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ABSTRACT

While research on meaningfulness in life is becoming increasingly popular in analytic philosophy, there is still a dearth of literature on the topic of meaninglessness. This is surprising, given that a better understanding of the nature of meaninglessness may help to illuminate features of meaningfulness previously unobserved or misunderstood. Additionally, the topic of meaninglessness is interesting in its own right – independent of what it can tell us about meaningfulness. In my dissertation, I construct and defend my own conception of meaninglessness.

I adopt Thaddeus Metz's (2013) analysis of meaninglessness presented in his new book, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. For Metz, meaninglessness is not the absence of meaningfulness but a positively bad state to be in – one that can detract from the overall meaningfulness of a life. I distinguish between the following: negative meaning (i.e., meaninglessness as a dis-value), positive meaning (i.e., meaningfulness), and lives that lack positive meaning. I defend a conception of *negative meaning*. In contrast, most conceptions of meaninglessness are conceptions of lives where positive meaning is absent. Philosophers defending these conceptions have yet to acknowledge the existence of negative meaning. I explain why conceptions of meaninglessness (as the absence of positive meaning) are inadequate and I provide support for the existence of negative meaning.

PRACTICAL IDENTITY AND MEANINGLESSNESS

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DISSERTATION

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Chapter One Meaning in Life

Introduction

If you go to the Barnes & Noble website you can find a literary genre titled, “Self-Help & Self Improvement.” Many of the books in this section focus on the questions of how to become happier, richer, or more self-confident. Others deal with the questions of how to lead a fulfilling life or the types of adventures a person ought to take before she dies. There are two things that become clear after surveying the titles and descriptions of books in this genre: people (e.g., customers) are very concerned about the quality of their lives and many self-help or self-improvement authors make a profit by selling glib answers to life's most difficult questions. One question of this variety is the question of what constitutes a meaningful life for a person. The fact that so many people express concern that their lives are not fulfilling, satisfying, rewarding, significant, important, or worthwhile suggests that philosophical contributions to the topic of meaningfulness can go some way toward quelling existential worries concerning the quality of our lives.

One difficulty for philosophers working on the topic of meaning in life is getting straight on which of a set of related questions they are concerned with when inquiring into meaningfulness. There is the question of what is the “meaning of life,” which is the age-old question related to a number of subsidiary questions. Two examples of subsidiary questions are whether there is some absolute explanation for the world's existence and that of human beings and whether human beings serve some purpose in existing (apart from any purposes we may establish in our individual lives)? While attempts at solving the “meaning of life” are certainly

noble ones, to my knowledge they have so far proven unsatisfactory, especially given the difficulty of providing a solution appealing to both theists and non-theists alike. Most philosophers working on the topic of meaning in life today are concerned with a different question. They are concerned with the question of what makes individual lives meaningful.¹ People question the meaningfulness of their lives when making important life choices. For example, people may choose to have children because they believe that doing so will make their lives meaningful. Some people make this choice even while recognizing that having children will be stressful, frustrating, and may prevent their engagement in activities that are more fun and pleasurable. Other people knowingly opt to pursue professions that pay less than others and which are challenging and require hard work because they believe these professions will give their lives significance and meaning. People also evaluate other people's lives as meaningful. Someone might say that Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King lived exceptionally meaningful lives. In each of these cases, we appear to be attributing a significance, value, purpose, or importance to the choice, profession, or life.

Very generally, positive meaning appears to be a quality of a life that some lives possess and others lack and one that is intuitively desirable to possess. Meaningfulness also appears to be a distinct concept from happiness and morality.² This is evidenced by the fact that there appear to be examples of meaningless happy lives – e.g., a life in pursuit of pleasure – and meaningful unhappy lives – e.g., a life dedicated to the care of a sick family member. And, there may be activities (e.g., gardening) that are meaningful but not necessarily morally praiseworthy.

¹ Some philosophers posit a close relationship between the questions. For example, some existentialists argue that the absence of a god, objective value, and ultimate purpose or point to existence entails that our individual lives are also meaningless. See, for example, Albert Camus (1991).

² I will focus on the distinctions between meaningfulness, happiness, and morality in Chapters 2 and 3.

I will also be assuming that a person can lead a meaningful life even if a God does not exist and, or, our relationship to a God is not necessary for meaningfulness.

Most philosophers working on the topic of meaning in life would accept these assumptions. Unfortunately, this analysis is vague. For example, this analysis would apply equally well to non-hedonic conceptions of well-being.³ The fact that there is not a widely-accepted conceptual analysis of meaning in life prevents my stipulating further assumptions about meaning in life without defense. In Section 2 of this chapter, I will present and defend my own analysis of positive meaning (and meaninglessness).

The fact that people express concerns regarding the meaningfulness of their lives provides philosophers with a practical reason in support of research on the topic of meaningfulness. However, the concern that one's life may be missing an important ingredient or value may best be interpreted as a concern that one's life is meaningless rather than a concern that one's life could be more meaningful or greatly meaningful. Though I will have plenty to say about the nature of *meaningfulness*, the focus of my dissertation is on *meaninglessness* in life. In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to *meaningfulness* in life as *positive meaning*.

Most philosophical literature on the topic of meaning in life is focused on positive meaning.⁴ However, in constructing their conceptions of positive meaning, philosophers will posit features of lives that seem intuitively meaningless or will reference examples of paradigmatically meaningless lives. One of my objectives is to catalog features of lives that philosophers have argued are intuitively meaningless. In doing so, I am able to draw conclusions about how philosophers are understanding and using the *concept* of meaninglessness. However,

³ While there have been a number of recent attempts to disambiguate meaningfulness from happiness, little work has been done differentiating meaningfulness from non-hedonic conceptions of well-being.

⁴ This is at least true of analytic philosophers.

I do not share all of the same intuitions concerning which lives are paradigmatically meaningless. Ultimately, I will argue that many of the examples of intuitively meaningless lives that philosophers utilize are not tracking features of lives that are undesirable (in and of themselves).

Based on the assumptions I have adopted about positive meaning, it seems reasonable to think that *meaninglessness* is a quality that some lives possess and others lack and one that is intuitively undesirable to possess. Meaninglessness would also be conceptually distinct from unhappiness and immorality. However, in Chapter 2, I will argue that most philosophers theorizing about meaning in life are committed to a conceptual analysis of meaninglessness that is incompatible with these assumptions. As a result, we have reason to be skeptical that these philosophers' conceptions of meaninglessness are correct.

I am relying on a specific *conceptual analysis* of meaninglessness. Thaddeus Metz (2013) has suggested that meaningless conditions are ones that “warrant revulsion or shame” or which involve the realization of “ends besides his [one's] own pain that are extremely worthy of avoidance” (64). In Chapter 2, I argue that Metz's analysis cannot accommodate some real-life crises of meaning. In contrast to Metz, I suggest that we conceive of meaninglessness as incomprehensibility. On this analysis, a person is in a meaningless period in her life when she is unable to make sense of her life. I will clarify the notion of incomprehensibility in Section 2 of this chapter.

I will also construct and defend my own *conception* of meaninglessness (in Chapter 4).⁵

⁵ Metz (2013) has provided a helpful clarification of the distinction between a concept and a conception of meaning in life. According to Metz, “the concept of life's meaning is what all and only the competing conceptions of a meaningful life are about; it is that which makes a given theory one of meaningfulness as opposed to one of rightness or happiness” (19). In other words, when we provide a conceptual analysis of meaning, we specify what this concept is “about” – i.e., what it is that we are talking about when we talk about lives having or lacking meaning. In contrast, a 'conception' of meaningfulness “is

In order to construct my conception, I will draw from psychological and phenomenological research on meaninglessness, as well as accounts of real-life crises of meaning. If, conceptually, meaninglessness involves incomprehensibility, then in constructing a conception of meaninglessness I will need to be able to specify when and why a person is unable to make sense of her life.

The remainder of this chapter will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I provide a conceptual analysis of meaninglessness. In Section 3, I define terms and clarify distinctions utilized by philosophers writing on meaning in life. In Section 4, I provide reasons in support of future research on meaninglessness. And, in Section 5, I provide an overview of the chapters to come.

2. The concepts of positive meaning and meaninglessness

I accept a conceptual analysis of positive meaning in life as *comprehensibility* and meaninglessness as *incomprehensibility*. In other words, a positively meaningful life is a life that makes sense to a person. In contrast, those facing a crises of meaning in their lives cannot make sense of their lives. The motivation for this conceptual analysis comes from Cheshire Calhoun's (2015) work in "Geographies of Meaningful Living" and recent psychological work on the nature of meaning-making.

Calhoun suggests that there may be two distinct concepts of meaning in life that are conflated in philosophical literature (2015, 15). Philosophers appear to disagree on which type of conceptual work they want the concept of meaningfulness to do. Calhoun refers to these two approaches as the *agent-independent value* approach and the *agent-dependent value* approach

just another word for a theory of it" (18).

(15). I will be adopting the agent-dependent value approach.

On the agent-independent value approach, meaningfulness is primarily “evaluative and commendatory” (Calhoun 15). Almost all philosophers writing on the topic of meaning in life adopt this approach. On the agent-independent value approach, positive meaning is an achievement concept; those who achieve a positively meaningful life are leading “admirable,” “excellent” “significant” or “commendable” lives (Calhoun 15). Philosophers who adopt this approach will often point to examples of “greatly meaningful lives” – e.g., the life of Mother Teresa or Pablo Picasso – and then provide an explanation for what makes these lives paradigmatically meaningful.⁶ Before discussing the competing approach, I want to focus on a few problems with the agent-independent value approach.

First, Calhoun (2015) argues that the agent-independent value approach cannot make sense of the following question: “which activities, relationships, projects, experiences would be most meaningful for *me* to choose?” (18). From a third-person, evaluative perspective, being a philosophy or a biology professor would be equally commendable. As a result, Calhoun suggests it shouldn’t matter which life that we choose. But of course it *does* matter to us that we are philosophy professors rather than biology professors. Some people would find being a philosophy professor to be more positively meaningful than being a biology professor. The agent-independent value approach cannot adequately account for why we have reason to pursue some types of lives over others.⁷

⁶ In his paper, “The Good, the True, and the Beautiful: Toward a Unified Account of Great meaning in Life,” Metz relies on a conceptual analysis of meaning in life as involving conditions that are either “worthy of substantial pride or admiration” or conditions that are “most worth striving for apart from one’s own pleasure” (2011, 390). Metz argues that we should reflect on examples of “greatly meaningful lives,” like the life of Mother Teresa or Pablo Picasso, and figure out what these examples have in common.

⁷ Calhoun also discusses what she calls the “agent-independent plus conception” (2015, 20). On this approach, a meaningful life is one that is valuable from an agent-independent perspective *and* one that an agent finds subjectively meaningful. Susan

I want to point to a second, related problem for the agent-independent value approach. I think we do sometimes reflect on examples of “greatly meaningful” lives, like the life of Mother Teresa or Pablo Picasso, and realize that our lives do not come close to matching their level of fame, achievement, or significance. However, I have doubts that we value such lives because they epitomize positive meaning. We have a tendency to conflate positive meaning with fame and overall level of achievement.

As Laurence James (2005) has argued, achievement may affect the meaningfulness of our lives. But even for James, a life's positive meaning is only affected by those achievements that involve a person's “self-conception, self-development and a deepening of self-understanding” (441). There is no reason to think that Mother Teresa's accomplishments were of this variety. And while it has been argued that achievement may affect the meaningfulness of lives, a different argument is required to defend the claim that a life with particularly noteworthy accomplishments is a more positively meaningful life. I think many people assume that those who have left significant marks on the world automatically lead positively meaningful lives, even when they don't know anything about those lives other than their mark.

One reason why this assumption may be incorrect is that some people who have led what others would describe as “greatly meaningful lives” have experienced what they personally describe as a crises of meaning. In other words, a life can seem greatly meaningful from the agent-independent value perspective yet not make sense to the person who is living it. As one of the greatest authors of all time, Leo Tolstoy has certainly left his mark on the world through his

Wolf (2010) defends this type of view. Calhoun (2015) provides a number of objections against this type of view, as well. She argues that combining two very different “measurement scales for meaning” is *ad hoc* – an attempt to construct a theory that fits our intuitions without making sense of those intuitions (21). I will not consider her evaluation of this type of approach further, here.

literary achievements. In this respect, he epitomizes what Metz (2011) referred to as a “greatly meaningful life.” However, Tolstoy experienced a crises of meaning while engaged in activities that some would consider greatly meaningful.

Or, thinking of the fame which my works would get me, I said to myself: “All right, you will be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière, and all the writers in the world, – what of it?” And I was absolutely unable to make any reply. The questions were not waiting, and I had to answer them at once; if I did not answer them, I could not live. The questions would not wait, they had to be answered at once, and if I did not answer them it was impossible to live. But there was no answer. (Tolstoy 2000, 12)

Tolstoy's crises of meaning became serious enough that he contemplated suicide. Similarly, I think that crises of meaning are associated with the following types of judgments: “my life is pointless,” “my life is empty,” or “I feel stuck; my life is going nowhere.” One problem, then, for the value-independent approach is that a person can make these sorts of judgments while engaged in activities that are fitting of commendation.

I want to point to a final problem with the agent-independent value approach. If we assume that positively meaningful lives are ones that are “worthy of substantial pride or admiration,” then it seems that meaningless lives are ones that “warrant revulsion or shame.” In Chapter 2, I argue that this conceptual analysis cannot account for real-life crises of meaning. As it turns out, avoiding meaninglessness is largely outside of one's control. Therefore, meaningless lives are not fitting of evaluations that assume personal responsibility.

The agent-dependent value approach is better suited to handle real-life crises of meaning.

Calhoun (2015) suggests that this approach is not commendatory. Instead, meaningful lives will be ones that an agent can explain and justify to herself and others. People make sense of their lives when they are cognizant of the reasons that justify their chosen ends. Some of these reasons will be what Calhoun calls “reasons-for-me” (27). Calhoun explains that “reasons-for-me are the reasons you have as the particular person you are . . . for choosing this end, sticking with it, and spending as much time on it in the face of temporal and other costs as you do” (27). The fact that “reasons-for-me” are relevant in choosing our ends can explain why, for some of us, becoming a philosophy professor makes more sense to us than becoming a biology professor. Each may be equally valuable from an objective standpoint. However, when we take into consideration our commitments, past experiences, desires, and other personal characteristics, there will be reasons-for-me that justify some choices over others (Calhoun 27).

