflecting on the aim of a sense of meaning, we can discover what the state of affairs would need to be like for an activity to be meaningful and thereby come to an account of meaningful activity.

26 Some might doubt that ‘meaningful’ refers to the same relation when attached to ‘lives’ rather than ‘acts.’ This ignores the sense of ‘living’ with which we are concerned.
1.3: A Sense of ‘Meaning’

But before we can adequately reflect on a sense of meaning, we need to clarify the relevant sense of ‘meaning.’ What is distinctive about the sense under consideration? The worry central to existential crises was that nothing we could do has meaning. Presumably, this includes activities like writing a letter. Yet the words of a letter have meaning in the sense that the words have referents. And the act of writing the letter might also be meaningful to someone in the sense that the act itself symbolizes something they take to matter, such as the love of a child. Moreover, the letter itself is meant to be read as an artifact constructed for that purpose. And since letters are rarely written without the writer’s intending to do so, it is obvious that someone could mean to write a letter. The letter writer might even believe the act of writing was meaningful. Yet despite agreeing to all of the above, it could still be coherent to maintain that writing a letter is without meaning; that doing such a thing is meaningless. It is this last sense of ‘meaning’ that concerns us.

Now we can see how our sense of ‘meaning’ is distinct from those other senses. It is evaluative. It is about what is worth actively doing. And as the quote from Teller’s novel points out, acts are only worth doing insofar as things matter. An act is worth doing when it is in pursuit of, or itself consists in, a worthy end. This is why certain appeals to those in existential crisis miss the point. They presume that which the existential worry calls into question: that health, well-being, or a successful career is worth pursuing. To be told that some people ‘recover’ from their existential crisis and see those things as worthwhile again is cold comfort. It is, extending Tolstoy’s metaphor, to tell the sober that everything will be better when they are once again drunk. Rather, it makes sense for those who find everything meaningless to be in despair. If
nothing is worth doing then these attitudes are also fitting. They would be representing the world as it is – without hope of anything better.

Similarly, to have a sense of meaning about what one does is often to be fulfilled, satisfied or appreciative. Worries about the meaningfulness of what we do usually don’t come upon us when we are happily involved in some project. This is borne out in the psychology literature where one of the strongest correlates with a sense of meaning is a sense of happiness (Baumeister et al. 2012: 6). If ‘meaning’ is evaluative then this makes sense as well. To appreciate, or to be fulfilled or satisfied by, an activity is to take that activity to be valuable (and perhaps more besides). These attitudes are often fitting when we are engaged in worthy pursuits. Without a sense of meaning – and the value it represents – it would be strange for such attitudes to arise. Their correlation is no mystery as we should expect to see a sense of meaning when fulfilled.

So, for an act to be meaningful it must be in pursuit of a worthy end. But not just any worthy end. Some ends are worth pursuing simply as a matter of obligation. For example, if I borrow your book and lose it, I am obligated to replace it (unless you waive that obligation). My going to the bookstore for a replacement is worth it. But living solely for obligation is not meaningful in the sense that those in existential crisis are after. You do not infuse your life with meaning by repeatedly breaking someone’s possessions so that you may be obligated to compensate them. Rather, the end must be worthy of pursuit independent of obligation.  

27 To situate this (incomplete) analysis in the literature, it is compatible with Antti Kauppinen’s Fitting Attitudes Analysis of Meaningfulness in lives but incompatible with Erik Wielenberg’s tri-partite analysis. Kauppinen thinks that “S’s life is meaningful to the degree it is fitting for S to have agential pride, feelings of fulfillment, and confident hope, and for others to admire S’s life and be inspired or elevated by it” (forthcoming: 7). For Wielenberg, a meaningful life is either supernaturally meaningful when it has “a purpose that is assigned by a supernatural
Section II: The Features of Meaningful Activity

From this preliminary analysis, we arrive at the first feature of meaningful activity that an account must capture:

a. ‘Meaning’ in the sense we’re discussing is normative.

Moreover, the successful account must do so in a way that captures the particular normative character of meaningful acts. Meaningful acts are worth active pursuit and engagement. Refraining from violating someone’s rights might be ‘worth doing’ in some sense but would not count as meaningful. Moreover, acting meaningfully is about more than meeting one’s obligations. Certain pursuits might be obligatory, such as working to fulfill a promise or to make amends for a wrongdoing, but neither is particularly meaningful.

An account must also make sense of those conditions which correlate strongly with a sense of meaning in individuals. These correlations help us determine the constitutive aim of a sense of meaning by revealing what those with a sense of meaning actually aim at. Moreover, by revealing the logical relation between correlated judgments, an account makes sense of how they might both be true, and plausible, given background assumptions. I have already discussed the correlation between happiness and meaningfulness. But there are other weaker, though still significant, correlates:

b. Self-identification with prayer, giving, and taking care of children as a parent.
That is, there is a correlation between a person affirming on a survey that these activities “reflect me” and that person also affirming sentences like, “In general, I consider my life to be meaningful” (R. Baumeister et al. 2012).

We also make intuitive judgments about the meaningfulness of what others do in both real and fictional scenarios. An account of meaning will be preferable to the extent that it can vindicate or explain away these judgments, especially those concerning paradigm cases of meaningfulness:

c. Campaigning against injustice is meaningful (e.g. Anthony, Gandhi, King).
d. Tending to others’ suffering is meaningful (e.g. Mother Teresa, Salk, Aid Work).
e. Advancing human knowledge is meaningful (e.g. Galileo, Curie, Einstein).
f. Great acts of creation are meaningful (e.g. the Taj Mahal, Michelangelo, van Gogh).

In addition to the features of meaningfulness, an account of meaningful activity should explain the conditions of meaninglessness:

g. Nothing is meaningful in the absence of God.
h. Our cosmic insignificance renders our actions meaningless.
i. Nothing is meaningful because nothing lasts.

These various features of meaningful and meaningless activity compose the data for an account of meaningfulness to explain. The test is to see which account can do so in the most parsimonious and consistent manner.
Section III: Evaluating Accounts in the Literature

Criteria in hand, we can now make progress evaluating accounts of meaningful activity. Both the philosophical and popular literatures are rife with remarks on meaningful activity and the meaning of life. From these literatures, we can draw out broad families of accounts to test.

3.1: Three Families

Harry Frankfurt (2002) and Richard Taylor (Baier 2007) have both argued for attitude accounts on which the acting agent’s own psychology is relevant to an activity’s being meaningful. Details vary, but an activity is meaningful on these accounts when it is desired or fulfilling in someone way to the one who does it. On one understanding, existentialist accounts of meaning are a kind of attitude account. The attitudinal existentialist thinks we act meaningfully when we act in good faith with our feelings and desires.

Purpose accounts are also popular in the literature. William Lane Craig (2008), John Cottingham (2003), and other religious thinkers take a divine being, like the Christian God, to have a central role in the meaningfulness of our acts and lives. Exactly which sort of role the divine plays for meaningfulness is a matter of dispute, even among believers otherwise in agreement. But perhaps most common is the view that an activity is meaningful just in case it accords with God’s will for us. Not all purpose accounts are about divine purposes though. As another interpretation of existentialists would have it, the agent’s own purposes might be sufficient. And purposes need not just be the result of intention. We might also think that we have a biological purpose in virtue of our evolutionary history.

Less popular in the philosophical literature, but rising in prominence, are narrative accounts. The paradigmatic bearers of meaning are linguistic entities like words, sentences, and
narratives. As it happens, activities, and particularly lives, can have a narrative structure to them. So, perhaps, meaningful lives and activities just are those with a narrative structure.

How do these broad families fare in general as accounts of meaning in the sense we are after? Not well. Each fails to respect the normativity of meaning. Attitude accounts imply that any activity is potentially meaningful. But certain activities are simply not worth pursuing no matter how much we might be into them. Likely candidates include gratuitously immoral acts or counting blades of grass. Purpose accounts are also problematic as Robert Nozick has pointed out (1981). Living in accordance with malevolent or capricious purposes – like being food for alien farmers or endlessly jumping through literal hoops for a trickster god – are not worth pursuing. Indeed, Sisyphus lives in accordance with divine purpose as he endlessly rolls a heavy stone up a hill only to see it roll back down as he nears the crest. Yet Sisyphus and his divinely mandated punishment compose the paradigm case of meaninglessness (Camus 1955). Purposes inferred from biology fare no better. Cryogenically freezing ourselves until such a time as our genetic material can be widely disseminated would be an effective means of fulfilling our evolutionary purpose (such as it is) but hardly seems a meaningful project nonetheless. Narratives too are not worth pursuing simply as narratives. A narrative may be a cautionary tale, like one of Aesop’s fables, where the point is that the events of the narrative are not worth replicating. A life with such a narrative structure is, by its own lights, not worth leading.

Furthermore, it is a mystery on all of these accounts why existential crises ever arise in teens or otherwise. Few in existential crisis fail to recognize that people have attitudes, purposes, or lives that comport with some narrative structure. Some even acknowledge that people have

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28 Credit goes to Arthur Ward for the example.
divine purposes or, at least, could do so coherently. Yet they nonetheless think everything is meaningless.