The agent-dependent value approach emphasizes two important things. First, the choices we make in our lives must be intelligible to us from our own deliberative standpoint; in other words, we need to understand which reasons we are responding to when we make our choices. Second, the value of our pursuits must be intelligible to us and we must be capable of justifying our choice of pursuits to others when needed. We can make sense of Tolstoy’s (2000) crises of meaning by suggesting that he could no longer explain or justify the point or purpose of any of his pursuits. In other words, his life no longer made sense to him.

As stated earlier, Calhoun (2015) believes that philosophers sometimes conflate the agent-independent value approach and the agent-dependent value approach. I think this is often done when a philosopher wants the agent-independent value approach to do more than it is designed to do. For example, take Antti Kauppinen’s (2012) suggestion in “Meaningfulness and

Time” that “someone who has meaning in her life has a reason to go on living” (352).

However, Kauppinen also accepts a conceptual analysis of positively meaningful conditions as ones that are fitting of pride, fulfillment and admiration (352). On Kauppinen’s analysis, a person need not find her life to be fulfilling in order for it to be fitting of fulfillment.

In “Meaning and Happiness,” Kauppinen (2013) clarifies the objective nature of his conception of positive meaning – the “Teleological View.” Kauppinen initially proposed this conception of meaning in “Meaningfulness and Time.” The details of this conception are not important for this chapter. Kauppinen argues that subjective meaningfulness – i.e., one’s sense that her life is meaningful – is really a component of happiness, not meaning in life (2013, 179). He appears to be committed to the position that a life that one finds meaningless can still be positively meaningful. But, then, it is unclear how Kauppinen (2012) can accept a conceptual analysis of positive meaning as that which people are concerned with when deciding whether they have a reason to go on living (352).

Kauppinen could say that he *is* concerned with when and why people have a reason to go on living. He is just focused on when and why people have an objective reason to go on living. They may just not take themselves to have a reason to continue living (i.e., a subjective reason). I do not want to enter too far into the internal and external reasons debate inspired by Bernard Williams’s (1981) work in “Internal and External Reasons.” However, in the context of meaning in life, a person simply does not have a reason to continue living unless she is able to derive that reason from her “subjective motivational set” (Williams 102). In other words, it must be clear from the perspective of her goals, desires, wishes, projects, and commitments why *she* has a reason to continue living. To explain why, imagine a thirty-year-old who believes her life is

meaningless and is debating whether or not she has a reason to go on. You say to her, “look, you are still relatively young. You still have time to pursue a medical degree and become a doctor. Imagine how fitting of admiration your life would be then!” If this career choice is entirely inconsistent with her subjective motivational set, it is hard to understand why she has any reason at all to become a doctor. Why should she care if being a doctor is fitting of admiration if she has no interest in becoming one? In other words, even if there are purely objective reasons to continue living, it is unclear why those who are facing a crises of meaning should care about them.

There may be a relationship between the agent-dependent value approach and narrative conceptions of identity. For example, on Marya Schechtman's (1996) view of identity, people make sense of who they are by forming an autobiographical narrative of their lives.

We expect a person's beliefs, desires, values, emotions, actions, and experiences to hang together in a way that makes what she says, does, and feels psychologically intelligible . . . Sometimes the collection of actions, thoughts, emotions, and characteristics ascribed to a character make sense – we can understand her reactions, motivations, and decisions – they pull together to present a robust picture. Other times, however, we are at a loss to put together the information we are given about a character. (Schechtman 97)

Of course, sometimes the character in question is ourselves. An identity crises may arise when a person's narrative self-conception is not coherent enough for a person to make basic sense of who she is. On this view, characteristics that we attribute to our identity are ones that we can incorporate into our life story. However, it is clearly not the case that all people who

have an intact narrative identity are leading positively meaningful lives. In a moment, I will clarify the specific way in which a person must make sense of her life in order to find it positively meaningful.

Psychologists working on the topic of meaning in life also operate with a conceptual understanding of meaningfulness as comprehensibility. As a result, I will be utilizing psychological literature on meaning in life throughout my dissertation. According to this literature, people have a psychological need to make sense of themselves and their environments.⁸ There appear to be two distinct ways in which people make sense of their lives.

First, people must maintain a set of assumptions about how the world works and is organized and how human beings interact with one another.⁹ These assumptions serve as expectations that enable people to predict and interpret events and behavior. For example, people generally believe that they live in a just and benevolent world and that people have control over their lives. As a result, people believe that bad things cannot happen to good people. People also tend to believe they are good people who are deserving of good things happening to them. Therefore, people feel safe and secure in the world as they do not believe that they are vulnerable to negative events that can strike randomly.¹⁰ For those who do experience a highly negative event or learn of others who do, they have to interpret the event in a way that enables them to maintain their assumptions. For example, “people who learn about innocent victims of layoff, sexual assault, or HIV tend to derogate the victims or blame them for their circumstances”

⁸ In “Introduction: The New Science of Meaning,” Travis Proulx, Keith D. Markman, and Matthew J. Lindberg argue that acquiring and retaining meaning in life involves “sense making” (2013, 4).

⁹ This theory is most notably discussed in Ronnie Janoff-Bulman's (1992), *Shattered Assumptions*. For other examples of the use of this theory, see Janoff-Bulman (1989; 1997; 2013), Roxane Cohen Silver and John A. Updegraff (2013), Crystal Park (1997; 2013) and Joanna E. Anderson, Aaron C. Kay, and Gráinne M. Fitzsimons (2013).

¹⁰ These are the primary assumptions that Janoff-Bulman (1992) argues are essential for our capacity to make sense of ourselves and environments.

. . . “by doing so, they are able to restore their believe that people deserve what they get”

(Anderson, Kay and Fitzsimons 2013, 281-282). Most of the time, people are able to make sense of negative events in their lives by interpreting them in ways that make them compatible with their general assumptions. However, sometimes an event is so inconsistent with a person’s assumptions that a person is unable to maintain them. Psychologists believe this can initiate a crises of meaning.

Not only do people need to maintain beliefs about how the world works and operates, but they need to be able to explain and justify the purpose or point of their existence. In particular, they need to be able to conceive of their activities and goals as worth pursuing and their ends as valuable. Travis Proulx, Keith D. Markman, and Matthew J. Lindberg suggest that people need some justification for why they are engaged in their activities (2013, 6). As an example, Proulx et al. argue that Sisyphus's fate was tragic not because his task was boring or painful.¹¹ Rather, they claim that what was tragic about Sisyphus’s fate was that he had to live “an existence with no why” (Proulx et al. 2013, 7). Sisyphus's fate stops being tragic if he is able to assign a purpose to his activity.¹²

Therefore, we not only need to make sense of our lives, but we need to do so in a way that makes apparent their value and purpose. In order to do so, Proulx et al. suggest that people conceive of their lives in terms of a “progress narrative” – “that fundamental meaning framework that allows us to imagine that we are flourishing (rather than declining) and that provides a path

¹¹ Sisyphus is a mythical character that the gods condemned to roll a boulder to the top of the hill over and over again for eternity.

¹² Richard Taylor (2000) would say that Sisyphus’s fate is still “tragic,” even though his life now has a point or purpose. For example, we can imagine that Sisyphus uses the boulders to build a temple. In this case, there would be a point or purpose for his activity. However, Taylor would say that the activity of boulder-rolling would still be meaningless because everything human beings create and accomplish are transitory. Eventually, Sisyphus’s temple would be destroyed and no trace left of it. Therefore, the most we can achieve is subjective meaningfulness. As long as Sisyphus is passionate about boulder-rolling, the activity adds meaning to his life. Taylor might agree that Sisyphus’s life does now have a point or purpose. In this case, the point of his activity is to fulfill his desire. For Taylor, this is the only point or purpose that can add meaning to our lives.

down which we will continue to grow and improve” (2013, 10-11). And, Dan P. McAdams has suggested that the progress narratives of midlife Americans tend to adhere to a particular story form – the “redemptive story” (2013, 182). McAdams explains that “in a redemptive story, bad events are repeatedly followed by positive outcomes, as the protagonist is repeated enlarged, ennobled, or improved through suffering” (182). The upshot of McAdams’s work is that what counts as a “flourishing” life narrative may be culturally relative.

Some philosophers have argued that people must construct a narrative self-conception in order to make sense of their lives. However, a person could very well construct a narrative of her life where her life is “declining” rather than “flourishing.” For example, someone might interpret events in her life in relation to the themes of disappointment and suffering. While such a person could have a coherent life story and therefore a fully intact narrative identity, she may not find her life to be meaningful. In order for a person to find her life to be meaningful, she must be able to construct a narrative of how she *wants* her life to go – a narrative of her life where she is flourishing. This narrative can give her life a point and purpose. Additionally, it can give a person direction as she guides her actual life in accordance with how she wants her life to go. I will defend a version of this position in Chapter 4.

3. Concepts and distinctions

In this section, I will be elucidating the distinctions between part-life and whole-life views and subjectivist and objectivist conceptions of meaning in life.

3.1 Part-life versus whole-life

As Metz (2002) claims, few theories of positive meaning actually focus on an entire life

as the bearer of meaning. Rather, they focus on how “meaningful states, actions, and relationships” can add positive meaning to a person's life (2002, 783). As an example, Wolf (2010) has focused on what makes an activity or project positively meaningful for a person. It is assumed that a positively meaningful life will be one composed of many meaningful activities or projects (or at least one activity that lasts throughout a lifetime). However, as Kauppinen (2012) points out, Wolf does not address how the meaningful activities or projects fit together to form a positively meaningful life. Wolf does not, for instance, address whether or not positive meaning can build over time as a result of the narrative structure of a person's life (Kauppinen 357).

Johan Brännmark (2001) has provided a useful distinction that can help explain the tension between Wolf and Kauppinen's approaches to the topic of meaningfulness. Brännmark is concerned with well-being, not meaningfulness. But, the same distinction is utilized in meaningfulness literature.

We can start with 'good,' asking ourselves which things are good, and then understand 'good lives' simply as lives that contain as much as these things as possible. But we can also start with 'lives' (and by 'lives' we would generally mean 'human lives'), asking ourselves what a life is and what it means to lead a life . . . On the second view, the value of parts can be determined only by seeing how they fit together as wholes and the value of a life is therefore dependent on the organization of the contents. (Brännmark 221)

Wolf (2010) takes the first approach. She focuses on explaining what makes an activity positively meaningful and then assumes that a positively meaningful life is one in pursuit of positively meaningful activities. It is unclear whether or not Wolf thinks that a person should try

to engage in as many positively meaningful activities as possible or if a person could lead a greatly meaningful life led in pursuit of a single positively meaningful activity. Either way, Wolf believes we can make sense of parts of lives being positively meaningful or meaningless. For example, we can imagine that a person's engagement in a relationship can be a meaningless part of a life if it is abusive. However, other relationships may constitute positively meaningful parts of lives.

I am adopting Metz's (2013) understanding of a part of a life as any segment of a life shorter than the life as a whole (39). So, for example, a person's childhood could constitute a positively meaningful period of her life (39). Additionally, a part of a life could be a desire satisfaction, which is best described as an event. For our purposes in this chapter, understanding the distinction between part-life and whole-life features is important but we do not need to do a full survey of what may count as a part of a life.

The second approach assumes that we cannot determine the meaning of a part of a life until we understand how it relates to the life as a whole. In this case, the structure, organization or pattern of a life is what is important for meaningfulness. We cannot just add up the number of meaningful parts to determine the meaningfulness of a life; instead, the way in which the parts are arranged matters (Brännmark 226). For example, David Velleman (2000) has suggested that there may be some value in learning life lessons (64). So, there may be some value in getting fired from a job if by getting fired you learn lessons that enable you to get a better job that you succeed at. Given that the significance of a part of a life can change over time, we cannot evaluate the final meaning or significance of a part of a life until the life story is complete.

Philosophers will posit different structural relationships of a life that are relevant for meaningfulness (e.g., redemption). Many of the structural relationships that are thought to be positively meaningful have analogs with features of stories that improve the quality of stories. For example, Velleman (1993) says that when you confer value on a misfortune it “alters its meaning, its significance in the story of one's life” (65). A story is not just a chronicle of events but an understanding of how the events relate to one another and the life's overarching themes. And an understanding of the story as a whole can affect the significance of events that take place in that story. In most cases, the analogy between a positively meaningful life and a good story should not be taken literally. Most philosophers do not argue that we are literally characters in a life story that we ought to make as interesting as possible. However, there are certain themes found in good stories that may be translatable to good lives – redemption, lessons learned from past misfortunes, success after years of effort and sacrifice, coherence, unity.

Metz argues that the two positions are not mutually exclusive; instead, parts of a life can be positively meaningful or meaningless and add to the overall meaningfulness of a life and structural features of a life can affect the life's overall meaning, as well (2013, 51-52). For example, a part of a life may be meaningful, but if the person were to live the same part over and over again this may detract from the overall meaningfulness of her life. Most would rather not relive the same day over and over again like Bill Murray's character in *Groundhog Day*, even if that day was particularly meaningful (Metz 52). Similarly, most people hope that enough growth occurs between childhood and adulthood that their adulthood is significantly different than childhood. A person's childhood may be positively meaningful, but if an adult was still engaged in all of the same activities of childhood, the person's life may be significantly less meaningful.

There will be some overlap between the two types of analysis. In the case of some examples of meaningless lives it may be unclear which category the life best fits in. For example, if someone were to do nothing but count blades of grass for her entire life this would be a highly repetitive life. However, often when philosophers are drawing our attention to features of an activity that may be meaningless the duration of the activity is irrelevant; the fact that the person may do the activity for the entirety of her life only helps to emphasize the meaninglessness of the feature in question.

3.2 Subjective versus objective features

Subjectivist accounts of meaningfulness stress that a person's life cannot be meaningful unless she finds her life to be meaningful. More strongly, some type of positive attitude towards a person's life or parts of her life is both a necessary and sufficient condition for a person's life to be positively meaningful (or part to be positively meaningful).¹³ The view is partially motivated by the belief that a life cannot be positively meaningful for a person if she has no access to the value added to her life through its meaningfulness. For example, a cancer researcher may be engaged in an objectively valuable activity, but if she does not deeply desire to pursue research, is not passionate about what she is doing, doesn't love her work, and is generally bored by what she does her activity may not be positively meaningful (Wolf 2010).

There is little consensus on what kind of subjective component counts as the necessary and sufficient condition for life's meaningfulness, however some possibilities of pro-attitudes include: desires, a belief that one's life is positively meaningful, feelings of satisfaction or

¹³ Metz has suggested that 'con-' attitudes may also confer meaning on a life (2013, 166). He states that "anger can be a source of meaning when it is directed toward injustice" (166). However, most subjectivists (and objectivists who adopt a subjective condition) restrict their analysis to 'pro-' attitudes.

fulfillment, love or other types of emotions, or active engagement. It need not be the case that a person consciously identifies her life as positively meaningful. For example, on Richard Taylor's (2000) account, as long as a person is passionate about what she is doing the activity adds positive meaning to her life, even if she had not conceived of the activity as positively meaningful.

Objectivist positions hold that a subjective component is not sufficient for positive meaning. The most popular view is to accept that a subjective component is either necessary for a meaningful life (but not sufficient) or that it adds extra meaning to a life already meaningful. For example, someone might accept that a satisfied desire cannot add positive meaning to my life if it is a desire to torture puppies. In this case the object of the desire does not possess objective value. Other objectivists hold that meaningfulness has nothing to do with subjective experience. Someone could argue that a person who cures cancer leads a positively meaningful life as a result of her significant impact on the world, even if she did not enjoy cancer research and didn't take pride in her achievement.

One motivation for the inclusion of an objective condition of meaningfulness is the intuition that people are sometimes wrong about whether or not their lives are meaningful. Other philosophers want to rule out certain types of lives that seem intuitively meaningless as positively meaningful. In particular, philosophers like to point to examples of highly immoral lives or lives dedicated to pointless or futile activity as paradigm examples of meaninglessness.

Not surprisingly, many objectivists adopt the agent-independent value approach. They believe that the concept of positive meaning is primarily “evaluative and commendatory” (Calhoun 2015, 15). In Section 2, I argued that philosophers will sometimes conflate the agent-

independent and agent-dependent value approaches when they want the agent-independent value approach to do more than it is designed to do. I suggested that Kauppinen (2012; 2013) may be guilty of conflating the two approaches. Kauppinen may also be guilty of smuggling a subjective condition into (what he takes to be) his purely objectivist conception of positive meaning.

As discussed in Section 2, Kauppinen accepts that lives are positively meaningful when they are fitting of fulfillment, pride, and admiration. A person need not actually experience these emotions for her life to be positively meaningful. In fact, Kauppinen argues that a “subject's actual attitude to her life is irrelevant [for its meaningfulness]” (2013, 166). We do experience feelings of fulfillment and pride but these feelings contribute to our happiness level and not the positive meaning of our lives. He concludes that subjective and objective meaning are distinct concepts and philosophers ought to theorize about objective meaning.

In Chapter 3, I will *also* argue that a person need not feel fulfilled for her life to be positively meaningful. However, while Kauppinen concludes that we ought to abandon a subjective condition altogether, I argue that we ought to focus on identification as the subjective condition of positive meaning (instead of fulfillment). When people live their lives in accordance with their identity-conferring values, commitments, and projects, they can make sense of the value and purpose of their lives. Additionally, it will be intelligible to them why they are choosing to live their lives rather than other lives that are equally commendable.

When constructing his conception of positive meaning, Kauppinen (2013) questions which features of a life have to be present in order for that life to be fitting of fulfillment, pride, or admiration. He claims that pride is only fitting when we are successful in “core projects that

give shape to our lives and define who we are” (167). One requirement for a project to count as positively meaningful is that it “reflects one's self” (167). It appears that Kauppinen *also* accepts that we must identify with our projects in order for them to be positively meaningful.

I do not think Kauppinen is making a foolish mistake in characterizing his conception as purely objectivist. Instead, he appears to be conceiving of what it means to *find* one's life meaningful in a different way than I am (and I'm not sure what way that is). We ought to conclude that the subjective-objective distinction is not very helpful. For this distinction to become helpful, philosophers would need to get clearer on what they mean for a person to *find* her life meaningful.

There is a second reason why the subjective-objective distinction is not helpful. For many philosophers, the objective condition is equivalent to a condition that the activities that one engage in be objectively valuable. For example, Wolf argues that people must find their activities to be fulfilling in order for them to be positively meaningful. However, Wolf wants to rule out the possibility that rubber-band collecting or Sudoku puzzle solving can be positively meaningful activities for a person, even if she feels fulfilled by them (Wolf 23). Intuitively, these types of activities cannot be meaningful because they are not objectively worthwhile. An activity is objectively valuable if it possesses some value independent of a person's valuing of it.

However, as Christine Vitrano (2013) has pointed out, in developing her conception of meaning in life, Wolf does not defend an account of objective value. And, if we do not have a conception of objective value, then we will have difficulty determining which activities are positively meaningful and which are meaningless. Vitrano claims that Wolf's evaluation of

which activities are worthwhile versus worthless appears arbitrary. For example, Wolf finds baking chocolate cakes to be valuable but completing crossword puzzles is not (Vitrano 85).

Vitrano believes (2013) that positively meaningful lives *are* lives engaged in objectively valuable activity. However, she argues that until we have a working conception of objective value, we ought to focus on more useful terminology (80). Therefore, Vitrano (2014) later argues (with Steven Cahn) that instead of focusing on what it is to live a positively meaningful life, we ought to focus on what it means to “live well.” And, “living well” requires “acting morally and finding long-term satisfaction” (Vitrano and Cahn 2014, 21). While we do not have a working conception of objective value, they believe we do have shared conceptions of “moral action” and “satisfaction.”

Vitrano and Cahn’s (2014) account seems susceptible to the same problem as Wolf’s. In the same way that we do not yet have an agreed upon conception of objective value, we also do not have an agreed upon conception of right and wrong action. On Wolf’s (2010) account, there will be some types of activities that seem clearly valuable whereas others will seem clearly lacking in value. Helping people who are starving seems like an activity that clearly possesses objective value. In contrast, destroying public property seems like an activity that clearly lacks value. However, on Wolf’s account, there will be some activities that fall in a gray area. Does the collection of paperclips count as objectively valuable? It is hard to tell.

Similarly, on Vitrano and Cahn’s (2014) view, there will likely be some activities that everyone would agree are morally praiseworthy (e.g., helping sick people) and other activities that seem clearly immoral (e.g., setting cats on fire). However, given that people adhere to competing conceptions of morality, there will be some activities that will be morally

indeterminate. Vitrano and Cahn (2014) provide an example of a man named Lee (14). Lee spends his life sunbathing, swimming and surfing. Additionally, “Lee has no financial needs but spends money freely on magnificent homes, luxury cars, the latest in electronic equipment, designer clothes, meals in fine restaurants. . . ” (14). While Vitrano and Cahn believe Lee's primary activities are not immoral and therefore can contribute to the value his life, on Peter Singer's version of utilitarianism, most of Lee's actions are immoral.¹⁴

Vitrano and Cahn's (2014) conception of “living well” is not an improvement on Wolf's conception of positive meaning in life. However, I agree with Vitrano (2013) that including an objective value condition seems inappropriate, given that we do not yet have an agreed upon conception of objective value. Without agreement, we will be left with competing theories of positive meaning that differ solely in terms of which things they take to be valuable. On one theory, collecting paperclips might turn out to be positively meaningful. On another theory, this activity will turn out to be meaningless. How would we decide between the theories? At the end of the day, theory choice would come down to sheer intuition. Of course, we can (and probably must) use our intuitions when evaluating lives for meaning. However, we should not stop here. We ought to try to provide an explanation for what it is about these lives that make them meaningful or meaningless (or more prone to meaninglessness). In other words, we should try to explain what is motivating our intuitions.

Laurence Thomas (2005) has taken this approach. Thomas focuses on immoral lives and questions *why* immoral lives are less favored to be positively meaningful. He argues that as social beings who require self-esteem for psychological health, we also desire to receive *genuine* affirmation from people whom we respect (413). The emphasis on 'genuine' affirmation is

¹⁴ See, for example, Peter Singer (1972) in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.”

important. Thomas believes that we are typically aware of when we receive empty praise (414). People give us empty praise when they tell us what we want to hear about ourselves rather than what they genuinely believe about us. The receipt of empty praise does not boost our self-esteem.

One example of a life that some philosophers argue is meaningless is Hitler's. Thomas believes Hitler's life was likely not meaningful for two primary reasons. First, Hitler gave people no choice but to affirm him (420). As a result, he likely only received empty praise. Second, praise that we receive from people whom we do not respect or value does not boost our self-esteem (423-424). By despising numerous groups of people, Hitler limited the amount of affirmation that he could receive from others.

Like Thomas (2005), I believe we can explain why some lives are meaningless without positing an unhelpful objective value condition. Additionally, a conception of meaning in life ought to be able to explain which types of lives are meaningful or meaningless and *why* they are meaningful or meaningless. I will attempt to provide an explanation for both in Chapters 3 and 4.

4. Why meaninglessness?

There are compelling reasons to study meaninglessness in life independent from what this study could inform us about the value of positive meaning. People may be more concerned that they avoid meaninglessness in life than that their lives be greatly (positively) meaningful or as meaningful as possible. Even if this empirical claim is false, I suggest people *ought* to be more concerned with avoiding meaninglessness. I also explain how our intuitions concerning meaninglessness may be more accurate than our intuitions concerning positive meaning.

Therefore, it may be helpful to start by theorizing about meaninglessness and then use our conclusions from this study to make inferences about the nature of positive meaning.

I should say that sometimes people *do* have concern that their lives are not as meaningful as possible or greatly meaningful. When a person is generally satisfied with her job and family life but decides to attend graduate school to pursue her dream career she may be interpreted as changing her life so as to maximize the amount of positive meaning in it. This type of person would probably not self-describe her life as meaningless before graduate school. She might say something like “my life would become even more fulfilling if I pursued the career I most want to pursue” or that “once I have my dream job I will have everything I want in life.” If circumstances prevented her from finishing graduate school, she may be disappointed but her discontinuation would probably not constitute a serious threat to the self-perceived meaningfulness of her life.

On a different note, some philosophers have posited a connection between meaninglessness and suicide. As Camus (1991) suggests, “killing yourself amounts to confessing” that “life is too much for you or that you do not understand it” (5). According to Camus, people perceive their lives to be meaningless when they cannot make sense of them. And, one explanation for why people commit suicide is that they cannot make sense of their lives. It appears that a perception of one's life as meaningless can cause people to make drastic changes to their lives – either to attempt to improve them or to end them.

I believe that the concern that one's life is meaningless and the concern that one's life is not as meaningful as possible are different concerns. And, I think the former concern is often a more important and pressing concern than the latter one. A person may not feel that she can

move on with her life until she addresses a concern regarding the meaninglessness of her life.

Tolstoy (2000) felt that he could not live at all until he was able to answer some of the existential questions that plagued him. In contrast, a person who feels that her life is adequately (positively) meaningful but could be more positively meaningful may feel content and feel little distress when she misses out on opportunities to make her life more positively meaningful.

One possible explanation for the urgency that accompanies a concern that one's life is meaningless is that meaninglessness may be associated with a phenomenology that is undesirable to possess. Tim Oakley (2010) has suggested that meaninglessness is typically associated with physical, psychological and emotional suffering (106). Additionally, as Roy Baumeister (1991) has described, “they [people in a meaningless period] may feel that they have lost an important part of identity, lost their position in society, or lost their future, and so they go through an aimless period in which they lack any purposes or motivations” (313). If these claims about the phenomenology of meaninglessness are correct, then even if nothing else about meaninglessness in life was undesirable, one would still have reason to avoid meaninglessness in one's life.

An additional reason why research on meaninglessness is important is that our intuitions concerning meaninglessness may be more accurate than those concerning positive meaning. How might this be the case? It is generally accepted that people leading *positively* meaningful lives rarely stop to question the meaningfulness of them. As Wai-hung Wong (2008) suggests, we seem to react to the meaningfulness of our lives in the same way that we react to our health: “we do not evaluate our health until we suffer from some physical pain or from some sorts of malfunctioning of our bodies that we are aware of” (127). Wong (2008) states that most people do not question the meaningfulness of their lives until they are faced with “critical problems”

that are the catalyst for their evaluation of their lives (126). Wong suggests that some highly reflective people may still evaluate their lives for meaningfulness even when they are not faced with a critical problem, but this is the exception and not the norm.

On a similar note, Wolf (2010) has argued that people are made better through their engagement in positively meaningful projects, even though they are rarely conscious of the value added to their lives through their engagement (118). For Wolf, people engage in specific projects because they recognize the independent value of the project and are passionate about working toward its completion. She suggests that “insofar as facts to the effect that something will contribute to the meaning of a person's life give reasons to foster or promote that thing, those facts will rarely be directly available to the people whose lives are in question and are not likely to matter much, even when they are” (Wolf 118).

The fact that people whose lives are going well do not stop to reflect on them does not, in and of itself, suggest that people do not care if their lives are positively meaningful. However, it may mean that people have a better grasp of the concept and nature of meaninglessness than they do positive meaning. Why might this be the case? If people are conscious of when critical problems are jeopardizing the meaningfulness of their own lives, they may have an appreciation of what these problems are and their effects. While some people have gone through both periods of positive meaning and meaninglessness, they may have only reflected on the value of their lives when they feared they were meaningless.

Second, some people may go through their entire lives without hearing someone proclaim that her life is meaningful. In contrast, many of us have heard people proclaim that their lives are meaningless, empty, pointless, or their activities worthless or futile. And, these are the sorts

of judgments we most closely associate with fears of meaninglessness. The more experience we have with others making such judgments, the better grasp we will have of when and how people use the concept.