3.2: Hybridization

One common strategy in the literature is to avoid these problems by building normative constraints into their otherwise favored account of meaningfulness. Attitudes, purposes, and narratives can suffice but only when valuable. Call this the hybridization strategy. Fitting attitude accounts, like that advocated by Susan Wolf, hold that meaningful activities are those towards which we have a fitting desire or which fittingly fulfill us (and such attitudes never befit mindless mayhem) (2010). Similarly, apologists for purpose and narrative accounts might say that activity is meaningful only when it accords to good purposes or narratives.

But hybridization is costly. Such accounts are often too restrictive. To illustrate the point with fitting attitude accounts, surely some activities can be meaningful without the agent having any attitude, or only negative attitudes, towards them.\(^{29}\) Finishing up one’s magnum opus while dying of cancer might be agonizingly painful for Sigmund Freud, such that he can no longer feel fulfilled or satisfied, but might nonetheless be worth doing. Alternatively, Mother Teresa might lose her desire to tend to the sick and dying but still act meaningfully if she persists in her charity out of stubbornness or habit. The same holds for purposes and narratives. An accidental hero might meaningfully save someone’s life without the deed according to a purpose or a narrative structure.\(^{30}\)

\(^{29}\) For an extended discussion of this point, see the previous paper in this dissertation.

\(^{30}\) This is on the charitable assumption that acts can fail to accord with purposes or narratives. If they cannot then such accounts fail to explain anything as every act meets the criteria.
The hybridization strategy seeks to salvage the intuitive appeal of attitudes, purposes, and narratives for meaning by building those in to the account of meaningful activity. We shouldn’t hold out hope for its success for two reasons. First, the intuitive appeal of such judgments seems to rest, at least in part, on conflation between the sense of ‘meaning’ we are using here and another sense. After all, each account neatly corresponds to one of the alternate senses of ‘meaning’ teased apart earlier in the example of meaningless letter writing. Second, by building in a normative constraint hybridization saddles these accounts with a further explanatory burden. What is it about two otherwise unrelated features that makes them jointly necessary and sufficient for meaningfulness (e.g. why both attitudes and fittingness)? An account which can capture the role of attitudes, purposes, and narratives without building them in to the account itself avoids this burden. And the hybridization strategy itself suggests such an account. Good attitudes, good purposes, and good narratives are unified by their goodness. So perhaps the meaningfulness of an activity is simply a matter of its goodness. The normative component tacked-on to limit the scope of such these families of accounts ends up doing all of the explanatory work.

3.3: A Case Study of Hybridization

To see this second point more clearly, consider a sophisticated narrative account such as Antti Kauppinen’s teleological view of meaningful lives:

S’s life is meaningful to the degree that it is defined by identity-shaping engagement in challenging projects that build on the past in successful pursuit of something objectively valuable. (forthcoming: 10)
To unpack this account, we need to understand the technical language Kauppinen deploys. First, as he understands it, life “comprises of self-relevant actions and events” (forthcoming: 8). Second, those actions and events are defined by engagement in superordinate projects which are the ultimate aim of one’s actions (e.g. the project of raising happy children subordinates the act of driving them to fun activities) (forthcoming: 8). Presumably, engagement is identity-shaping when it is with those superordinate projects that define our lives. Third, a project builds on the past when it “positively inform[s] later goal-setting, goal-seeking, and goal-achievement” (forthcoming: 9). Or, said another way, when it “change[s] us for the better for later activities” (forthcoming: 9). Putting it all together, we might restate Kauppinen’s account as:

S’s self-relevant actions and events are meaningful to the degree that they are part of challenging projects that change S for the better and are in the successful pursuit of objectively valuable ends.

It is not clear why the successful pursuit of something objectively valuable is not meaningful (rather than simply less meaningful) without challenge and self-improvement. After all, altruism for some is hardly a challenging project – a few clicks on a website and a portion of one’s immense inheritance goes to saving lives – but such altruism is plausibly meaningful. Even if foregoing material wealth is challenging, as it is for many, a person for whom such altruism is easy does not have a less meaningful life! Rather, when we want a life of meaning we might strive to emulate such a person.

Kauppinen may, of course, respond to these criticisms by modifying his account slightly. He might say instead that self-improvement and overcoming challenge enhance the meaningfulness of a life rather than constrain which lives have meaning. So, while privileged
altruists may act meaningfully, they act less meaningfully than those who act similarly but overcome challenge or better themselves in the process.

While such a modification is easy enough, it misses the deeper challenge to Kauppinen’s account and hybrid accounts more generally. The challenge is not whether accounts can be modified to capture the relevant judgments but how they capture those judgments. Hybrid accounts recognize that value is essential for meaningfulness. But they think other factors matter as well. Self-improvement and overcoming challenge are, for Kauppinen, essential features of meaningfulness independent of their value. However, those and whatever else might make a compelling narrative, as well as positive feelings and noble purposes all plausibly enhance the value of projects with valuable ends. For example, consider some charitable project which prevents the spread of malaria. As valuable as such a project is by itself, it could be improved if it also gave great satisfaction to those engaging in it. The challenge is for those advocating hybridization to explain why the total value of an activity is inadequate to explain the meaningfulness of an activity when it can equally well capture the appeal of things like attitudes, purposes, and narratives.

3.4: Axiological Accounts

The most promising accounts in the literature are those that make the normativity of meaningfulness central to the account in just this way. On these accounts the meaningfulness of an activity consists entirely of that which satisfies the normativity requirement. Robert Audi and Aaron Smuts provide us two examples. Audi suggests that, “a life is meaningful on the basis of the good that is realized in it or the good created by it” (2005: 343). Worth noting is that by allowing the good created by a life to contribute to its meaningfulness, Audi leaves open the
possibility of meaningful, but only instrumentally valuable, lives. Accumulating donations for a non-profit is only valuable insofar as those donations are put towards a valuable end but provided they are put towards a valuable end, accumulating donations might nonetheless be meaningful. However, he is explicit that he is providing only sufficient conditions for meaningfulness (2005: 330). Audi’s account is therefore incomplete. Smuts goes further and endorses the *good cause account* of meaningful activity on which the promotion of the good, either intrinsically or instrumentally, is *all there is* to meaningfulness (2013: 12). To promote the good, on this account, is simply to be causally responsible for an improvement to the actual state of affairs (2013: 12).\(^\text{31}\)

**Section IV: The Positive Difference Account**

Like Smuts and Audi, I endorse an axiological account of meaningfulness. On my account, an activity is meaningful because it makes a positive difference. Motivating this account is the commonplace thought that meaningful activity makes a difference. Charities and philanthropic organizations – the sorts of organizations that attract those in search of meaning – often characterize their work as making a difference. Whether such charities are successful in actually making a difference is beside the point. Believing that it does provides those engaged in charitable work a sense of meaning. My account vindicates their sense of meaning, if they are making the difference they think they are.

\(^{31}\) It is worth noting that, although Smut’s account is correct in tying meaningfulness to goodness, he misunderstands the implications of his account. Smuts thinks nihilism about “objective” value, if true, would undermine his account. The good cause account is therefore “off the table for nihilists” (2013: 22). This is a mistake. The good cause account of meaningfulness is on the table for nihilists because they could just conced that nothing is meaningful. If the nihilist is correct, it simply turns out that no one is causally responsible for an improvement to the actual state of affairs.
Of course, not every difference is a positive one. A devastating natural disaster like an earthquake or hurricane makes a tremendous difference. When we speak of ‘making a difference’ in the context of philanthropic work, we implicitly exclude those sorts of differences by referring only to positive differences. What does it mean to ‘make a positive difference’? As I take it, an act makes a positive difference compared to an alternative when the state of affairs in which that act occurred is better than the alternative state of affairs where, all else equal, it did not. Thus, successfully fighting oppression is more meaningful than lying in bed all day which is in turn more meaningful than perpetuating oppression.33

How is making a positive difference distinct from promoting the good? Each compares the value of a different pair of worlds. Promoting the good, as Smuts’ explicitly characterizes it, involves a comparison between the “actual world” (i.e. state of affairs as it is) and “the nearest possible world where you did not exist” (i.e. state of affairs as it otherwise would have been, all else equal) (2013: 17-18). Our accounts are extensionally equivalent about which acts are more meaningful than others. But Smuts also thinks, “Lives that are below a threshold of this kind of value are meaningless, or worse, they might have anti-meaning or negative meaning.” (2013: 2-3). To talk of ‘anti-meaning’ or ‘negative meaning’ radically revises how we typically talk of meaningfulness. Moreover, it introduces new difficulties, as there is no obviously good way of specifying this threshold. Instead, I think we should stick with what Kauppinen calls, “the standard semantics for gradable adjectives” according to which “sentences of the form ‘S’s life is

32 Due to problems with ‘triggering’ cases, which are structurally analogous to problems of over-determination in the metaphysics of causation, locating the relevant alternative is tricky. I cannot resolve such issues here. Instead, I merely note that this is no special problem for my account. For some discussion of these problems in the moral domain, see (Kagan 2011).

33 I note here an implication with which some might disagree. On my account, it can be meaningful to act even if the state of affairs will be inevitably be worse than when one started. That is, the relevant comparison is not between the state of affairs as it is and the state of affairs as it will be. Instead, the comparison is between the state of affairs as it will be and the state of affairs as it would otherwise have been. I think this captures the judgment that it can be worthwhile to engage in hopeless opposition to extinction, if only to give people one more day of happiness.
meaningful’ are true when S’s life is more meaningful than some portion of lives in the contextually salient contrast class” (forthcoming: 7).