Oakley (2010) has also suggested that we ought to be wary of the conclusions we arrive at when we theorize about positive meaning. He states that “people simply do not in any consistent way attribute meaningfulness to individual lives, or to life in general” (Oakley 107). If we cannot fix the concept of positive meaning in ordinary use and do not agree about which lives are positively meaningful, then we may have reason to be skeptical of our intuitions concerning which conceptions of meaningfulness best exemplify the concept.

There is evidence supporting Oakley's claim, namely that our intuitions concerning which lives are positively meaningful often *do* diverge. For example, some people share the intuition that a person's life is positively meaningful if she is highly accomplished at her activities, regardless of whether or not she is passionate about those activities.¹⁵ Other people share the intuition that a person's activities are positively meaningful if she is passionate about her activities, regardless of whether or not those activities are worthwhile.¹⁶ Wolf (2010) has provided a popular contemporary account that combines each of these elements. While Wolf's (2010) account is popular, some philosophers have argued, contra philosophers like Wolf, that even a person's immoral activities can contribute positive meaning to her life.¹⁷ If immoral activities *can* contribute positive meaning to a life, then a requirement that activities be objectively worthwhile may not be entirely correct.

¹⁵ For example, Metz has suggested that Mother Teresa's life is at least somewhat meaningful due to its high level of moral achievement, even if she was not passionate about her work (2013, 183-184)

¹⁶ Taylor argues that Sisyphus's life would become meaningful if a desire to roll the boulder up the hill was implanted in him (2000, 169). Though the activity remains pointless, Sisyphus's positive attitude toward boulder-rolling makes the activity meaningful for him.

¹⁷ For an example, see John Kekes (2000). For an objection to Kekes (2000), see Iddo Landau (2011).

Given the diversity of our intuitions regarding which lives are positively meaningful, it seems reasonable to be somewhat skeptical of the conclusions of our theorizing. However, I do not believe that the fact that our intuitions diverge gives us reason to do away with intuitions as the starting place of our theorizing altogether. Rather, our skepticism ought only to encourage us to be cognizant of the fact that a philosopher's approach to theorizing may impact her conclusions. As already suggested, some philosophers may have conceptual commitments built into their understanding of meaninglessness that can impact which *conceptions* of meaninglessness are even considered.

5. Overview of chapters

In this final section, I will provide a very brief overview of the chapters of my dissertation.

5.1 Chapter 2: Meaningless Lives

In this chapter, I provide a catalog of examples of meaningless lives utilized in philosophical literature. For example, a philosopher may have the intuition that playing *Candy Crush Saga* all day long is a meaningless life. If so, she could infer from this example that lives engaged in pointless activity are meaningless. In providing a catalog of examples of meaningless lives, I will be able to draw conclusions about how philosophers are understanding the concept of meaninglessness. Additionally, I will be able to point to flaws with conceptions of meaning in life that rely on these examples.

I suggest that most philosophers tacitly accept that meaninglessness is merely the

absence of positive meaning, rather than a state that is dis-valuable. As a result, when we examine examples of meaningless parts of lives, the parts do not seem undesirable in and of themselves. Additionally, when we conceive of meaningless 'lives' as entire lives (rather than parts), we are left wondering why anyone would live such lives. As a result, I suggest that there is likely a separate condition, constitutive of meaninglessness, which explains why some people's lives resemble one or more of the examples of paradigmatically meaningless lives. However, this means that the activity (or lack thereof) highlighted in these examples are merely symptoms of meaninglessness, not constitutive of it.

5.2 Chapter 3: Positive Meaning without Fulfillment

In Chapter 3, I object to the view that a necessary condition for positive meaning in life is positive affect. I focus primarily on Wolf's (2010) position in *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*. As already discussed, Wolf argues that a meaningful activity is an activity that one finds fulfilling and one that is objectively valuable. I provide three objections to Wolf's fulfillment condition. Then, I argue that we ought to adopt identification as the subjective condition of positive meaning (instead of fulfillment). In other words, positively meaningful parts of a person's life will be ones that she identifies with. However, I argue that not all identifications are positively meaningful. As a result, I defend a view in which a subset of a person's overall identifications are positively meaningful ones.

From the perspective of my dissertation at large, the primary purpose of this chapter is to motivate the idea that there is a relationship between meaning in life and our practical identities. In this chapter, I focus on positive meaning in life. However, it seems reasonable that if positive

meaning in life involves our practical identities, then it is likely the case that meaninglessness also involves our practical identities. In Chapter 4, I refine the conception of positive meaning that I develop in this chapter. Then, I defend a conception of meaninglessness that is tied to our practical identities.

5.3 Chapter 4: Practical Identity and Meaninglessness

In this chapter, I elucidate the nature of the condition that I argue is constitutive of meaninglessness. I provide a brief introduction to phenomenological literature on radical types of hopelessness, boredom, and meaninglessness. I argue that radical boredom and meaninglessness are different types of hopelessness. And, I suggest that meaninglessness is specifically a type of agential hopelessness.

I argue that a person in a meaningless period in her life is unable to project herself into the future as an agent, imagining herself successfully pursuing ideals she is committed to, projects that she care about, in roles that she values, and in relationships with people she cares about. And, the “self” that is projected into the future is one's practical identity. In projecting herself into the future, a person constructs a narrative out of her fundamental identifications (e.g., those that most define her). The narrative that is constructed is not her narrative identity but a narrative of how she *wants* her life to go. And, this narrative enables her to make sense of the value and purpose of her life and direction her life is going in. In contrast, those who are unable to project themselves into the future in this way will find that they cannot justify the value and purpose of their lives and may feel that their lives are going nowhere or that they are stuck in the present. After defending my conception of meaninglessness, I explain why I am conceiving of

meaninglessness as a dis-value, rather than the absence of positive meaning.

5.4 Chapter 5: The Meaning of the Afterlife

In Chapter 5, I respond to Samuel Scheffler's (2013) argument in his new book, *Death and the Afterlife*, that the collective afterlife – i.e., the continued existence of other human beings after our deaths – matters more for the meaningfulness of our lives than our own continued existence. I argue that much of the importance of the collective afterlife for the meaningfulness of our lives derives from our inability to directly confront our own mortality. In defending this claim, I utilize my conception of positive meaning in life defended in Chapters 3 and 4. Additionally, I draw from the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker and social psychologists from the terror management theory tradition. I argue that Scheffler has not conclusively shown that the collective afterlife matters more to us than our own personal survival.

Chapter Two

Meaningless Lives

Introduction

When philosophers reflect on examples of intuitively meaningless lives, they hope to reveal what these types of lives lack in hopes of understanding what positively meaningful lives possess. For example, some people may have the intuition that a person who plays *Candy Crush Saga* all day long leads a positively meaningless life; and, we could infer from this intuition that lives engaged in pointless activity are meaningless. Therefore, it may be that activity must be objectively valuable in order to add positive meaning to a person's life.

In this chapter, I provide a survey of paradigmatically meaningless lives.¹⁸ The examples of meaningless lives cataloged in this chapter are really examples of meaningless *parts* of lives, especially activities. A philosopher will provide necessary and sufficient conditions for an activity to be positively meaningful and then assume that a positively meaningful life is one led in pursuit of positively meaningful activities.¹⁹ In contrast to this type of view, some philosophers focus on the whole life as the primary bearer of meaning.²⁰ I will not discuss features of whole lives that may seem meaningless.

At this point it would be helpful to remember that I have characterized positive meaning as a quality that some lives possess and others lack and one that is intuitively desirable to possess (Chapter 1, Introduction). Based on this characterization, it would be reasonable to think that

¹⁸ I am not the first to provide a catalog of meaningless lives. For example, W. D. Joske (1974) has argued that there are at least four categories of meaninglessness: the worthless, pointless, trivial and futile (97).

¹⁹ Though I am focusing on meaningless *parts* of lives rather than meaningless *lives*, at times it will be easier to refer to 'lives' rather than 'parts of lives,' and I will take advantage of this convenience.

²⁰ See Chapter 1, Section 3.1 for a more complete description of the distinction between parts of lives and whole lives.

meaninglessness would be a quality that some lives possess and others lack and one that is intuitively *undesirable* to possess. If there is a feature of a life that makes it meaningless, then we have a *prima facie* reason to avoid that feature. Possessing this feature would make someone's life worse (in some respect) than others that do not possess this feature.²¹ However, I argue that there is nothing necessarily undesirable about the majority of the intuitively meaningless lives discussed in this chapter.²²

I argue that it is only by determining the causes of the part or the context in which a part is situated that we can determine if there is something problematic with the part. When I suggest that a part is *problematic* (in some contexts), I either mean that the part seems clearly undesirable in and of itself, or, the part appears to be symptomatic of some other condition that seems undesirable.

I argue that most conceptions of meaning in life theorize from features of lives that are symptomatic of meaninglessness, but not constitutive of it. For example, there may be an underlying condition, constitutive of meaninglessness, which explains why a person would choose to play *Candy Crush Saga* all day long. If I am correct, then engagement in pointless activity is not itself a sufficient condition of meaninglessness, but possibly a symptom of it. Most conceptions of meaninglessness are actually conceptions of lives where the value of positive meaning is absent and not lives with a feature present that makes them undesirable.

My primary target in this chapter are conceptions of meaning in life that tacitly adhere to

²¹ I am not suggesting that meaning in life is a component of well-being. It may be that meaningfulness and well-being are distinct values of a life. However, if meaningfulness is a component of well-being, then meaninglessness is a feature of a life that detracts from its overall well-being level. If meaning and well-being are entirely distinct concepts, then meaninglessness is a feature that detracts from an all-things-considered evaluation of a life (one that takes into consideration meaning and well-being).

²² While my examples of meaningless lives are examples of lives that philosophers have suggested are intuitively meaningless, not all philosophers share these intuitions. In fact, I do not share many of these intuitions. And, later in this chapter I will explain why (for those who have them) many of these intuitions are incorrect.

what I refer to as the *Standard Account*. The Standard Account is best described as a commitment to a particular conceptual understanding of meaningfulness. On this analysis, meaningfulness is not a dis-value but the absence of positive meaning. Philosophers who adhere to the Standard Account accept that the worst case scenario (from the perspective of meaning in life) is a life devoid of positive meaning. They can take advantage of a straightforward procedure in the evaluation of lives for meaningfulness. They will point to one or more meaning-making features (e.g., fulfillment) that they believe can explain why a life seems positively meaningful. Then, lives that are meaningless will be ones that lack those meaning-making features.

This chapter will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I provide my catalog of meaningless lives. In Section 3, I argue that conceptions of meaningfulness that theorize from these examples of meaningless lives are too simplistic. In Section 4, I consider the possibility that meaningfulness is a dis-value, rather than the absence of positive meaning. In doing so, I present and evaluate three competing conceptions of meaningfulness as a dis-value. I argue that the philosophers who defend these conceptions fail to explain why they are conceptions of meaningfulness and not unhappiness or immorality.

2. Catalog of meaningless lives

I have split my catalog of meaningless lives into two categories: objective and subjective meaningless lives. In Chapter 1, Section 3.2, I provided an analysis of the distinction between objectivist and subjectivist conceptions of meaning. I also argued that this distinction is not very helpful. I argued that objectivists who conceive of the objective condition as a condition of

objective value do not have recourse to a working conception of objective value. As a result, they will have difficulty evaluating which lives are actually meaningful or meaningless.

However, as most of the philosophers who have posited these examples of meaningless lives utilize the objective-subjective distinction, I will also utilize this distinction when cataloging my examples of meaningless lives. Also, like most philosophers, I will conceive of objectively meaningless lives as lives that are not objectively valuable.

As already stated, my catalog of meaningless lives is actually a catalog of meaningless parts of lives. To simplify matters, I will say that a part of a life seems objectively meaningless if it is intuitively not objectively valuable. However, there are different ways in which a part of a life can be worthless. Counting blades of grass may seem meaningless because it is pointless. Other activities seem meaningless because they are destructive of value. Killing innocent people does not seem pointless in the same way that counting blades of grass seems to be. The activity of killing seems to have a point, but its point is overwhelmingly negative and destructive. Philosophers may argue that both activities are not objectively valuable, even though the explanations for why they are not objectively valuable differ.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Section 3.2, in cases where a part of a life seems subjectively meaningless, it is thought that the person does not *find* the part to be positively meaningful. Philosophers will posit a positive propositional attitude (or set of pro-attitudes) toward a part of a life that must be present in order for the part to count as positively meaningful; if a part is subjectively meaningless, then the pro-attitude is absent. For example, Harry Frankfurt (1988; 1999; 2002) has argued that love is necessary (and sufficient) for positive meaning in life. For Frankfurt, parts of a person's life would not be meaningful if she does not love or care about

those parts.

2.1 Objective part-life

The most oft-cited example of a meaningless life is that of Sisyphus, a mythical character that the gods condemned to roll a boulder to the top of the hill over and over again for eternity.

Every time Sisyphus rolls the boulder to the top of the hill, the boulder rolls down again.

Richard Taylor has explained that Sisyphus's life is not meaningless because it is difficult (2000, 168). Taylor says the example would be just as good if we imagined Sisyphus rolling a pebble to the top of the hill over and over again (168). He suggests many would consider Sisyphus's life to be meaningless because it is pointless – “nothing ever comes of what he is doing” (Taylor 168).²³

One type of meaningless life is the *pointless life*. Other examples of pointless activities may include playing *Candy Crush Saga*, or, as Wolf has suggested, completing crossword or Sudoku puzzles (2010, 9), smoking pot all day long (2010, 9), or even making “handwritten copies of the text of *War and Peace*” (2010, 16).

Joel Feinberg (1980) believes that Sisyphus's life is meaningless because it is pointless. However, he thinks that there other types of meaningless lives that are worthless for slightly different reasons. He has us imagine that the gods assign Sisyphus an aim – to put a flag on the top of the mountain before returning down (Feinberg 262). Sisyphus would have an end that would explain why he undertakes his activity, so the activity is not totally pointless. However, Feinberg says that even though the activity of boulder-rolling now has a point, the end doesn't justify the means. We can refer to this type of life as a *trivial life*.

²³ Taylor (2000) argues that if Sisyphus desires to roll boulders (and his desire is clearly satisfied), then the activity is meaningful – even if pointless. So, he disagrees with the suggestion that lives engaged in pointless activity are necessarily meaningless.