Adopting these semantics has methodological implications for how we evaluate cases of meaningfulness. Kauppinen notes:

Given that the truth of unqualified claims about meaning in life varies with context, we should be wary of intuitions concerning meaningfulness as such. We’re better off asking ourselves which features would make life more or less meaningful, or what would make life ideally meaningful.” (forthcoming: 7)

I will proceed as if Kauppinen, rather than Smuts, is correct about how we should talk of meaningfulness.

4.1: Extensional Adequacy

Any successful account of meaningfulness must explain, or explain away, the apparent meaningfulness of paradigm cases. As noted above in Section II, such cases include the lives and acts of those who combat injustice, pursue excellence in art and science, and help those in need. On a plausible axiology, the positive difference each of these activities makes accounts for its meaningfulness. The world is a better place with less suffering and oppression and more understanding and beauty. And thereby, those who successfully pursue such ends do so meaningfully.

This brings out an important feature of the positive difference account. By explaining meaningful activity in normative terms, it cannot answer whether any particular activity is meaningful without a prior commitment to which states of affairs are better or worse. This
affords the account a certain amount of flexibility in capturing the meaningfulness of particular activities. In my discussion so far, I have spoken confidently of certain activities being meaningful on the hope that my assumed axiological commitments are shared by my readers. When they are not shared, we should expect disagreement. Indeed, this illustrates how the positive difference account can accommodate widespread disagreement about what is meaningful. We should expect such disagreement to occur whenever people have different axiological commitments.

4.2: Nihilism, Religion, and Significance

Obviously, the positive difference account captures the normativity of meaning. That an act makes a positive difference, either as a consequence or in itself, is a strong consideration in favor of doing it. This is because better states of affairs are worth pursuing. And so the positive difference account also explains how nihilism about value undermines meaning. If such nihilism is true then no state of affairs is better than any other. It follows that no acts would be meaningful.

By explaining the relevance of nihilism to meaningful activity in this way, the positive difference account also has the resources to explain how God might be necessary for meaning. Many – both religious and non-religious alike – think the existence of God or some other supernatural force is required for anything to be better or worse (Craig 2008). Consider Bertrand Russell’s evocative description of the world absent such a force:

Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no
heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.

(2007)

The not implausible thought is that, in such a world, existence is nothing more than an arraignment of valueless particles in the void. The nihilist would have it right. So, per the positive difference account, no rearranging of such particles could be meaningful. Like Russell, I do not think the existence of God is necessary for some states of affairs to be better than others. But that is not what is important. What is important is that the positive difference account explains how God or some other supernatural force might seem to be necessary for meaningful activity, as so many think they are. And it can do so given the background assumptions that many have about value. Given those assumptions, a supernatural force like God is necessary for us to act meaningfully.

This explanation works well enough for the direct role that many think God plays for meaningfulness but it does not entirely capture the thought that religiosity, or spirituality more generally, are also important for meaningful activity. This thought is widely shared as indicated by the strong correlation between prayer and the belief that one’s life is meaningful. The positive difference account can also explain how spirituality, and prayer in particular, might be relevant for meaningfulness. Prayer is the means by which the religious often take themselves to communicate or connect with the supernatural force that is the source of value. By praying, they affirm that the lives they have chosen to lead are of worth. Exactly what this affirmation consists
in is a matter of theological dispute. In some traditions prayer provides guidance towards the 
good in the form of literal communication from the divine. In others prayer serves as a means to 
reflect on the divine and thus discover what is worthwhile. Or perhaps the act of prayer itself is 
what is meaningful as Emil Fackenheim writes, “In the eyes of Judaism, whatever meaning life 
acquires derives from this encounter: the Divine accepts and confirms the human in the moment 
of meeting” (2007: 32). Whatever is actually going on, each is consistent with the positive 
difference account. Those who pray usually see the object of their prayer as the source of the 
good but also that prayer somehow taps into, or grants access to, that goodness. Given all this, 
prayer facilitates meaningful activity by facilitating good action.

In its accounting for nihilism, the positive difference account also has the resources to 
explain why the significance of our lives is relevant to how meaningful they are. Doubts about 
the meaningfulness of our activities arise in contexts where the significance of our lives is in 
doubt. When people look to the cosmos and contemplate how small and limited our lives are in 
comparison to the age and size of the universe, it is not uncommon for people to wonder if their 
actions “really matter” (Camus 1955; Nagel 1971; Rescher 1990; Blackburn 2001; Craig 2008; 
Landau 2011; Seachris 2013). The vast majority of events in the universe will, and would have, 
gone on just the same without us. This is worrying.

How could the vastness of the universe undermine meaningfulness? When we look at a 
clear night sky or visit a planetarium we get a sense – sometimes loosely referred to as a 
perspective sub specie aeternitatis – of the vast scale of the universe. And it becomes hard to at 
once imagine the universe at its true scale and those differences which we take to matter. All 
human existence, never mind an individual human life, is so miniscule on this scale that the 
impact of human actions is imperceptible. We would need to stop our imaginings and refocus our
attention on the world around us in order to once again detect those things we take to be worthwhile. The positive difference account makes sense of this. On it, an activity is meaningless if it makes no difference. We should expect that when we lose track of those positive differences in our imagining, we would no longer see our actions as meaningful. And this is precisely what happens for many who contemplate the cosmic vastness.

4.3: Comparative Meaningfulness and the Universal Scale

The scale of the universe can seem to diminish the meaningfulness of our actions by comparison as well. Guy Kahane has argued that the universe in its vastness contains the possibility that our actions might be of some absolute significance and yet insignificant in comparison to other unknown grander deeds (2013). Since the same can be said of the meaningfulness of our behavior, our actions might be meaningless in comparison to other unknown grander deeds. Any adequate account of meaningfulness should explain why this is so. The positive difference account can do so.

To see this point more clearly, consider comparisons of meaningfulness more generally (and on a terrestrial scale). When we consider what we might accomplish and whether it is meaningful, we may do so in comparison to the activities of momentous historical figures like Edward Jenner. Jenner’s research on smallpox, and subsequent creation of the first vaccine, has saved more lives than perhaps any other (“BBC - History - Edward Jenner” 2014). Billions more have been spared the agonies of preventable disease. And these are just the direct benefits of vaccinations. The indirect benefits are beyond any practical countenance. Even dedicated and effective philanthropists will likely never do so well for so many. All we’ve ever done, or will
do, likely pales in the comparison. We can lose track of the worth of our own deeds by fixating on this comparison.

It is plausible to say then that Jenner’s life is more meaningful than the average. An account of meaningfulness needs to allow that some acts are more meaningful than others. But many accounts of meaningfulness fail to permit any such comparisons. For example, if an activity is meaningful because we are fittingly fulfilled by it, as Wolf supposes, then it isn’t clear why Jenner’s research is any more meaningful than a modest donation to the Against Malaria Foundation. Both are potentially fulfilling and fittingly so. Wolf’s account gives no indication of what is relevant for comparison.34

The positive difference account permits such comparisons. Some positive differences are greater than others. Jenner’s actions made the world a better place than my actions likely will. On the positive difference account, the degree to which an act is more meaningful just is the degree to which it makes a positive difference. So, Jenner’s actions were more meaningful than my own are likely to be.

Merely allowing for comparisons between acts isn’t enough. Comparisons on the universal scale are supposed to pose a special problem by drastically enlarging the salient contrast class. In comparison to what might occur, human action – even those of notables such as Jenner – is supposed to be meaningless. An account makes sense of this concern, even if doesn’t ultimately vindicate it, by allowing for the possibility.

34 Of course, such accounts could be reformulated to do so. For example, a small change to Wolf’s account would allow it comparison between activities. My point is that such a change is necessary to account for the various features of meaningful activity.
Not every account of what is meaningful can do so, even among those which otherwise allow for comparisons of meaningfulness between activities. Some accounts use a comparative metric with an upper bound. That is, there is a point at which an activity is so maximally meaningful that no activity could possibly be more meaningful. Once the universe is large enough to permit such a maximally meaningful activity, then its size becomes irrelevant. For example, consider again Kauppinen’s teleological view. On it, an activity is meaningful to the extent that it defines the acting agent’s life in a certain positive way. At some point, one far less than the unfathomable vastness of our own universe, the size of the universe becomes irrelevant to how defining an activity is to a life. There is an upper-bound to how defined a life may be. Kauppinen’s account, therefore, cannot make sense of why our acts might be meaningless at the scale of the universe.

The positive difference account allows for the possibility that our actions are meaningless on the universal scale. There is no (obvious) upper-bound to how large a positive difference can be. If saving more lives is better than saving fewer, then, in principle, we could always save more lives. How large a positive difference an action can make is dependent on circumstantial constraints, such as the size of the universe. As the size of the universe increases, so too does the potential size of positive differences. In a universe as vast as ours, we can only make miniscule differences compared to what is possible. By taking meaningfulness to be a matter of positive

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35 An account might also fail to capture the special problem of the scale of the universe poses by using a metric for comparison that has no upper-bound but is nonetheless insensitive to elements that can increase with the size of the universe. I do not think anyone has proposed such an account in the literature and so merely note the possibility.

36 Ultimately, I do not think such possible comparisons diminish the actual meaningfulness of our acts. A meaningful act of compassion – such as the provision of medicine to an injured child – is not diminished even against the backdrop of the myriad heroics and horrors that constitute a wartime triage center. The well-being of children remains a worthy pursuit even if the need is great. While some might not share the intuition that aiding the injured child is meaningful, especially when we consider that hundreds or thousands more suffer, recall that the relevant intuition is whether aiding the child is more meaningful than the alternative.
difference making, we can thereby account for the possible meaninglessness of human action on the scale of our universe.

4.4: A Better Explanation

In addition to what an account implies, we may evaluate it on how it accounts for things, as well. When the positive difference account and a competitor account both imply some act is or isn’t meaningful, the positive difference account generally offers a better sort of explanation than its competitors.

Consider, for example, the widely held judgment that being a parent can be meaningful. Every plausible account of meaningfulness can vindicate this judgment. Where they differ is on why parenthood is meaningful. On attitudinal accounts, if the activities of those in existential crisis aren’t meaningful, it is because they are depressed or fail to see the value of their actions. On the positive difference account, it’s because they’re right. Contra purpose accounts, taking care of our children isn’t meaningful because of our evolutionary past or because someone else intends for us to do so. Rather it is because children are worth taking care of. And this is what the positive difference account suggests. It is better that our children be cared for. It is not, as narrative accounts suggest, that parenthood is meaningful because it makes a good story.

Even in those cases friendliest to narrative accounts, the positive difference account still does better. Irena Sendler saved thousands of Jewish children from Nazi death camps, survived torture by the Gestapo, and, due to a daring rescue attempt, narrowly escaped execution as she was being led to her death for her heroic deeds. Her actions were meaningful and they make a compelling narrative. But, as Sendler herself recognizes, comporting to a narrative structure is not what makes what she did meaningful, “Every child saved with my help and the help of all the
wonderful secret messengers, who today are no longer living, is the justification of my existence on this earth” (Hevesi 2008). The children justify her existence – give her life meaning – because their lives were (and are) valuable. It was good to save them.

4.5: Concluding Remarks

The positive difference account is explanatorily powerful. It captures the requisite judgments and does so in an intuitively compelling way. No other prominent account does so well at making sense of meaningfulness.

Section V: Objections

Yet, despite its successes as an account of meaningfulness, the positive difference account is not uncontroversial. In what follows, I address some concerns from the literature and, what I take to be, the strongest objections to the account.

5.1: No Theory of Objective Value

The positive difference does not imply that any state of affairs is better than any other. Christine Vitrano has raised the concern that without an account of what makes some states of affairs better than others we ought to refrain from making judgments about which activities are meaningful. She takes it that, “we ought to resist making judgments about meaning unless we have a viable theory of objective value” (2012: 12). This is an application of a general injunction to “use evaluative concepts we understand and leave aside those we don’t” (2012: 12). Presumably, this objection to Wolf’s account applies to my account as well – we ought to resist making judgments about meaning unless we have a viable theory of goodness.
This objection absurdly requires that a phenomenon be explained by a viable theory before we are justified in judging that it has occurred. Consider an analogy. An axiology is a theoretical account of the good as physics is a theoretical account of physical phenomena. So to say our judgments about the good are unjustified without such a theory is like saying our judgments about physical phenomena are unjustified without a viable physics. Clearly though, some judgments about physical phenomena by those lacking a theory of physics are justified. So too are some judgments about the good – suffering usually makes things worse, enjoyment usually makes things better, ending injustice is good, oppression is bad, and so on. We are therefore justified in making some judgments about what is meaningful. Alleviating suffering and ending oppression are, usually, meaningful endeavors.

Moreover, Vitrano’s claim here appears self-defeating. Even leaving aside questions of what makes a theory viable – and whether we have a viable theory of such viability – her claim that we ought to resist making judgments invokes an epistemic ought. But the available accounts of epistemic normativity are just as viable as the available axiologies. So, in the absence of a relevant difference between evaluative and normative concepts, Vitrano’s objection violates her general injunction too.

5.2: Wrong Meaning

Previously in the paper, I distinguished how Smuts understands the semantics of meaningfulness from Kauppinen’s understanding, which I share. Smuts takes it to be an absurd implication of this understanding that exceptionally bad acts are meaningful if they are even a little bit better than the alternative where they did not occur. I think this begs the question against a gradable understanding of ‘meaningful.’ On our understanding, judgments about what is
meaningful depend on the salient contrast class. While it is true then that exceptionally bad acts are *more meaningful* than even worse alternatives, they are not meaningful as we usually conceive of meaningful acts.

I think Smuts’ concern suggests a stronger objection to the positive difference account, though it is one which applies equally well to the good cause account. The objection is that wrong-doing cannot be meaningful but on the positive difference view it can. After all, it seems possible that an action might make the world a better place and yet still be wrong.

Earlier, I drew a distinction between types of normative assessment and suggested that wrong acts or acts that ought not to be done all things considered might nonetheless still be meaningful. This objection denies that possibility. If an act is wrong then it is not in pursuit of a worthy end.

This objection is unmotivated. Consider the debate concerning the relationship between the wrong and the good. We might think that whether an act is wrong, it still might promote the good nonetheless. Alternatively, we might think that wrongness is such that wrong acts cannot promote the good. How we get to an outcome constrains the comparative goodness of that outcome such that the outcomes of wrong acts are never good.

The *Wrong Meaning* objection is incompatible with this latter alternative. After all, if acting wrongly constrains the positive difference of the act then wrong acts cannot be meaningful since wrong acts never make a positive difference. So, those pressing the objection must deny that goodness is constrained by wrongness.

If wrong acts *can* be good in some respects, then it seems no less plausible to claim that wrong acts can be meaningful in some respects. Whatever our motivation for denying the latter
claim, it seems to cut just as well against the former. Once it is granted that actions can be both wrong and good (or even best!), I accept the possibility that actions can be both wrong and meaningful. This is not to exculpate wrongdoers. Someone may act meaningfully and nonetheless be a blameworthy scoundrel.

For this objection to succeed, it needs to be established that wrongdoing can be good in some respect without thereby also providing the means to establish that wrongdoing can be meaningful in some respect. Without some independent motivation to regard meaningfulness as relevantly dissimilar to the good, the objection fails. I do not hold out hope that such motivation is forthcoming.

5.3: Accidental Meaning

My account also seems to imply that some acts are meaningful even when the positive difference they make is accidental. The person who accidentally contaminated the Petri dishes with *Penicillium* fungi that led to the discovery of penicillin made a positive a difference. Yet to call such accidental contamination ‘meaningful’ is counter intuitive.

Here I accept the implication. But I think there is good reason to do so independent of my theoretical commitments. Let’s clarify what is at issue in this case. It is not whether the contaminator was responsible for the discovery of penicillin or whether they deserve credit or praise for it. Rather, the issue is whether it was worth it for the contaminator to do whatever he did that day which led to the contamination. I think it was.

Spelling out the case makes accepting the implication more palatable. Imagine that on that fateful morning the contaminator was thinking, like teenagers in existential crisis do, about skipping work to just lie in bed all day. Perhaps he was eager for an upcoming holiday with the
family or, as a rather untidy person, was simply reluctant to clean the laboratory. What sort of information would be relevant to dispelling this belief that keeps the contaminator in bed? Precisely the difference their getting out of bed and going to work makes! Billions will survive otherwise fatal illness, or see loved ones survive, or recover more quickly from their suffering. And as the result of accident or not, these facts make it such that it is worthwhile for the contaminator to get out of bed and go about their day. As the contaminator – Alexander Fleming himself – said, “When I woke up just after dawn on September 28, 1928, I certainly didn’t plan to revolutionize all medicine by discovering the world’s first antibiotic, or bacteria killer. But I guess that was exactly what I did.” and that was meaningful (“The Real Story Behind Penicillin | The Rundown” 2014).

The disagreement about this case is, I think, mostly illusory. On my account, a meaningful act might be the successful pursuit of a valuable end, the value of which is appreciated by the acting agent. But it might also be a whimsical act in pursuit of nothing of importance which just so happens to make the world a better place. I do not dispute that it might be more meaningful for valuable ends to be non-accidentally achieved by virtuous agents acting with eyes wide open. But that is because it might be better that valuable ends are achieved in such a manner. It might be better because it is better for the agents themselves to exhibit such virtues or simply better that such virtuous agents are around. Why it is better is irrelevant to the objection at hand. All that matters for my account is that it is better. My account captures the meaningfulness of intentionality where it makes a positive difference.
5.4: Concluding Remarks

These objections do not successfully refute the positive difference account as a viable account of meaningfulness. Some objections, like Vitrano’s, evince confusion about what an account of meaningfulness should establish. Others provide counter-examples that, once we are careful to distinguish meaningfulness from other sorts of normative considerations, are unpersuasive.

Conclusion

Let us briefly review the discussion so far. There is an interesting sense of ‘meaning’ which applies to activities (and therefore lives as well). Popular accounts of what makes an activity or life meaningful fail as accounts of meaningful activity in this sense. These accounts which locate meaningfulness in attitudes, purposes, functions, and narratives fail to capture the essential normativity of meaningful activity. Meaningful activity is – whatever else – activity worth pursuing. I have suggested an alternative account: activity is meaningful because it makes a positive difference. This account captures the essential normativity of meaningfulness and is a better account of those various features of meaningful activity. I then considered two objections from the literature and what I take to be the strongest criticisms of the positive difference account. I took each of these objections to be unsuccessful. Therefore, I conclude that the positive difference account is the best available account of meaningful activity for the relevant sense of ‘meaning.’ It better vindicates the truth of our common sense judgments about meaningful activity and does so in an explanatorily intuitive way.
CHAPTER III

MEANING’S CONTRIBUTION TO WELL-BEING

Meaningfulness and well-being seem to be connected. People who self-report as being happy tend to also report that they find their lives meaningful (R. Baumeister et al. 2012).37 Moreover, the stereotype of someone who takes everything to be meaningless is that of a person in despair. Even in the deprivations of a Nazi concentration camp, losing one’s sense of meaning was to be feared. Victor Frankl writes of his experiences in such a camp, “Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost” (2006). These correlations and connotations are suggestive. But they imply nothing definite about the relationship between meaningfulness and well-being. There might be nothing to the connection beyond its appearance.