In contrast yet again, futile activities are ones that have a point and their means are proportionate to the end, but the means are an ineffective way to acquire the end (Feinberg 1980, 264). As Brooke Alan Trisel has explained, whether or not a medical treatment is futile depends on the specific goals or aims of the treatment (2002, 72). If the goal of a practitioner is simply to keep a patient alive, then providing nutritional support for the patient would not be futile. However, if a practitioner's goal is to increase the likelihood of the patient one day being conscious when she is clearly in a permanent vegetative state, then the treatment would be futile (Trisel 72). I will refer to a life led in pursuit of futile activities as a *futile life*.

If the futility of an activity depends on expectations, it could be suggested that one way to lead a meaningful life is to have very low expectations. At least, this would be one way of avoiding a potentially futile life. If your expectations are very low, then it will not be difficult to figure out a means that will be effective in acquiring your end. However, if a person's only goal in life is to get out of bed in the morning, we may ask why the person even bothers. I will refer to this type of life as the *low expectation life*. This life is probably a version of the pointless life except that what explains the person's pointless activity is that she has set very low expectations for herself.²⁴

The person's life with low expectations probably resembles the *passive life* in many ways. The problem with the passive life is not that the person is engaged in worthless activities, but that the person is not active at all. Wolf (2007) describes one example of a passive life. The Blob is a person “who spends day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies” (Wolf 6). Wolf infers from the example of the Blob that a life

²⁴ As an example, Laurence James (2010) has argued that only those achievements that are difficult for a person to accomplish are meaningful. One possible implication is that those people who set their expectations low will not thereby make their lives more meaningful through their accomplishments.

lead passively or inactively is a meaningless life.

A different interpretation of Wolf's Blob example is that the Blob is active but motivated purely by considerations of pleasure. I will refer to this as the *hedonist's life*. The hedonist's life could rank very high in happiness but not positive meaning. Philosophers typically accept that happiness and positive meaning are different values of a life. Therefore, a person can lead a happy life that is not positively meaningful. For example, a life in Robert Nozick's (1974) experience machine may be a very happy life, but it lacks the sort of authenticity we typically associate with a positively meaningful life.

An additional problem with Nozick's experience machine example is that lives built on lies may be meaningless. Philosophers who include an objective condition in their conception of meaningfulness are often motivated by the idea that people can be wrong about the meaningfulness of their lives. Shelly Kagan (1994) has provided a helpful example of the *deceived life*. The deceived businessman is one who dies believing that he has led a highly successful life, both personally and professionally (Kagan 311). However, his beliefs concerning the success of his life are all false. For example, he believes he has a loving and faithful wife but his wife has cheated on him. Someone may have the intuition that the businessman's life is, at least, less meaningful than it would have been had his beliefs about his life been correct. This is the case even though it is stipulated that the businessman never finds out about the deception and therefore never experiences disappointment, anger, or sadness.

The deceived life may be one example of the *failed life*. As an example, Wolf has us imagine a farmer who planned to hand his farm down to his children, but the farm goes into foreclosure (2010, 105). Wolf says that "if these people [with significant failures] were to think

of their lives as wasted, a total loss, it would not be unnatural or surprising, and such a thought is at least somewhat akin to the thought that one's life (or this period of it) has been meaningless (105). Wolf is skeptical that failure may render a person's activities entirely meaningless, but at the very least she believes failure may reduce the meaningfulness of our activities.

In "Time and Life's Meaning," Taylor (1987) defends a different view than that defended in "The Meaning of Life." Taylor (1987) argues that only creative activities can count as positively meaningful. If the boulders were to be used to construct a temple and Sisyphus was the author of the plan or vision of the temple, then his boulder-rolling may count as positively meaningful (682). In contrast, if Sisyphus were forced to roll the boulders up the hill to be used in the construction of a temple based on someone else's creative plan, the boulder-rolling would be meaningless (680).

There are two types of meaningless lives that arise in reflection on Taylor's example. First, Taylor believes highly *imitative lives* count as meaningless. For example, Taylor believes that the activity of raising children would not count as positively meaningful for a parent if the parent raised her children in the same way that she was raised. The life of the person who makes "handwritten copies of the text of War and Peace" may also seem meaningless because it is imitative (Wolf 2010, 16). The author of the handwritten copies is not adding anything new to the text; she is just imitating the writing process of Leo Tolstoy.

Taylor also believes we must be the author of our own lives in order for our lives to count as positively meaningful. Taylor would likely count a *subservient life* as meaningless. One could require that a person autonomously form and maintain parts of her life in order for them to count as positively meaningful. Some obvious examples where this requirement would not be

met are in cases of coercion or brainwashing. More contentious examples would include, as John Christman has described, cases “where there are social conditions that, while at some level are 'acceptable' to the person, are fundamentally oppressive and restrictive. Examples include voluntary slavery, a subservient housewife, a religious devotee, and a conscientious objector” (2004, 149).

A different type of life that may have a point but its point is worthless is the *destructive life*. For Metz (2013), there is distinction between activities that lack value and activities that are dis-valuable. Counting blades of grass may be a pointless activity, but it isn't a harmful activity. In contrast, “blowing up the Sphinx” and “torturing others for fun” are not just worthless activities but destructive of value (Metz 54). One possible sub-category of the destructive life is the *degrading life*. Metz includes the following as one example of a meaningless activity: “prostituting oneself to feed a drug addiction” (201). In this case, the value that you destroy is your own.

2.2 Subjective part-life

The examples of intuitively meaningless lives that I will describe in this section are supposed to share the following in common: an absence of a necessary positive attitude toward one's life or parts of one's life. As we will see, some of the examples of subjective part-life meaningless lives are not just missing a positive attitude. Instead, they also appear to be associated with a negative phenomenology. I will not be able to discuss every example of a subjectively meaningless life in this section, so I will focus on a few notable ones.

Taylor (2000) has us imagine that the gods who condemned Sisyphus to rolling boulders

also implanted in him a desire to roll boulders. Even though the activity remains pointless, Taylor believes that the activity is now meaningful because it fulfills Sisyphus's desire. Taylor's conception of meaning points to a possible meaningless life, the *frustrated life*. With the frustrated life, a person's desires are perpetually frustrated. For example, we can imagine someone whose only desire is to run a four-minute mile, but every time she tries she fails.

Aaron Smuts (2011) has argued that an immortal life would necessarily become undesirable for human beings with fixed abilities (which would likely be all human immortals) because eventually they would reach a point where their fixed abilities prevented further success and advancement. Smuts concludes that “even if occasional successes could give great satisfaction, with fixed abilities, innumerable, endless failures would be just over the horizon. Immortality for those with fixed abilities and just a little ambition would be a prison of eternal frustration” (145). Smuts is arguing that an immortal life would necessarily become undesirable because it would inevitably become perpetually frustrating. It is unclear whether or not Smuts is additionally arguing that there is a connection between frustration and meaninglessness.

According to Wolf, people who are fulfilled by their activity are typically “gripped or excited” or generally passionate about the activity (2010, 14). For example, a person who is instrumental in designing and building a new hospital is certainly engaged in this activity. However, a person who is not passionate about designing and helping build hospitals is not the type of person who will feel fulfilled by this activity. Intuitively, there are some people who are fully committed to their work, but who are nonetheless not passionate about it. And, she suggests that people who are engaged in activities that they do not care about are typically alienated by, or bored with, their work.

However, there are subtle differences between the *alienated life* and the *bored life*. We can understand the alienated life as one where a person is not doing what she *most* wants to do or an activity which is most expressive of her true self. Cheshire Calhoun has described the conflict the alienated housewife faces as a conflict between two selves, one, an “authentic self” that represents what the alienated housewife truly values, and an inauthentic self, such as a “culturally sanctioned view of what is normally valuable” for women (2008, 201). That which she truly values – say, an academic career – does not provide reasons for action for her because she largely neglects these reasons in support of reasons stemming from traditional gender norms. As Marya Schechtman adds, the alienated housewife's life seems meaningless to her because “there is a peculiar kind of frustration, anxiety, and emptiness associated with suppressing one's true nature” (2004, 419).

Wolf (2010) has suggested that the alienated housewife may still love her family. She suggests that someone whose “principled activities and projects are shaped and guided by love in a sense” may “feel trapped by their circumstances, compelled to live in ways that leave them no opportunity to pursue their passions or to realize their potentials (113). It seems, then, that we can also distinguish between the *alienated* life and the *loveless* life. An *alienated life* need not lack love.

Additionally, it seems to me that someone who is not doing what she most wants to do or most closely identifies with may nonetheless experience some fulfillment in her activities. For example, a person may feel fulfilled while playing chess even if the activity is not expressive of who she is. What seems important for avoiding boredom is being affectively attached to one's activities. For example, one must feel fulfilled with, or excited by, playing chess in order to

avoid boredom while playing.

Matthew Ratcliffe (2013b) has provided a helpful description of ordinary boredom. Most of the time when people are bored they are bored *by* something, like a lecture or endless Monopoly game. Ratcliffe says that “here, the boredom is directed at something – one’s current situation” (167). Ordinary boredom is characterized by the awareness that one could be engaged in more exciting activities if she was not stuck doing her present activity. She may be counting down the minutes of her present activity in anticipation of a future one.

Some people who are in loving marriages still go through long periods of boredom. In Chapter 3, I will argue that an inappropriate test for the meaningfulness of a relationship is its level of fulfillment. Some people, waiting to acquire endless fulfillment in their relationships, may end them, only to realize the importance of their relationship after the fact. Therefore, the *bored life* is likely also distinct from the *loveless life*.

To sum up, feeling alienated from parts of one's life does not preclude feeling fulfilled by them (e.g., chess). Similarly, feeling alienated from parts of one's life does not preclude loving them (e.g., one's spouse). Lastly, one can feel bored by a part of one's life that one also loves.

3. Problems with the Standard Account

Philosophers point to examples of intuitively meaningless lives and then theorize about which features of these lives are meaningless. For example, I utilized Wolf's (2007) example of the Blob to characterize someone who lives a passive life. Wolf provides this example in order to argue that active engagement is required for positive meaning. I provided similar characterizations of what I termed the hedonist's life, the pointless life, the alienated life, and

others.

I suggested that these types of lives are not really intended as lives at all but examples of intuitively meaningless parts of lives – most often activities. Philosophers have us imagine that the activity (or lack of one) extends for the entire temporal duration of a life only to emphasize the meaningless features being analyzed. I will now argue that conceptions of meaning in life that utilize these types of examples are overly simplistic – i.e., they lack adequate explanations for why these lives are meaningless. As it turns out, different inadequacies are highlighted when we conceive of meaningless 'lives' as parts of lives and when we conceive of them as entire lives.

I will explain how, when we focus on meaningless 'lives' as *parts* of lives, many of the examples of parts do not (in and of themselves) seem undesirable. This is true of at least the following lives: pointless, futile, trivial, low expectations, passive, hedonist, imitative, frustrated, bored, alienated, and loveless lives (again, conceived of as *parts* of lives). More will need to be said about the following examples of lives which do seem undesirable, though not necessarily from the perspective of meaning in life: failed, subservient, destructive, and degrading lives.

As most of the examples of meaningless 'lives' conceived of as parts do not seem undesirable in and of themselves, I will suggest we conceive of meaningless 'lives' as entire lives. In other words, we ought to imagine someone engaged in one of my examples of meaningless lives for the entirety of her life. I will suggest that when we focus on meaningless parts of lives as meaningless *lives*, we are left wondering why anyone would choose to lead such a life. In some of these cases there may be an underlying condition which explains why someone's life resembles one or more of the examples of meaningless lives. By explicating the features of this underlying condition, we will also be in a position to explain when and why some meaningless

parts of a life are problematic (from the perspective of meaning in life) and why others are not.

I am taking it for granted that a part of a life may not be meaningful but it could promote one's happiness level. One may decide it is all-things-considered rational to pursue it given that it promotes one's happiness. This is fairly uncontroversial. So, I will be arguing that most of the parts of lives discussed in Section 2 are not undesirable from the perspective of *meaning in life*.

Before moving on, I want to point to two more general problems with most conceptions of meaning. First, the emphasis on *activities* as positively meaningful or meaningless obscures the fact that, in real-life crises of meaning, the bearer of meaninglessness is a period of time that does not necessarily correspond to the length of an activity. For example, Leo Tolstoy's (2000) crises of meaning lasted for a period of time that did not correspond to any of the activities he was engaged in at the time. This may suggest that meaninglessness in life cannot be accounted for by loss of meaningful activity or engagement in meaningless ones.

Additionally, most conceptions do not specify what would be required of a person to overcome a meaningless period in her life. What most philosophers will do is posit a condition as necessary for meaningfulness. It would seem, then, that if someone fears a part of her life is meaningless, she would just need to assess which condition is missing and find a new part that is not missing that condition. For example, if an activity is meaningless because it is futile, then a person needs to quit the activity and find a different one that is not futile. Or, as Wolf has suggested, if someone is bored or unfulfilled by her activity, then the person needs to “find his or her passion and pursue it” (2010, 13).

The assumption, here, is that curing meaninglessness may be fairly easy, as long as someone is marginally reflective on the value of her pursuits. However, if overcoming a

meaningless period in our lives is not this simple, then there may be more involved in meaningless periods than the absence of a condition. In Section 3.1, I contrast contexts in which an activity seems clearly undesirable with ones in which it does not seem undesirable. I believe it will be clear that in contexts in which an activity is undesirable, a change in activity will not improve one's condition.

3.1 Meaningless 'lives' as parts of lives

The primary issue that arises when we conceive of the examples of meaningless lives as *parts* of lives is that most people will identify with many of these meaningless parts. By “identify,” I mean that most people will recognize that they have had stages of their lives that resembled one or more of the examples of meaningless lives. Or, they will recognize that they have spent many hours engaged in these types of activities (or passively). This recognition may cause some people to question the meaningfulness of their lives. This questioning is not, in and of itself, problematic. However, such questioning can also be accompanied by fear and concern. And, I believe this fear and concern is most often unjustified. Most people whose lives sometimes resemble one or more of my examples of meaningless lives have nothing to worry about.