In this paper, my overarching goal is to consider whether there is a connection between meaningfulness and well-being by considering some of the possible ways in which the two might be connected. Of the possibilities considered, I focus primarily on whether acting meaningfully constitutes an improvement to our well-being and argue that it does not.38 Postulating such a connection carries theoretical costs that outstrip any explanatory benefit. Furthermore, given ambiguities in how we talk about meaningfulness and well-being, there is good reason to think that the connection meaningfulness and well-being seem to share is merely apparent.

37 On a survey of adults in the United States, the affirmation of statements like “In general I consider myself happy” had a strong positive correlation with the affirmation of statements like “In general I consider my life meaningful.”

38 In this paper, I do not distinguish between meaningful activities and meaningful lives. Lives, insofar as they matter for the relevant normative sense of meaningfulness, are a species of activity. Thus, what is true of meaningful activities should generally be true of meaningful lives. When and if the distinctive character of lives is relevant to their meaningfulness, should not change my arguments here.
1.1: Well-being

Some crucial preliminaries before my argument: I use ‘well-being’ in the most prevalent philosophical sense as about how well off someone (or thing) is.\textsuperscript{39} An account of well-being explains why something is good for you and does so in terms of the fundamental constituent(s) of well-being. For example, traditional hedonism explains why family, friends, backrubs, and money are usually good for someone – because these things usually give pleasure and some function of one’s pleasure and pain is what constitutes one’s well-being.

Traditional hedonism is just one member of a broader family of ‘experiential’ accounts on which the only constituents of someone’s well-being are that individual’s qualitative experiences (Bentham 1879; Mill 1971; Feldman 2004; Crisp 2006). Other prominent non-experiential accounts include desire (or preference) satisfaction accounts and pluralistic accounts (Railton 1986; Brandt 1998). On desire satisfaction accounts, the only constituent of well-being is how well satisfied the individual’s desires are. Pluralistic accounts, the most prominent of which are called objective list theories, do not have a single basic constituent of well-being but a plurality (Griffin 1986; Hurka 1996; Finnis 2011). Typical pluralistic accounts include as constituents of well-being qualitative experience and satisfied desires but also intimate relationships both platonic and romantic, health, authenticity, and proper functioning.

\textsuperscript{39} There is debate over what has well-being. The broad consensus is that most humans have well-being but disagreement increases the further the concept is taken to extend – from everything with mental states, to non-human animals, to all living things, to everything with teleological organization including toasters, thermometers, and cars. See (Feinberg 2009; Singer 1977; Goodpaster 2012; Varner 2002; Rolston 1989; McShane 2004; Basl and Sandler 2013) for more.
1.2: Meaningfulness

Unlike ‘well-being’, there is no standard sense of ‘meaningfulness’.40 Some understandings of the term apply to acts, others to lives; and there is little agreement about how to understand the term even within those categories. There is not enough space here to provide an adequate analysis of the term and its different senses.41 However, such an analysis is unnecessary here. Our present concern is with the sense of ‘meaningfulness’ that appears connected to well-being. Specifically, we are concerned with ‘meaningfulness’ as the proper object of a sense that one’s actions are worthwhile, the absence of which is associated with despair. A paradigm case of this phenomenon is the teenager in existential crisis. Reflection on this stereotype will show that the relationship between meaningfulness and well-being is not trivial for at least one familiar sense of the term.

The teenager in existential crisis worries that nothing they could do would be meaningful – that everything is meaningless. Perhaps prompted by crisis of faith or realization that entropy will crumble everything, they express the concern in questions such as, “Why do anything at all?” For such teens, appeals to current health and well-being, to future fulfillment and satisfaction, or to potential success are not merely ineffectual but frustrating in that they miss the point. The concern isn’t with what is good for the teen, what they want, how they might eventually feel, or even what they might find meaningful in the future. The concern was whether anything was worth caring about – whether anything they could do was meaningful. Moreover, the teen’s pessimism extends not only to their personal pursuits but those of others as well.

40 For a survey of various uses of the term see (Metz 2001)
41 I attempt to provide just such an analysis in the introduction to this dissertation.
Everyone’s actions are meaningless. Those who think that what they do is meaningful are simply mistaken.

Setting aside whether the teen is ultimately correct, we can see what meaning is to someone expressing this concern. To be in existential crisis is to doubt whether anything is worth active engagement and pursuit. But meaningful activity isn’t just activity worth doing. Certain things might be worth doing simply because they are morally required. But you would not act meaningfully by breaking people’s windows and then fulfilling your obligation to replace them. But it isn’t meaningful to refrain from hurting other people. Rather, when we act meaningfully, it is fitting that we be satisfied with what we have accomplished.

1.3: No Trivial Connection

With these analyses, incomplete as they are, we can already see that the connection between meaningfulness and well-being is not trivial. If an activity is meaningful (in the teen’s sense), whatever else it is, it is worth pursuing. But the same cannot be said of well-being. It is not true by definition that it is worth pursuing one’s own well-being. Absent substantive defense of an account to the contrary, we can sensibly ask whether a life that is good for you is also meaningful. So, meaningful activity is not trivially a matter of activity that improves well-being. If there is to be a connection between meaningfulness and well-being then it must be of some other kind.

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42 Erik Wielenberg stipulates a sense of ‘meaning’ as applying to activities which necessarily enhance one’s well-being (2005). As the case of the teenager in existential crisis shows, not everyone is concerned with that sense of meaning.
Section II: Meaningfulness Partially Constitutes Well-Being

Plausibly, meaningfulness and well-being share an explanatory connection. Specifically, those who act meaningfully are better off if and ultimately because they acted meaningfully.\(^43\) I call this claim the ‘explanatory principle’ as it tells us why an individual is better off if they pursue certain activities over others (though not why they are as well off as they are). It does so by postulating a constituent of well-being – meaningful activity.

2.1: The Explanatory Principle’s Role in an Account of Well-Being

The explanatory principle is incompatible with experiential and desire-satisfaction accounts. To see why, it is important to distinguish the principle from the claim that meaningful activity necessarily contributes to well-being. That claim could be true even if the contribution is a necessary one. For example, someone might be a hedonist about well-being and believe that meaningful activity necessarily involves pleasurable mental states. But this combination of views does not entail the explanatory principle. That is, even if acting meaningfully necessarily makes you better off, it does not yet follow that the meaningfulness of your action is why you are better off. Rather, it could be that you are better off because the act was pleasurable, as in the combination of views above. In such a case, pleasure would be the common explanation for both the meaning of an activity and its contribution to well-being. Meaningfulness and well-being would share a common explanation but would not thereby explain one another.

The explanatory principle is also not itself a complete account of well-being (or at least not a good one). There’s more to well-being than just meaningful activity. Presumably, any plausible account of well-being must recognize that suffering makes one worse off but suffering

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\(^{43}\) Philosophers who (seem to) endorse this latter claim include (Wolf 2010; Kauppinen 2012; Thomson 2001; Thomas 2005; Levy 2005; Metz; Baier 2007)
per se does not make one’s life less meaningful. Consider a life spent resisting oppression, filled with constant suffering and hardship yet exceptionally meaningful. That life would go better for the one who lives it were that suffering to be lessened. So, the explanatory principle requires that a pluralistic account of well-being be the right one. For the sake of argument, I therefore grant that some sort of pluralism about well-being is correct in what follows.

2.2: Motivating the Explanatory Principle

Why believe the explanatory principle in the first place? It is perhaps plausible once we reflect on how meaningful action appears to contribute to the acting agent’s well-being in a case:

Ally and Beth both donate their free time to a cause. Ally raises funds for the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Cultural Artifacts or SPACA for short. SPACA works to preserve historical and cultural artifacts that might otherwise be lost or damaged. These artifacts include ceremonial works, art, manuscripts containing the writings of forgotten languages, and artifacts from myriad ways of life. SPACA preserves these artifacts in the hope that everyone might have access to, and learn from, past ways of human living. Beth works with equal diligence as Ally for an organization also called SPACA. However, this SPACA is the Society for the Preservation of AC Adapters. As their name implies, this group strives with the same earnestness as the first to preserve AC Adapters of all shapes and sizes from the past. This organization too hopes that these AC Adapters may be preserved in the hope that everyone might have access to, and learn from, past ways of human living.
Ally seems to have done something of value in a way that Beth did not. Ally’s actions are more meaningful than Beth’s. Many think that Ally is better off as well. For the sake of argument, let us grant that. A straightforward vindication of these appearances, if they are correct, is that meaning contributes to well-being. After all, Ally and Beth are relevantly similar in almost every other way. They both have the same attitudes and feelings towards their respective causes and engage with those projects in the same way. If there is a difference in their well-being then something must explain that difference. The explanatory principle offers such an explanation.

The explanatory principle can also explain other familiar judgments about well-being. Consider well-worn cases from the well-being literature: the experience machine and the deceived businessperson. In the experience machine, a person is provided as much qualitatively pleasurable experience as is possible but spends the entirety of their existence floating in goo, ignorant of the outside world. The deceived businessperson believes that their life is going well with a good job and a happy and supportive family but, in actuality, the businessperson lives in blissful ignorance of the cruel hoax that their marriage and career actually are, perpetuated by those amused at the businessperson’s deluded and unwitting participation. In both cases, many are apt to think that life in the machine, or life as the businessperson, are not going as well as they could be. The people involved are not maximally well-off. Traditionally, appeals to authenticity or desire satisfaction have been used to explain why. The person in the experience machine is not really participating in the experiences they believe they are having. The pleasure derived from those experiences is thereby inauthentic and authentic pleasure counts more than inauthentic pleasure. The deluded businessperson’s desire is for a loving family and not merely for love.

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44 See Nozick (1974) for the original statement of the experience machine case. The deceived businessperson case is an un-gendered modification of the one in Kagan (1994) which itself is an expanded treatment of ideas found in Nagel (1970).
45 Nozick suggests authenticity might be relevant. Kagan discusses the idea that having what you want – satisfying your desires – plays the relevant role.
the appearance of a loving family. This desire remains unsatisfied and so their life goes worse for them than it otherwise could.

Though not the usual explanation, a difference in meaning does just as well in capturing the phenomena as appeals to authenticity or desire satisfaction. These lives could be more meaningful and, consequently, could be better for those who live them. Constantly seeking and indulging in frivolous pleasures from fast food, cheap stimulants, and repetitive video games minimizes one’s opportunity to do something of worth. These sorts of pleasures, taken to their extreme in the experience machine, are without basis or impact. A person who spends all their time in a machine loses his or her capacity to make any real difference! And this is ultimately what’s bad for the businessperson as well. The significance of their life is far different from what they imagine. It is a testament to deception and false agency. Both at work and at home, their efforts are systematically stripped of their connection to the world because the world is not as they conceive it. If the businessperson were living the life they thought they were, or the person in the experience machine was living the life they were merely experiencing, their lives would be more meaningful. And so, the explanatory principle explains (and vindicates) the common place judgment that these people are not as well-off as they could be.

Section III: Explanatory Dispensability

In this section, I consider whether the explanatory principle best explains why Ally is better off than Beth.\(^46\) I consider two plausible alternate explanations to account for the

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\(^46\) A defender of the explanatory principle may worry that I have, unintentionally, constructed a straw-man in this case. While I have constructed the case in question, it is of dialectic necessity given that the principle has often been
difference in well-being between Ally and Beth. Ultimately, I conclude that the explanatory principle is not needed to explain what’s going on in Ally and Beth-style cases. We can explain why Ally is better off than Beth just as well without it. It is, therefore, dispensable.

3.1: A Difference in Desire Satisfaction

The first alternate explanation to consider is open to those pluralists who accept some form of desire satisfaction as a constituent of well-being. An implicit difference in desire satisfaction between Ally and Beth might be behind the intuition that Ally is better off. After all, it is natural to think that Ally and Beth are driven by an intense philanthropic desire to help given their described behavior. What else would motivate them to give so much of their time? But this allows an explanation of the judgment that Ally is better off without reference to the meaning of her work. Ally’s philanthropic desire to help is satisfied, while Beth’s isn’t. Though Beth might think the preservation of something useless like old A.C. adapters benefits someone, it doesn’t. And these are no small desires but ones which both Ally and Beth have organized their lives around. Satisfying such a desire plausibly makes one better off.

To block this alternative explanation, we might stipulate that Ally and Beth’s desires are equally satisfied. A difference in desire satisfaction could not then be used to explain a difference in well-being. To equalize satisfaction, we would need to either modify the world in the case or Ally and Beth’s beliefs. Consider each strategy in turn.

Ally and Beth’s desires could be both equally satisfied if it turns out that – perhaps by some surreal turn of events – preserving A.C. adapters benefits people just as much as preserving cultural artifacts. However, such a move only makes it less plausible that Ally acted more assumed or asserted, rather than supported. Nonetheless, defenders are welcome to construct their own. My argument against the explanatory principle does not wholly rest on debunking ‘Ally and Beth’-style cases.
meaningfully than Beth. Beth’s devotion to obscure technological paraphernalia paid off! She did something worthwhile and acted meaningfully. And so, even if there is still the (unlikely) intuition that Ally is better off in the case once desires are equalized, then it is not meaning that makes the difference.

We might stipulate instead that neither Ally nor Beth have any philanthropic desire but simply a desire to do the work they do (for artifacts and adapters respectively). Now each’s desires are equally satisfied. This stipulation does not help if the relevant desires for well-being are not the individual’s actual desires, as some would have it, but rather what a more ideal agent would desire for them. But worse, it adds a new complication as now Ally and Beth fetishize these items in themselves without concern for their broader relevance. As fetishists, Ally and Beth are psychologically atypical eccentrics. When we devote ourselves to a cause as Ally and Beth have, we typically see ourselves as engaged in something worthwhile (unless we are in the grips of an addiction of some sort). Eccentric Ally and Beth though can wholeheartedly devote themselves to a task they don’t conceive of as worthwhile or valuable. So, though we may not desire for ourselves to be in Beth’s position rather than Ally’s, if our method of coming to such judgment is to ‘put ourselves in their shoes’ then we are potentially mislead when the shoes are so foreign. This eccentricity raises a major concern about the claim that Ally is better off than Beth.

47 There are interesting issues about the role of luck in acting meaningfully. As with moral luck and epistemic luck, there is something unintuitive about a person who ‘just happens’ to act meaningfully. I think this intuition confuses apparent reasons and actual reasons. It is, by stipulation, worthwhile for Beth to have done as she did. And that’s all we are after for my sense of what is ‘meaningful.’ That we can only see it in hindsight is no objection.

48 For an example of just such an idealized desire account, see (Railton 1986). Of course, whether an activity is meaningful might be a factor in what an ideal agent would desire.

49 It also raises a concern about whether Ally’s work is now meaningful given that she fails to recognize it as worthwhile or valuable in any respect. Without such recognition, it seems like the value of her preserving artifacts is the result of (happy) accident. Given my own commitments, such criticism is not open to me. I think Ally does act meaningfully, however she herself sees her actions.
In passing judgment on Ally and Beth’s relative levels of well-being, as Sharon Street has aptly noted in another context, we must be on guard against taking such eccentrics to “look pretty much like ordinary human beings with just a tweak or two” (2009). Rather, they are more like “visitors from another planet” and that our intuitions about such alien visitors are “likely to be more plastic than one’s intuitions about a character one is (unconsciously and perhaps mistakenly) assuming to be a human being” (2009). It is thereby less clear whether Ally is better off than Beth. Both have fixated on their object of interests – artifacts and adapters, respectively – and proceed to collect and preserve them with care. And both are quite adept, each managing equally well to preserve that which they desire. But neither regards adapters or artifacts as particularly valuable. They just collect them as a thing to collect and nothing more. Taking their eccentricity into account (as best we can), it is less plausible (to me at least) to declare Ally better off than Beth.

Now the proponent of the explanatory principle faces a dilemma. If we construe the case naturally, with Ally and Beth having different desires, the judgment which motivated the explanatory principle can equally well be explained by a difference in satisfied desires. If we modify the case to equalize desires, however we go about it, we cast doubt on the judgment that Ally is better off than Beth. Either way, the explanatory principle is left unmotivated.

3.2: A Difference in Circumstance

Another alternate explanation is open to the pluralist. As stipulated in the case, Ally and Beth are similar enough to each other such that no difference in attitude, sensation, or situation could explain a difference in their well-being. But Ally intends to, and succeeds in, promoting a worthwhile end while Beth intends to, and succeeds in, promoting a worthless end. This raises
the question: Why is Beth so into A.C. adapters? Some distorting influence must explain why she is so deeply mistaken about what is worthwhile. Perhaps she has been extensively brainwashed, is in extremely peculiar circumstances, is the victim of some complicated deceit, or has simply taken leave of her faculties.

Whatever it is, such a distorting influence is the sort of thing that is plausibly bad for Beth, especially in comparison to Ally, whose judgment is not so distorted. If she has taken leave of her faculties then she is no longer functioning properly. If she is brainwashed then she is no longer acting autonomously. And if she is being deceived by circumstance or design, then the authenticity of her actions is in question. But these are precisely the sort of considerations that many take to be constituents of well-being.50

Their presence confounds our judgment about the case. Given such confounds, there is a viable alternate explanation at hand. This other element (whatever it is) explains the difference between Ally and Beth’s well-being. Worse, our judgments about such a situated creature might also be distorted by this given how divergent our circumstances, both internal and external, must be. If Beth is not subject to any such distorting influence then maybe she is correct and she does act meaningfully. As above, perhaps she is living in a world where A.C. adapters are objects of great significance and import. And again, in such a world preserving A.C. adapters is likely meaningful and meaning would no longer serve as an adequate explanation of a difference in well-being between Ally and Beth. The case would no longer serve to motivate the explanatory principle.