For starters, there is nothing necessarily problematic about pointless, futile, or trivial activity. Rather, in order to understand if there is something problematic about engaging in such activity, we need to understand what is causing this engagement or, more generally, the context in which these activities are undertaken. If we assume for the sake of argument that some types of meaningful activity are challenging and require hard work, then pointless or trivial activity is

sometimes a necessary reprieve from this type of activity. It is unclear to me why the person who plays *Candy Crush Saga* during her breaks from writing philosophy papers is doing an activity that in any way counts against the meaningfulness of her life.²⁵

While many examples of meaningful activities are ones that appear to “transcend the self,” sometimes we need to focus on the self. Without occasionally focusing on the self, we won’t have enough personal resources left to dedicate to other people and causes. For many people, engaging in activity like *Candy Crush Saga* enables them to restore their cognitive, psychological, and emotional reserves.

Additionally, in Chapter 3, I will argue that we guide our lives in accordance with one or more conceptions of a life worth living. And, these conceptions are composed of our identifications with *basic ends* or *goods*. For example, we may adhere to a conception of a life worth living that revolves around family life. In this case, we may identify with basic ends or goods, such as trust, love, and support, that we accept as essential to family life. If I have primarily dedicated my life to my family, then pointless, futile, or trivial work may have a point or purpose if it promotes my family. In fact, a person may take pride in the fact that she spends hours bored at work as a cashier if she deems her work necessary to support her family. The fact that she is willing to make such sacrifices for her family demonstrates just how important her commitment to her family is. As Metz has suggested, “if you volunteer to be bored so that others avoid boredom, this might confer meaning on your life and be worthy of substantial esteem or admiration” (2013, 69).

One might object that such work isn't meaningful, it is just instrumentally valuable in that

²⁵ *Candy Crush Saga* also counts as futile. A person could play *Candy Crush Saga* all day long every day and never “beat the game.” There is no end to the game. The game creators keep adding new levels to the game.

it enables one to support one's family. In response I would say that even if it were the case that this type of work isn't (intrinsically) positively meaningful, this does not mean that such work is *undesirable* from the context of meaning in life. As Metz suggested, it seems possible that such work *is* positively meaningful. As mentioned in Chapter 1, philosophers generally accept that positive meaning and happiness are distinct values of a life. One context in which people choose to pursue positive meaning in their lives over their own happiness is when making sacrifices for those people whom they love. It may even be that the more undesirable a sacrifice is from the context of happiness the more positively meaningful it is for a person (though I will not defend this in my dissertation).

For similar reasons, it is sometimes appropriate for people to “act” passively or pursue pleasure. In fact, almost all of us are sometimes The Blob. Behaving like The Blob may sometimes be necessary for the reasons just stated – i.e., taking a break from challenging activity and restoring physical, emotional, and psychological resources. Additionally, there is not anything necessarily problematic about occasionally pursuing pleasure and neglecting the meaningfulness of one’s life.

In contrast to the person who pursues pleasure as a respite from more challenging tasks, there may be those who seek pleasure because they are either prevented from pursuing positive meaning or lost the desire to pursue it. As an example, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl (2006) details his experiences as a prisoner in concentration camps during WWII. He argues that some people (such as himself) were able to find meaning in their lives even while facing the most extreme suffering, objectification, and loss of autonomy. However, there were those who lost the will to live. Frankl says that many who lost the will to live could be seen

smoking a cigarette. In contrast, other prisoners exchanged their cigarettes for additional food.

Let us recall, for instance, what sometimes happened in extreme situations such as prisoner-of-war camps or concentration camps. In the first, as I was told by American soldiers, a behavior pattern crystallized to which they referred as 'give-up-itis.' In the concentration camps, this behavior was paralleled by those who one morning, at five, refused to get up and go to work and instead stayed in the hut, on the straw wet with urine and feces. Nothing – neither warnings nor threats – could induce them to change their minds. And then something typical occurred: they took out a cigarette from deep down in a pocket where they had hidden it and started smoking . . . Meaning orientation had subsided, and consequently the seeking of immediate pleasure had taken over. (Frankl 139)

One might think that the prisoners in this example are consciously choosing to lead the hedonist's life. However, one striking difference between the hedonist's life and the prisoners' is that the prisoners have been systematically prevented from engagement in activity that they might find positively meaningful. Smoking cigarettes doesn't appear to be a consolation prize for loss of meaning. Instead, it seems that they have lost the motivation or the capacity to pursue positive meaning in their lives. And, somehow, this lost capacity is associated with the pursuit of pleasure.

If what Frankl (2006) suggests is accurate, then it also seems that there is a connection between the capacity to pursue positive meaning in one's life and one's having a reason to continue living. By losing the motivation to pursue positive meaning in their lives, they had also lost the motivation to continue living. There is no reason to think that most people's lives

resembling the hedonist's life have lost the motivation to live. Therefore, we need to understand why someone's life resembles one of the examples of meaningless lives in order to understand if the behavior in question is problematic.

Turning to my next example, it also seems unlikely that having low expectations *always* counts against the meaningfulness of your life. For example, if a person has recently experienced a devastating failure, setting her expectations low for a while may be required for her to build up her confidence. It may be that the only way for her to build up her confidence is to have a few successes in a row – even if the successes are relatively easy to achieve.

We can also contrast this case of having low expectations with a more problematic sort. Calhoun (2008) has argued that some people who experience demoralization cease seeing a reason to engage in practical deliberation and, or, cease seeing a reason to pursue that which they value. Calhoun states that “the point of deliberation is to affect the world through one's actions” (204). Most people believe that they can be successful in affecting the world in the way they intend.

However, Calhoun (2008) states that “poverty, for example, means that even the simplest plans, such as taking a bus to work or supplying one's children with required school pencils, are chronically vulnerable to derailment” (204). Calhoun suggests that some people who feel that their lives are out of their control believe that their lives are controlled by luck or by other people (205). Such people may question the purpose in deliberating about what to do if, after they have chosen their ends, they have no faith that through their own agency they will be able to achieve those ends (Calhoun 205). Therefore, there may be contexts in which setting low expectations for one's self is not problematic and contexts in which it is problematic. As just suggested, one

case where the setting of low expectations appears problematic is when it is symptomatic of the person's lost confidence in her ability to perform as an agent.

Even boredom is not necessarily problematic from the perspective of meaning in life. In Section 2.2, I presented Ratcliffe's (2013b) description of ordinary boredom. Ratcliffe suggests that when a person experiences ordinary boredom, what partially causes her boredom is her recognition that she could be engaged in something more exciting if she was not stuck doing her present activity. For example, a person could be listening to a philosophy lecture and also be daydreaming about being outside, enjoying the weather. Based on this description of ordinary boredom, ordinary boredom is likely a necessary consequence of someone living a responsible adult life. It may also be a consequence of a person living a meaningful life.

As I will more fully discuss in Chapter 3, Wolf (2010) argues that we typically feel fulfilled when engaged in activities that we care about. And, when we care about something we are "gripped, excited, interested, [and, or] engaged" with that thing (Wolf 9). However, as responsible adults, we cannot always be engaged in activity that we find to be exciting or interesting. We sometimes have to clean our homes, run errands, pay bills, and do projects at work that we do not care about or even actively dislike.

Those people who are living meaningful lives, especially those who are leading highly meaningful lives, will likely have numerous things that excite or interest them. As a result, when doing dull chores or cleaning, there will likely be many other things they would prefer to be doing at that time. However, I do not think we want to say that performing these types of activities counts against the meaningfulness of their lives. For one, boring activity may be required if we are to have the resources (e.g., financial resources) to engage in exciting and

interesting activity.

Additionally, it may be a feature of all positively meaningful activities that they are all sometimes boring. For example, some people may find raising children to be highly (positively) meaningful. Yet, raising children is not always exciting or interesting. It may be that what is important for positive meaning is that we find some things to be exciting or interesting; and, it need not be the case that we are always actively engaged with those exciting or interesting things.²⁶

We can contrast the person experiencing ordinary boredom with someone who experiences the meaning crises Tim Oakley (2010) has termed “loss of value.” Oakley argues that some people who face crises of meaning find “that nothing is worth doing, pursuing, or aspiring to; nothing has any value” (114). In ordinary boredom, it is our acknowledgment that there is something worth doing other than what we are doing now that partially causes the boredom. However, the fact that we can conceive of things that would be worth doing is also the reason why ordinary boredom isn't typically problematic. Ordinary boredom is just an inevitable consequence of acting as a responsible adult and a consequence of the fact that we are not psychologically equipped to experience meaningful activities as always exciting, interesting, or engrossing. In contrast, those who find that nothing is worth doing may experience inescapable boredom. This type of person not only finds her present activity to be boring but cannot imagine an activity that would be exciting or interesting.

3.2 Meaningless 'lives' as entire lives

So far, I have attempted to motivate the idea that not all of my examples of meaningless

²⁶ I will defend this claim in Chapter 3.

parts of lives are undesirable in every situation. In some contexts these parts of lives are desirable. In doing so, I have tried to point to contexts in which the meaningless parts seem problematic and others in which they do not. It may be thought that one way to ascertain if a meaningless part of a life is actually problematic is to conceive of the part as an entire life. In other words, we can try to imagine a person actually engaged in one of the intuitively meaningless parts of a life for the *entirety* of her life. By taking such a perspective, we may now recognize that the examples of meaningless parts of lives were undesirable all along.

For example, we can imagine a person who lives her life almost entirely passive.²⁷ Such a person does not engage in worthwhile social relationships, is not employed, doesn't engage in hobbies she finds valuable, and doesn't exercise. I don't want to argue that someone like this doesn't exist; maybe there are some people who meet this description. However, my guess is that most readers are now thinking that there may be something distinctively wrong with a person living a passive life. We cannot imagine someone choosing such an existence. At the very least, most of us would desire more information about the case. Does the person behave passively because it makes her happy?

As a second example, imagine someone living the bored life. This person is bored at every moment of every day of her life. Upon hearing that such a person exists, we would likely desire additional information. Is her problem that she does not find anything exciting or worth doing? We might wonder which condition may be causing this generalized apathy. Or, is she perpetually bored because she spends her life engaged in monotonous work?

One reason why there may be something distinctively wrong with living many of the

²⁷ I say "almost entirely passive" because someone could argue that watching television or drinking beer are not examples of entirely passive activities. For example, a person must pick up her beer in order to drink it.

examples of meaningless lives for the entirety of one's life is that, as Wolf has suggested, human beings desire to be engaged in activities that can be seen as valuable from perspectives other than our own (2010, 28). One explanation for this interest is that we want to be able to feel pride in our activities. Wolf suggests that we generally feel pride in those activities that other people would deem admirable or worthy of pursuit from a third-person perspective. Wolf adds that these are important motivations in the lives of human beings. If Wolf is correct about this aspect of human motivation, then why would someone choose to spend her life completing Sudoku puzzles or guzzling beer?

In the example of the hedonist's life, it may be that a person considers what positive meaning has to offer and decides against its pursuit. Such a person may lead the majority of her life in pursuit of pleasure. This doesn't seem necessarily problematic. However, as suggested in Section 3.1, there may be people who face either external or internal conditions that prevent their pursuit of activity that seems valuable from a third-person perspective. If one pursues pleasure because she has been prevented from pursuing positively meaningful activity, then the hedonist's life does seem problematic.

I believe that in the problematic examples of meaningless lives, there is a condition present that restricts a person's capacity to engage in worthwhile or rewarding activity. In the case of the passive life, if I am correct that there is some underlying condition that explains the inactivity, then inactivity is not by itself a meaningless feature of a life; instead, it is sometimes a symptom of a different condition that explains the life's meaninglessness.

If meaninglessness is a distinct phenomenon from the absence of positive meaning, then we can account for the plausible suggestion I made earlier – that if positive meaning is a feature

of a life that makes lives more desirable, then meaninglessness is a feature of lives that is *undesirable*. And if meaninglessness is undesirable to possess, then we can explain why people ought to avoid meaninglessness in their lives and why possessing meaninglessness makes lives worse (in some respect). Adherents of the Standard Account cannot explain why meaninglessness in life is *undesirable*.

4. Meaninglessness as a dis-value

At this point it should be clear that I have so far neglected discussion of some of my examples of cataloged meaningless lives. These lives include the following: failed, subservient, destructive, and degrading lives. What makes these lives unique is that, unlike the lives discussed in Section 3, they seem clearly undesirable. For example, it seems that we do not need additional information about a life that resembles the destructive life to determine that it is problematic.

Not surprisingly, the few philosophers who have constructed conceptions of meaninglessness, where meaninglessness is conceived as a dis-value, have focused on these types of meaningless lives. However, I will argue that these types of lives are not undesirable from the perspective of meaning in life. To simplify matters, I will refer to the concept of meaninglessness as a dis-value as *negative meaning*. Therefore, we can contrast negative meaning with positive meaning (e.g., *meaningfulness*) and both with the absence of positive meaning. As already noted, most philosophers assume that meaningless lives are those where positive meaning is absent.

I will now consider three recent attempts to elucidate the nature of negative meaning.

Then, I will present an objection to each of the three attempts.

4.1 Negative meaning as conditions warranting revulsion and shame

Metz states that conditions of negative meaning (which he refers to as “anti-matter”) are ones that detract from the overall meaningfulness of a life (2013, 64). For example, Metz states that a person who blows up the Sphinx for the thrill of it “has not merely lost an opportunity to acquire some meaning, but rather has done something to weigh *against* whatever meaning he might have had in his life” (64). For Metz, an action like blowing up the Sphinx is intuitively worse from the perspective of meaning in life than others (e.g., sleeping in) where positive meaning seems absent.

Metz believes that destructive actions (e.g., blowing up the Sphinx) and degrading actions (e.g., prostituting oneself to pay for a drug addiction) exemplify negative meaning because they “warrant revulsion and shame” and, or, involve the realization of “many ends besides his [one’s] own pain that are extremely worthy of avoidance” (64). I will limit my discussion to Metz’s analysis of conditions of negative meaning as ones that “warrant revulsion and shame.”

There are two distinct ways of interpreting the analysis of negative meaning as involving conditions warranting revulsion and shame.²⁸ On the first, revulsion and shame are moral concepts and apply to types of immoral behavior. They might apply to behavior that involves the destruction of value in the world or one’s own value, or the dishonoring of value in the world or one’s own value. On the second interpretation (which Metz adopts), revulsion and shame are not moral concepts. As a result, a condition may warrant revulsion and shame even if it does not involve a moral failing.