3.3: Denying the Indispensability of the Explanatory Principle

With at least two plausible alternate explanations available, the Ally and Beth case is inadequate to establish the indispensability of the explanatory principle. I take it that this result generalizes to any similarly styled case where the method is to attempt to hold fixed everything but meaningfulness and well-being and then change the ‘meaningfulness variable’ to see if well-being changes as well. Such Ally and Beth-style cases fail because they either fail to hold fixed the relevant variables or the cases become about truly unusual creatures. In either event, we may reasonably doubt those judgments about the case necessary for explanatory indispensability to obtain.

Section IV: Challenging the Explanatory Principle

The mere existence of competitors does not undermine an explanation like the explanatory principle. The question becomes: which explanation captures the relevant phenomena at the lowest cost? I think the explanatory principle is open to some serious challenges that raise its cost significantly. For the purposes of my argument, none of the challenges raised here need be decisive by themselves. Rather, they are meant to expose the costs of the principle for well-being pluralists who might seek its adoption.

4.1: The Challenge of Self-Interested Meaning

There is something different about meaning as opposed to the other plausible constituents of well-being such as happiness and health. Insofar as we care about a person and want them to be well off, we tend to set our concern with the meaningfulness of their actions to the side.
Conversely, those who want to do something meaningful stereotypically are not concerned with their own well-being. By characterizing meaningful activity as just another constituent of well-being, the explanatory principle makes a mystery of this difference.

For example, think of those paradigmatically concerned with the well-being of others: parents. It is the height of banality for a caring parent say, “I just want my child to be happy.” Yet, it is far less banal, perhaps even jarring, for that parent to say, “I just want my child to live meaningfully.”51 This is not to say a caring parent wouldn’t, or couldn’t, want their child to have a meaningful life. Rather, it is a matter of emphasis. This is reflected in the stereotype of parenting as concern for a child’s health, safety, and, centrally, happiness. If the explanatory principle were true, we should expect a similar concern for the meaningfulness of their children’s lives to be part of this stereotype. But, conspicuously, it isn’t. Similarly, consider the person paradigmatically concerned with their own well-being: the egoist. Such a person cares only for themselves and pays no heed to anyone else’s well-being except as a means to their own. We typically characterize such people as selfish or egotistical. We would not expect them to engage in meaningful activities like charity work.

Moreover, consider the way that meaningfulness and well-being are often opposed in commonplace expressions. The eager graduate – stereotypically concerned with living meaningfully – wants to “be part of something greater than myself.” The new parent says of the time before they had a child, “I never realized how meaningless my life was when I was just living for myself.” In such cases, the interests of the individual are set aside as irrelevant, or even as obstacles, to meaningful living. Yet on the explanatory principle, these expressions evince a deep confusion. Giving up one’s career prospects to tend to the sick and dying in impoverished

51 This phenomena is noted by R.F. Baumeister (2014) as well.
parts of the world or sacrificing one’s new suede shoes to save a child in a pond are just alternate ways of acting in one’s own interest.

The intuitive difference between meaning and well-being is well-made by considering the paradox of hedonism. Some have suggested that, as a contingent psychological fact about humans, those who pursue their own happiness *qua* happiness usually fail. This is an interesting claim and potentially quite useful if true but why would it be paradoxical? It would be paradoxical because we would expect that pursuing the constituents of your well-being would make you better, rather than worse, off. On the explanatory principle, however, this should be no surprise. Meaningful activity often, perhaps exclusively, concerns things outside our own subjective experience. Rather, that so many have regarded the paradox of hedonism as a paradox at all should come as a surprise.

The challenge in all this is for the advocate of the explanatory principle to explain this difference in how we think about meaningful activity. What is it about meaning that makes it different from the other constituents of well-being such that we do not see it as self-interested? Those who deny the explanatory principle have an alternate explanation ready at hand: pursuing meaning does not appear to be a self-interested because it isn’t. Meaning is not a constituent of well-being.

4.2: The Challenge of Meaningful Self-Diminishment

The previous challenge focused on a phenomenon – the apparent difference between meaningfulness and well-being – for which it seems like the explanatory principle is a poor explanation. But the principle also bears theoretical costs as well. On pain of paradox, the

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52 Though many others have reached the same conclusion, the coining of the phrase was made by Henry Sidgwick in (1981: 22).
explanatory principle is inconsistent with any theory on which some actions are meaningful because they diminish well-being. On the plausible assumption that it is meaningful to make the world a better place, this includes any theory on which a diminishment of someone’s well-being can make the world a better place. Theories which have this implication include egalitarianism theories, axiological theories of desert, and retributivist theories. So, the conjunction of some such theory, a plausible claim about meaningful activity, and the explanatory principle can imply that when someone meaningfully diminishes their own well-being, they are better off because they are worse off. And that conclusion is paradoxical.

To make this line of reasoning more explicit, let us walk through it using an axiological theory of desert as an example. First, a restatement of the explanatory principle:

1. Someone is better off because they act meaningfully.

Next, a plausible assumption about what might make an action meaningful:

2. Someone acts meaningfully because they make the world a better place.

Combine these two claims with an axiological theory of desert on which the goodness of a world is, in part, a function of fit between how well off people are in that world and how well off those people deserve to be.

3. Someone makes the world a better place because they get what they deserve.

On any plausible construal of such a theory, fit between what is had and what is deserved can sometimes be increased when someone is made worse off.

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Each position has its defenders. For egalitarianism see Temkin (1993), for a theory of axiological desert see Kagan (1999), and for retributivism see M. Moore (1987).
4. Sometimes someone gets what they deserve because they are worse off.

In each of these claims the explanans explains the explanandum in terms of its constitution.\textsuperscript{54} And this sort of explanatory relation is transitive.\textsuperscript{55} It follows that:

5. Therefore, sometimes someone is better off because they are worse off.

Such an implication is paradoxical. Something must have gone wrong if we are led to say that anyone’s being better off can consist in their being worse off.

In response, a pluralist may be tempted to say, “In this case, the decrease in well-being brought on by the meaningful act is traded off against by the increase in well-being brought on by the meaningfulness of the act. But pluralism is compatible with such tradeoffs!” This response works when the loss in well-being is instrumental to another constituent of well-being such as when a painful stimulus discourages dangerous behavior. But unlike painful stimuli, in a case of meaningful self-diminishment the very same consideration constitutes both an increase and decrease of well-being on the explanatory principle. To illustrate this, consider a case where one of the above theories is correct and the self-infliction of pain on can be meaningful in itself. It is irrelevant in this case whether the pain might make the self-inflictor better off in the long run, as when pain discourages dangerous behavior, because there is no such tradeoff in the pain itself. A tradeoff would require that there be a second well-being increasing consideration that is weighed off against the pain. And there is but one consideration in this case – the pain. This pain is both good and bad for the self-inflictor. As implausible as this result may be, this is not yet the

\textsuperscript{54} There is a worry for this line of reasoning. Constitution is sometimes used in differing senses (e.g. realization, material constitution, etc.). I can only assume here that I have used a univocal sense but, if this is a mistake, this line of reasoning is invalid.

\textsuperscript{55} I cannot defend the assumption that this explanatory relation is transitive. While widely accepted, it is not entirely uncontroversial.
paradox. The paradox is in the explanation the explanatory principle provides for this result. On the explanatory principle, the pain is good for the self-inflictor because it is bad for them.

Another response on behalf of the pluralist is to deny that diminishment is ever meaningful as diminishment. It is never the case that mere loss to well-being is what makes an act meaningful. The most promising route to establishing this claim is to deny that the mere loss of well-being can ever make the world a better place. Perhaps something like a person-affecting principle is true on which something can be good only if it is good for someone. While promising, this response is costly to someone who wishes to accept the explanatory principle. To begin with, it would require the denial of plausible, independently motivated philosophical positions such as egalitarianism, axiological theories of desert, and retributivism. By denying them the defender of the explanatory principle adopts the burden of showing how those positions fail. This is a burden some may not be willing to bear in defense of the explanatory principle.

4.3: The Challenge of Distant Meaning

It is a truism that well-being is about the individual. Whichever features are relevant, whether psychological (as with enjoyment, suffering, and desires), physiological (as with health and functioning), or both, it is the features of the individual that are relevant. But it is also a truism that meaning can be about more than us as individuals. Meaning can be found in being part of something greater than oneself. As Robert Nozick notes, “people worry about the meaning of their lives when they see their existences as limited” (1990: 166). So by doing something of worth beyond the limits of their own lives, people act meaningfully. This is why

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56 For the classic treatment of this sort of principle, see (Parfit 1984: 394-95).
57 As such a principle is, often times, precisely what is at issue with such theories it would be question begging in the extreme to merely assert it. Indeed, Temkin has given well-known criticisms of just this sort of person-affecting principle in (1993).
58 Kagan makes this point and situates it in the larger dialectic over well-being in (1992) and (1994).
meaning is to be found in working for God’s purposes or for the total benefit of humanity (even if these are not what meaning ultimately consists in). These ends are larger than the individual. As I will show, these two truisms are in tension. The challenge for the advocate of the explanatory principle is to reconcile the apparent incompatibility of these two claims.