²⁸ Thanks to Metz for pointing this out.

Stephen M. Campbell and Sven Nyholm (forthcoming) have recently discussed the first interpretation – that negative meaning involves immorality. They consider the possibility that if positive meaning involves “making the world a better place” or “promoting 'the good,’” then negative meaning is “a matter of promoting the bad” – “making the world a worse place” (forthcoming, 4).

There are two primary problems with this general view of negative meaning. First, this conceptual analysis is inconsistent with many first-person accounts of people experiencing a crises of meaning. Perhaps the most oft-cited autobiographical account of a crises of meaning is Tolstoy's (2000), as described in his essay, “My Confession.” Tolstoy was engaged in objectively valuable activities throughout his crises of meaning – e.g., raising a family, writing, and teaching. Therefore, he wasn't engaged in activities that destroy value or were personally demeaning. His crises of meaning resembles most closely people facing clinical depression. In the same way that suffering from a mental illness is not fitting of revulsion and shame, enduring a crises of meaning cannot, and ought not to be, be described as such.

Additionally, when we focus on destructive and demeaning lives as *parts* of lives, it becomes difficult to differentiate meaning from morality. Take, for instance, a person who, on one occasion, tortures another person. Or, consider a person who, on one occasion, engages in prostitution to feed a drug addiction. What would we say about these actions? We would likely say that these people are making moral mistakes. The first person is destroying the value of another person; in the second example, the person is either destroying her own value or not honoring her own value. Of course, it may turn out that immoral actions do detract from the overall meaningfulness of a life. However, it is widely accepted that the concepts of positive

meaning and morality pick out different values of human lives. If so, then negative meaning and immorality likely pick out different dis-values in human lives.

In contrast, let's imagine a person who dedicates her life to an activity that “warrants revulsion and shame.” Let us imagine a person who sets as her primary end or good the goal of making the world a worse place. For such a person, torture would be a justified action. How would we evaluate such a person? The best description of someone who adopts evil ends is that she is an evil person. Again, it may be that evil people do not live positively meaningful lives; but if they do not, we need an argument in defense of this position. In fact, if we accept a conceptual analysis of meaninglessness as incomprehensibility, then we *can* explain why some people who adopt evil ends can still lead meaningful lives. Some people who adopt evil ends can still make sense of the point and purpose of their lives.²⁹

However, Metz (2013) accepts that conditions that warrant revulsion or shame need not be immoral ones. For example, it may be that being mistreated as a child is a condition that warrants revulsion or shame. Or, it may be that losing an arm or leg warrants revulsion or shame.³⁰ There are two problems with Metz's interpretation. First, a person could be in a condition that warrants revulsion or shame (e.g., losing a leg), yet not feel shame or other negative emotions in response to her condition. It seems possible that a person who lost a leg may even feel proud of her condition and may, additionally, feel empowered after overcoming obstacles related to her disability. As Metz defends a conception of negative meaning, he accepts that being in a condition that warrants revulsion or shame *detracts* from the overall meaningfulness of a person's life. However, it is hard to imagine how the life of a person who is

²⁹ I defend this position in Chapter 3.

³⁰ Metz has provided these examples in conversation.

proud of her disability is negatively affected in this way. Metz's conception would be more attractive if a person had to actually experience shame in order for a condition to detract from the overall meaningfulness of her life.

Second, Metz (2013) views positive meaning in life as a type of achievement; in other words, he tacitly adopts the agent-independent value approach. On this approach, if positive meaning involves a type of achievement, then it seems reasonable to suppose that (if negative meaning exists at all) negative meaning constitutes a type of failing. Metz could say that a person need not be responsible for all of her failures in life. The fact that she was mistreated as a child could constitute a type of failing in life, even if she was not responsible for this mistreatment. However, in Section 4.3 (of this chapter), I express skepticism that there is a necessary connection between negative meaning and failure.

4.2 Negative meaning as dissatisfaction

Campbell and Nyholm (forthcoming) take the following approach in constructing conceptions of negative meaning (3). First, they present what they take to be the most popular conceptions of positive meaning. Then, they provide what they believe is the most promising conception of negative meaning that corresponds to each of the conceptions of positive meaning. I considered their first attempt in Section 4.1 – that negative meaning is a matter of “promoting the bad.” In the next two subsections, I will consider their other attempts at formulating conceptions of negative meaning.

According to the “Subjective Satisfaction Theory,” lives are meaningful when they are satisfying or fulfilling (Campbell and Nyholm 4). Campbell and Nyholm state that “there are

many ways to characterize satisfaction. But, at a minimum, it must involve feeling good about, and in response to, the activity in question” (5). On this view, the absence of positive meaning would be the absence of satisfaction or fulfillment – the absence of a specific positive feeling. In contrast, “anti-meaning [negative meaning] would consist in an outright disaffection with the life or activity in which one is engaged” (5).

In Chapter 3, I will argue against the view that fulfillment is a necessary condition for positive meaning. One of my objections to the fulfillment view is that it is unclear why fulfillment, characterized as a “positive feeling,” would not directly contribute to one’s happiness level. My suggestion will be that positive feelings contribute directly to one’s happiness level; in contrast, one’s identifications contribute to the positive meaning of one’s life. The same objection applies to the dissatisfaction view of negative meaning. If satisfaction promotes happiness, then it is reasonable to think that dissatisfaction promotes unhappiness. Therefore, on this account, we are left wondering what the difference is between negative meaning and unhappiness.

4.3 Negative meaning as failure to achieve one's aims

Finally, Campbell and Nyholm (forthcoming) consider the theory of positive meaning where positive meaning involves the achievement of one's aims. According to this conception, “our lives have meaning to the extent that we achieve aims that are central to our lives” (Campbell and Nyholm 7). If we accept this conception of positive meaning, then, negative meaning “if it exists at all, would consist in the failure to achieve one's central aims. A lack of any central aims entails meaninglessness [the absence of positive meaning], whereas frustration

of such aims constitutes anti-meaning” (Campbell and Nyholm 7). As a reminder, one of the examples of meaningless lives that I left for Section 3 is the *failed life*.

It is unclear what the relationship is between failure and meaning in life. However, I want to focus on Campbell and Nyholm’s suggestion that failure in one’s central aims may be worse from the perspective of meaning in life than having no central aims at all. They do not provide an argument in defense of this claim.

I have the intuition that lacking central aims is worse than failing in one’s central aims. One problem with having only one central aim – one project or goal that your entire life revolves around – is that “putting all your eggs in one basket” is risky. For example, imagine Sara, an athlete whose only goal in life is to make it to the Olympics. However, she is getting older and realizes that if she doesn’t qualify for the next Olympics, she will not be in a position to be able to try again. Sara doesn’t qualify for the Olympics. At this point, Sara may feel that her life has no point or purpose, and she may have no idea what she is supposed to do. In other words, Sara may have difficulty making sense of her life.

In contrast, most people have multiple central aims. For example, Jim is a committed family man, has a career as an accountant, and enjoys playing golf in his spare time. If Jim is fired from his job, he would likely be very disappointed; however it seems unlikely that Jim would now be unable to make sense of the point or purpose of his life. For one, being fired from one job doesn’t prevent Jim from applying to other, similar, jobs. More importantly, Jim has other sources of positive meaning in his life. After losing one source of positive meaning, Jim may find that he has more time and energy to put into other sources of positive meaning (e.g., his family). Not only is Jim unlikely to face an existential crisis, but it seems overly condemnatory

of Jim to say that his failure actually *detracts* from the overall meaningfulness of his life.

There is also a counterintuitive implication of this view. Campbell and Nyholm (forthcoming) assume that failure in one's central aims can actually detract from the overall meaningfulness of a life. If so, then a person who experiences a lot of failures in life may actually have a life that is overall dis-valuable (from the perspective of meaning in life). In contrast, a person who has no central aims is someone whose life only lacks positive meaning. And it is worse to have negative meaning in your life than to lack positive meaning.

One implication of their view is that it may be better to have no aims in life than to pursue challenging aims that require hard work, for the latter aims are associated with a high risk of failure. One might think: "better to avoid failure and not aim for anything than to try hard and fail." However, most people would accept that it is better to at least try to accomplish aims in life and fail than it is to never have aims at all; this is the idea behind the cliché phrase: "tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

Sara's failure seems far worse than Jim's failure. And, the primary difference between Sara's failure and Jim's failure is that Sara only had one aim in life. In other words, after her failure, she now has no central aims. So, if you agree that Sara's failure seems worse than Jim's failure, you should accept that having no central aims is worse than failing in one's aims (in and of itself). As I will argue in Chapter 4, some people facing a crises of meaning have lost their central aims and, like Sara, have difficulty making sense of their lives.

5. Conclusion

In summary, meaningless conditions do not appear to be ones that "warrant revulsion or

shame,” cause dissatisfaction, or involve failure in one’s central aims. However, in Chapter 4, I will develop a conception of negative meaning whereby immoral actions and failures do *sometimes* instigate periods of negative meaning. I will take a similar approach to Laurence Thomas (2005) in “Morality and a Meaningful Life.” Like Thomas, I will not argue that immoral actions or failure *necessarily* detract from the overall meaningfulness of a life. Instead, I will posit a contingent causal connection between these events and negative meaning. In other words, people who engage in immoral behavior or who experience failure are more prone to negative meaning than others.

As stated in Chapter 1, Section 2, I believe that the primary problem with these conceptions of negative meaning is that they assume the truth of the agent-independent value approach to meaning in life. The implication of this approach is that if acquiring positive meaning in life is a type of achievement, then the presence of negative meaning must signal a type of failure (e.g., a moral failure). The implication is that those who lead lives that are negatively meaningful are in some sense responsible for their lives not being as meaningful as possible; therefore, they can be blamed. I will remain agnostic on whether or not positive meaning is an achievement concept. However, in Chapter 4, I argue that those facing a crises of meaning are typically people whose lives have been affected by circumstances outside of their control. For example, loss of a loved one can be an event that instigates a crises of meaning. Therefore, those facing crises of meaning are usually victims of highly negative events, and not the perpetrators of those events.

At this point, I am not convinced that there is a distinct concept of negative meaning that is interpreted as a type of failing. We already have recourse to other useful conceptual language.

For example, we can condemn people for their moral failings. However, it is unclear to me how to understand failure, in general. I believe the best way to evaluate failure is in terms of the effects it has on a person's life. Failure can cause disappointment, which can cause unhappiness. And, as I will argue in Chapter 4, some types of failures can cause crises of meaning. But, otherwise, failure is just a regular feature of human lives – one that we are all subject to from time to time.

Chapter Three

Positive Meaning without Fulfillment

Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, positive meaning is thought to be a quality that some lives possess and others lack and one that is intuitively desirable to possess. However, philosophers disagree on which examples of lives count as positively meaningful *and* on what explains the desirability of positive meaning as a value added to a life. Explaining what makes positive meaning desirable is difficult, as it appears to be a distinct value from happiness and morality. A person whose wealth allows her to do nothing but shop, eat at restaurants, and go dancing may be happy. However, her life lacks the sort of depth that we associate with positively meaningful lives. Those people who “take care of an elderly parent when doing so prevents them from engaging in activities that they would find more rewarding and enjoyable” may lead positively meaningful lives, even though they may not be very happy (Metz 2009, 4). On a different note, Susan Wolf argues that pursuing hobbies – e.g., gardening, running – can be positively meaningful; while these hobbies are not immoral, they are also not necessarily activities that best promote the “good of the world” (2010, 6-7).

If positively meaningful lives are not necessarily happy or exceedingly moral (i.e., saintly), then why should we desire them? One answer is that positively meaningful lives are experientially superior to meaningless lives. In other words, some philosophers argue that a necessary component of positive meaning is positive affect.³¹ In order to differentiate positive meaning from happiness, they posit (as a condition of meaningfulness) a different type of

³¹ For example, see Harry Frankfurt (1988), Raymond Martin (1993), Charles Starkey (2006) and Susan Wolf (1997; 2010).

positive affect than pleasure.

I will be focusing on one example of a conception of positive meaning in life that requires positive affect – Wolf's (1997; 2010). For Wolf, positively meaningful lives are necessarily fulfilling lives. In contrast, I argue that a feeling of fulfillment is not a necessary condition of positive meaning in life – i.e., people sometimes find parts of their lives to be positively meaningful when the feeling of fulfillment is absent.³² In fact, some types of painful, difficult or (more generally) negative parts of our lives – ones associated with few positive emotions or predominately negative emotions – may also qualify as positively meaningful. For example, it may be that caring for an elderly parent counts as positively meaningful, even if the experience is largely painful and frustrating. While I focus on Wolf's fulfillment condition in my paper, the objections that I raise against her view can be similarly raised against others that adopt a positive affect condition.

After providing details of Wolf's view in Section 2, in Section 3 I provide three objections to the notion that a positively meaningful life necessarily feels good. In defending one of my objections, I cite psychological literature on the nature of fulfillment. By utilizing this literature, I am not only able to construct a novel objection to Wolf's account, but will also be able to propose a general constraint on all conceptions of positive meaning. In Section 4, I propose a conception of positive meaning in life that utilizes an alternative subjective condition of meaning – one that does not involve positive affect. I argue that positively meaningful parts of our lives obtain their value through their relationship to our practical identities.

³² Like Wolf, I am primarily concerned with meaningful parts of a life and not with meaningful *lives*. For a description of this distinction, see Chapter 1, Section 3.1. Wolf focuses on conditions necessary for a meaningful activity with the assumption that a meaningful life will just be one engaged in meaningful activities. Later in this paper, I will be focusing on meaningful identifications, and not lives. However, when discussing meaningfulness, it is sometimes more convenient to refer to meaningful lives rather than parts of lives and, at times, I will take advantage of this convenience.

2. On fulfillment

Wolf adopts both a subjective and objective condition as necessary for positive meaning. She argues that a person finds her activities to be positively meaningful when she is fulfilled by them. However, Wolf wants to rule out the possibility that rubber-band collecting or Sudoku puzzle solving can be positively meaningful activities for a person, even if she feels fulfilled by them (2010, 23). Intuitively, these types of activities cannot be positively meaningful because they are not objectively valuable.