To illustrate this tension, consider it in another context. One familiar objection to simplistic desire satisfaction accounts is that they imply causally distant events can contribute to an individual’s well-being. But this is implausible, as Parfit’s classic case is meant to show: “Suppose that I meet a stranger who has what is believed to be a fatal disease. My sympathy is aroused, and I strongly want this stranger to be cured. We never meet again. Later, unknown to me, this stranger is cured” (Parfit 1984: Appendix I). But that seems irrelevant to my well-being no matter that I desired it. After all, it is mysterious how something that has no effect on a person – physiologically, psychologically, or otherwise – could make a difference to how well off they are. In response, advocates of desire satisfaction accounts limit which desires properly count as relevant to the well-being of the desiring individual (Keller 2004; Heathwood 2006). Whether these responses are successful or not is beside the point. Their mere existence suggests that there is a burden for any account of well-being which implies that an individual’s well-being can be improved, or diminished, by distant facts.

By adopting the explanatory principle, pluralists take on this burdensome implication. After all, the meaningfulness of our actions may hinge on causally distant events as well. By donating to charity, we may save lives and thereby act meaningfully. But those lives might be

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60 We can modify the case to allow that, “I never hear of her or even think of her again” as Kagan (1994) does. To make the point even stronger, we could stipulate that your desire is instead for some obscure, causally isolated fact (e.g. that there have been an even number of atoms in a galaxy 13.3 billion light years away in 123 B.C.E. and an odd number of atoms in that same galaxy in 4567 C.E.).

61 These are just two examples of many.
saved life decades later, continents away, or after our death. If so, then the explanatory principle faces the same difficulties of a simplistic desire satisfaction account.

Furthermore, the explanatory principle cannot share in the typical defense of desire satisfaction accounts. Activity does not have content in the way that desires do. And so, while it may be possible to draw the relevant distinction between meaningful activity which contributes to well-being and meaningful activity which does not, the burden of drawing that distinction is on the defender of the explanatory principle.

4.4: The Challenge of Hidden Meaning

There is another challenge related to the one above. The explanatory principle implies that we can be insensitive to large changes in our own well-being. The meaning of our acts can be hidden from us. Like George in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, our past actions might have been meaningful. Unbeknownst to George, by deferring his dreams and staying to work in his hometown, he has prevented its people’s livelihoods from falling under the vicious control of a tyrannical figure. Ultimately, it takes an angel to reveal to George how meaningful his life has been. Yet, like George, the meaningfulness of our acts can be obscure and so bound up in what *may* have been that we would require divine intervention to sort it all out. On the explanatory principle, George is far better off than he could ever have known in a world without angels. Similarly, we all might be much worse off than we thought, if the despairing youths of the world have it right and everything is meaningless. And this is implausible. Well-being is supposed to be about *us* such that we are sensitive to how well things are going for us.

The obvious reply to this challenge is that it is not open to me given the dialectal assumptions I’ve made. Each of these challenges is supposed to be friendly to the pluralist about
well-being. And it seems that this worry draws upon motivation that is only friendly to experiential accounts of well-being like hedonism. After all, we might not be aware whether our desires have been satisfied, whether we are fulfilling our proper functioning, or whether we are healthy.

But this reply misconstrues the challenge. The claim is not that we must be aware of something for it to be relevant to our well-being. That would be begging the question. Rather, the challenge is that we are insensitive to large changes in our well-being. And there’s an in-principle distinction between insensitivity and awareness. The difference is this: an ideal epistemic agent armed with the correct account of well-being and all facts about an individual’s physiology and psychology should be able to determine, at least roughly, how well off someone is. And they can do this for most of the items that populate a pluralistic account of well-being: including non-distant desires, health, proper functioning, experiential quality, and so on. But this agent could not do so if the explanatory principle is correct. The agent would not know that the town in It’s a Wonderful Life would have been a much worse place were it not for George. And so, on the explanatory principle, the agent would not know how well off George is.

4.5: Against the Explanatory Principle

The explanatory principle’s implications are counter-intuitive and surprising. However, granting the intuition that Ally is better off than Beth, the principle might still be justified if we could not otherwise explain why. But, as we saw in Section III above, we can. Therefore, I conclude that, given both the explanatory principle’s dispensability and its costs, pluralists about well-being should reject the explanatory principle. A reasonable pluralistic account of well-being
already has the resources to make sense of the motivation the explanatory principle draws upon, without averting to the principle itself.

Section V: Explaining Away the Apparent Connection

I have argued that we shouldn’t accept a connection – trivial or substantive – between meaningful activity and well-being. If I am right, and there is no such connection, then why does there seem to be one? I think we mislead ourselves with ambiguous language and the pervasive stereotypes that surround discussions of meaninglessness.

5.1: Linguistic Ambiguity

A meaningful life is a life worth living. But, as the population ethics and euthanasia literature often emphasize, there is also a threshold of well-being below which someone’s life is no longer worth living. If both are right, then this speaks to a substantive connection between well-being and meaning. Indeed, it implies that an act is meaningful only if it keeps one above a certain threshold of well-being. This flies in the face of apparently meaningful sacrifices – like voluntarily dying to save the lives of others or sacrificing oneself to protest an unjust regime – on which it would clearly be better for the individual to not sacrifice themselves even if it is better all things considered that they do. There is a tension here in our common sense.

This tension, however, exists only as long as we take there to be a univocal sense of ‘life worth living.’ Once we allow the phrase to be ambiguous, the tension dissolves. When we claim that a meaningful life is a life worth living, we are claiming that we ought to live that life in an

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62 For the seminal discussion of population ethics, see (Parfit 1984)
active sense. It is a life worth pursuing. But when we claim that a life is no longer worth living below a certain threshold of well-being, we are claiming that things can go so poorly off for us that we’d be better off dead. Distinguishing these two senses of ‘life worth living’ resolves the aporia but also frees us of any implicit connection between well-being and meaning. We would be better off dead than made an example of by a vicious regime though doing so might still be worth it if it led to a more just society.

The same point can be made about talk of a ‘good life.’ This expression is ambiguous between a life that is good for us to live and a life that is good for us. There are those who have argued that the latter is what makes the former but this is to grant too much to our own self-interest. As the examples above about self-sacrifice show, sometimes it is good for us to do what is bad for us.

5.2: Misleading Examples

In examples of meaningless activity – both popular and philosophical – the person acting meaninglessly is nearly always poorly off. Consider Sisyphus, the paradigm example of meaninglessness. For his (deeply unsavory) deeds in life, Sisyphus is forced by the gods to eternally roll a stone up a hill only to see it inevitably roll back down just as he nears the top. Sisyphus is not well off. Rolling stones up hills is, presumably, exhausting and uncomfortable work and seeing one’s project fail when close to success is awful enough. But to know that this must continue for all time must be incomparably worse. Similar examples of meaninglessness are those of the grass counter, who spends his every free moment counting grass, or David Wiggins’ pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs (1988: 342). These individuals too are faring less well than
they could be. Our closest analogues among actual people are those who suffer from compulsive behaviors. Compulsive behavior is often alien and disturbing to those who have it and obviously bad for such individuals.

If our conception of meaninglessness is informed by examples such as these – as I take it to be – then we risk conflating meaning and well-being as co-extensive or as bearing a substantive connection to the other. There is always temptation to infer a stronger connection from correlation. But such temptation is misleading without independent reason to draw such a connection.

There is another subtle point here as well. The myth of Sisyphus is a cautionary tale. It serves to deter people from behaving in certain ways – Sisyphus himself was a sadistic murderous tyrant – by warning them of punishment for that behavior. But it can only play this role because we usually want what we do to be meaningful. When we think it isn’t, we are usually frustrated and saddened. And we are satisfied when we think it is. So, those who really think their efforts are meaningless are usually poorly off. But this is because we are listless or dissatisfied, not because we are correct. But not everything we want, or are satisfied by, is good for us. Oftentimes what makes us better off is being satisfied, and not the cause of our satisfaction. The lesson here is that while the myth of Sisyphus might tell us something about how to get what we want, it does not tell us what is ultimately good for us.

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63 As every introductory statistics course warns, it is a mistake to infer causation from correlation. This point is slightly different in the kind of explanation fallaciously inferred. Rather than a causal explanation being illicitly inferred, it is a grounding explanation.
5.3: Mere Appearance

To summarize: there appears to be a connection between meaningfulness and well-being because of a tight correlation between the two in our commonplace examples, stereotypes, and language. Failure to distinguish the two notions problematically gives rise to tension in our language, as we see with the phrase ‘a life worth living’. Committing ourselves to there actually being a connection between meaningfulness and well-being brings along the attendant difficulties of the explanatory principle. We avoid these difficulties by adopting an alternate explanation: the intuitive pull of such a connection is a mix of confusion and cognitive overreach.

Conclusion

I have argued that someone’s well-being is not explained by the meaningfulness of their acts or lives. Further, I argued that appearances to the contrary are just that, mere appearances. However, there is another important prescriptive point to be made. There is a trend in ethics to collapse everything into a question of prudence. By keeping meaningfulness and well-being separate, we buck that trend and make room for a host of important and fruitful conceptual questions in ethics including those about when it is good for us to sacrifice ourselves and bad for us to act selfishly. The egoist who thinks it is incoherent to talk of the good *simpliciter* cannot ask these questions at the conceptual level. Instead, they can only ask as a matter of strategy whether acting for others is ultimately in our self-interest or whether selfish behavior turns out to

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64 My survey of the linguistic support for this connection is, of necessity, incomplete. However, my hope is that the survey is general enough to have shifted the burden of proof on to those who wish to postulate a supposed connection between meaning and well-being.
be self-defeating. While these questions of human behavior are interesting, I think we should not yet cede the conceptual point to the egoist. It is worth asking whether there is anything to live for beyond what is good for us.
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