Wolf does not require that a person form a belief or judgment concerning the meaningfulness of her activity. As Wolf (2010) points out, people rarely stop to question the positive meaningfulness of their lives (118). If a person's life is positively meaningful if and only if she judges it to be so, then it may be that very few lives would qualify.

According to Wolf, people acquire a feeling of fulfillment when they are engaged in objectively valuable activities and possess a positive affective attachment either to the activity (e.g., a relationship) or the end of the activity (e.g., saving lives). This affective attachment may take the form of care, love, or passion. When we care about something we are “gripped, excited, interested, [and, or] engaged” with that thing (2010, 9). We not only care about other people, but also those things we are passionate about – philosophy and art, hobbies, or ideals like peace or equality. When engaged in pursuits we love or are passionate about, we experience fulfillment.

Wolf states that fulfillment is not a feeling of pleasure like the pleasure experienced when eating an ice cream cone (2010, 14). While eating an ice cream cone can increase a person's happiness level, it will not make a person feel fulfilled. However, fulfillment *is* a positive feeling. As a result, a desire for a feeling of fulfillment can compete with a desire for pleasures.

Training for a marathon may be physically painful, exhausting, and frustrating. Nonetheless, people choose to run marathons. One explanation for their choice is that they desire fulfillment at the cost of pleasure and comfort.

Fulfillment is best characterized as an emotion rather than a feeling, for fulfillment has “some cognitive content or concomitant” (Wolf, 1997, 217). Wolf does not suggest that we can identify one cognitive state associated with all instances of fulfillment. However, Wolf states that “there is some association between finding an activity fulfilling and believing, or at least dimly, inarticulately perceiving, there to be something independently worthwhile or good about it” (1997, 217).

Wolf uses the added cognitive component as evidence that a positively meaningful life is not just a fulfilling life. She believes we have an interest in living a life that is “fitting of fulfillment.” In other words, we desire that the activities we engage in actually possess the value that we judge or perceive them as having. I do not believe Wolf wants to say that a feeling of fulfillment is only possible when a person recognizes the value of her activities. I take her as merely pointing out a feature commonly associated with the phenomenology of fulfillment.

We may not possess the same commitment to the value or worth of our activities when in pursuit of happiness. If this is true, this is a notable difference between the phenomenology of positive meaning and happiness. However, Wolf again stresses the important experiential dimension to positive meaning. Wolf states that “since a meaningful life is necessarily at least partly fulfilling, and since fulfillment is a major component of happiness, a very important reason for taking meaningfulness to be in our interest is that it brings fulfillment with it” (1997, 220).

Wolf does not argue that a person will find constant feelings of fulfillment when engaged in a positively meaningful activity. Wolf states that “during a slump, a person may feel alienated from all her projects, only to recover her sense of meaningfulness later without making any change at all in the nature of the projects” (2010, 111). In contrast, she contends that a person who is more often than not unfulfilled by her activities – someone who is typically bored or alienated – will not find her activities to be positively meaningful.

3. Objections to the fulfillment condition

In this section, I present three objections to the inclusion of fulfillment as a necessary condition of positive meaning. I believe that a brief discussion of the problems associated with Wolf's subjective condition can help direct us to a related view that is not susceptible to the same problems. A presentation of the related view will take place in Section 4.

3.1 Fulfillment is transitory

Roy Baumeister (1991) has summarized findings from social science studies that suggest fulfillment is far more ephemeral than Wolf suggests. If Baumeister's summary of findings is correct, the requirement that meaningful activities be fulfilling may entail counterintuitive conclusions about our most valued activities and commitments.

The key to understanding fulfillment may be that it is not a real state at all. Rather, fulfillment is a type of idea. It is a concept of a subjective state that is better than what one has at present. It is an idealized notion of a perfect state that one may achieve in the future. It may not be in human nature to find lasting fulfillment in

the present. (Baumeister 34)

Baumeister (1991) does not suggest that people never experience fulfillment. When he refers to fulfillment as a “type of idea,” he is referring to the conception of fulfillment as perpetual affect. He explains how people commonly think that once they get a job promotion, find “the one,” or have children they will acquire endless fulfillment. In reality, Baumeister argues that people only feel fulfillment or positive affect for short periods of time. The addition of new sources of positive meaning and the loss of sources of meaning are both associated with changes in affect – the former associated with a short-term increase in positive emotion and the latter associated with “unhappy emotions” (Baumeister 325). However, the “myth of fulfillment” (as he describes it) has motivational power in that we are motivated to pursue those things that we believe will someday provide lasting fulfillment.

If Baumeister's conclusion is correct, then using the feeling of fulfillment as the subjective condition of positive meaning may be problematic. For one, most new sources of positive meaning may be associated with feelings of fulfillment – regardless of their overall value. According to Wolf's conception, it would seem that the early stages of a relationship may be the most positively meaningful and then the meaningfulness may decrease with time as the feeling of fulfillment diminishes. I think more often than not we would describe the early stages of a relationship as fun or happy, but not positively meaningful. Intuitively, if any part of our relationships are positively meaningful it is the later periods that involve considerable commitment, trust, and depth.

Of course, Baumeister's finding is not incompatible with Wolf's view. If Baumeister is correct, it may just mean that positive meaning in life is difficult to maintain. However, I do not

find it intuitively plausible that the meaningfulness of our most important activities and relationships is as capricious as Wolf's view entails. If a conception of positive meaning in life entails that the same relationship is positively meaningful one week, meaningless the next, then positively meaningful again the next week, we would have reason to be skeptical of that conception. This could be the case if we take into account the influence that a person's mood can have on her capacity to experience fulfillment. In contrast, it seems more intuitive that there is an underlying value to our important activities and relationships that stays relatively stable, even while our feelings, attitudes, or moods change more regularly.

In response, Wolf would likely say that we need to evaluate a relationship as a whole. If most of a relationship is fulfilling, then it would count as positively meaningful. I interpret Wolf as committed to the position that a relationship is only positively meaningful during the periods that it is fulfilling. Fulfillment *is* a necessary condition for positive meaning. As a result, we can count an entire relationship as positively meaningful when it has more periods that are positively meaningful than meaningless. However, this would not change the fact that periods during which fulfillment is absent are meaningless. Wolf is just not committed to the view that the momentary absence of fulfillment necessarily undermines the meaningfulness of the relationship *as a whole*.

I believe that viable subjective conditions of positive meaning will be consistent with our common-sense ascriptions of the meaningfulness of parts of our lives. We have reason to question any subjective condition that is in nature too transitory to explain these ascriptions. After defending my conception of positive meaning I, too, will have to respond to what I term the *Transitory Challenge*.

3.2 Fulfilling but not significant

A second problem for Wolf's view is that not all people who are engaged in fulfilling activities that are objectively valuable would personally count those activities as positively meaningful. This would suggest that positive meaning and fulfillment can come apart.

Wolf acknowledges that a wide range of activities may be positively meaningful for people, for example: playing chess, ballet, running, relationships, and gardening. Wolf's advice for leading a meaningful life is to find those things that one is passionate about and pursue them. As long as an activity has some value independent of a person's valuing of the activity, it can be positively meaningful.

Based on Wolf's inclusive conception, each of us probably have a long list of activities in our lives that count as positively meaningful. However, many of us would not identify all of the items on our lists as positively meaningful to us. A person may have a number of romantic relationships in her life that were fulfilling at the time but that she would not count as positively meaningful. Wolf also claims that many of our hobbies would count as positively meaningful. Playing chess may count as a positively meaningful activity for a person who felt fulfilled while playing chess. My guess is that many people who feel fulfilled when playing chess would not identify their hobby as positively meaningful.³³ The fact is that some of these activities are significant to us and others are not.³⁴ What might we mean when we judge that an activity is not positively meaningful because it is not significant? I will provide one potential answer in Section 4.

³³ This is the case even if chess is objectively valuable and the chess player recognizes the value of chess.

³⁴ This may be the point that Starkey (2006) intends to make in "Meaning and Affect." He argues that some people engaged in an activity Wolf would count as meaningful (e.g., writing a book) would not find the activity to be meaningful because the activity is of "little significance to them" (Starkey 97). However, he doesn't explain what he means by significance.

3.3 Positive meaning and happiness: two goods or one?

One reason why Wolf's conception is compelling is that she is able to easily explain why positively meaningful lives are desirable. According to Wolf, when a person is doing what she loves or is passionate about she acquires “a particular type of good feeling” (2010, 13) or positive “qualitative character” (2010, 15). One challenge for philosophers writing on the topic of meaning in life is to explain what it is about positively meaningful lives that make them more desirable than meaningless lives. I will refer to this challenge as the *Value Challenge*. One response Wolf can provide to the Value Challenge is that positively meaningful lives are qualitatively superior to meaningless lives.³⁵

One important component of this challenge is to disambiguate between positive meaning as a value and happiness (and morality). Wolf assumes that feelings of pleasure and fulfillment are both positive feelings, but feelings with distinct phenomenology and which arise in different situations. However, it is unclear why both types of positive feelings do not directly contribute to a person's happiness level, rather than one directly contributing to happiness and the other positive meaning.

As described earlier, Wolf could reply that fulfillment carries with it a commitment to the value of the object of fulfillment – a commitment that feelings of pleasure lack. She could argue that a necessary component of the emotion of fulfillment is a belief or judgment that the object of fulfillment is objectively valuable.³⁶ However, in a review of Wolf's *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, Joseph Raz (2010) argues that Wolf does not do an adequate job of differentiating the

³⁵ Wolf does provide additional reasons why lives that are “fitting of fulfillment” are desirable. I will not consider them, here.

³⁶ As discussed earlier, this is a stronger position than Wolf defends.

concept of positive meaning from the concept of well-being. In particular, Raz (2010) argues that Wolf's conception of positive meaning is approximately the same as his conception of well-being in "The Role of Well-being." In "The Role of Well-being," Raz (2004) argues that a person cannot be satisfied with her life if she believes that the activities she engages in are worthless. Therefore, Raz (2004) argues that happiness also includes a commitment to the value of its object.

More importantly, Wolf acknowledges that positive meaning in life is consistent with a "great deal of stress, anxiety, and vulnerability to pain" (2010, 15). She would agree with Metz (2009) that the activity of caring for an elderly parent could count as positively meaningful, even if the activity does not make a person especially happy. However, caring for an elderly parent also does not seem rewarding, satisfying, or fulfilling in the same way that pursuing one's passions in life do. A runner may choose to forgo pleasure and comfort in order to train for a marathon. In this case, she gives up one hedonic good – i.e. pleasure – for others – e.g., satisfaction and fulfillment. This does not seem like an accurate assessment of those who willingly sacrifice the pursuits they would find most rewarding and satisfying for the people, ideals, and commitments they find most important in their lives. We need a conception of positive meaning that can equally account for the value of marathon running and caring for an elderly parent.

Any conception of positive meaning in life that relies heavily on positive affect will have difficulty responding to the Value Challenge. In Section 4, I defend a conception of positive meaning in life that is compatible with negative emotions and experiences. One could question how parts of a life that involve negative emotions could be desirable. It may seem that I will

have even more difficulty responding to the Value Challenge than Wolf. Therefore, I will also have to respond to the Value Challenge in Section 4.

4. Practical identities and meaning in life

I have so far argued that we cannot explain the degree of meaningfulness of a part of our lives in terms of the intensity of fulfillment. I will now argue that a better indication of the degree of meaningfulness of a part of our lives would require an understanding of the relationship between that part and a person's self-conception or practical identity. Before describing this relationship, I want to summarize the challenges discussed in Sections 2 and 3. The subjective condition that I propose in this section must be immune to these challenges.

First, the subjective condition that I propose cannot be too transitory. My conception cannot entail that parts of our lives are positively meaningful one day and then meaningless the next. As a result, my subjective condition must be mostly immune to mood swings. The subjective condition that I propose should also not entail that activities are the most positively meaningful when we first start them and then become less positively meaningful over time. If anything, activities should become more positively meaningful as time passes.

Second, I must be able to respond to the Value Challenge. The Value Challenge has two components. First, I must be able to explain what makes positively meaningful parts of our lives desirable. While Wolf is able to account for what makes marathon running desirable, she is unable to adequately account for what makes caring for an elderly parent desirable. The conception that I defend should be able to account for the desirability of both activities. Also, the conception that I defend should be clearly one of positive meaning and not one of happiness

(or morality). This may mean that what makes positively meaningful lives desirable is something distinct from what makes happy lives desirable.

Next, I argued in Section 3 that not all activities that we find fulfilling are also significant to us. For example, most people who feel fulfilled while playing chess would not count this activity as positively meaningful. Similarly, some fulfilling romantic relationships seem highly meaningful to us while others do not. The conception that I defend needs to explain why some activities are significant to us while others are not.

In Section 2, I suggested that the subjective condition cannot require too high a level of reflection. People rarely stop to reflect on the positive meaning of their lives. If a conception of positive meaning in life requires that people do frequently reflect on their lives, very few lives would count as positively meaningful. The subjective condition that I propose needs to be compatible with the fact that people rarely evaluate their lives for meaningfulness.

I will now explain how positive meaning in life is tied to our practical identities. I argue that the correct subjective condition – i.e., one that can respond to the aforementioned challenges – will account for the relationship between parts of our lives and our identities. More specifically, I argue that a person finds a part of her life to be positively meaningful when that part is fundamental to who she is and is endorsed by her. I will now explain how I am defining terms.

Very generally, an answer to the question “what is my practical identity?” would also be an answer to the question, “who am I?” Constituents of one's practical identity would include answers to what Marya Schechtman (1996) has termed the “characterization question.” Schechtman contrasts the characterization question with the “reidentification question.” Those

theorists writing in response to the reidentification question are concerned with what it means for a person to be logically identical to herself at earlier and later times (Schechtman 7-8). They are concerned with which relations unify a person over time. In contrast, the characterization question concerns which characteristics can be attributed to a given person (Schechtman 73).

Our practical identities include the following types of characteristics: desires, goals, values (e.g., honesty), ideals (e.g., peace), commitments (e.g., to one's child), roles (e.g., mother), and character traits (e.g., sense of humor). Additionally, our identities include our identifications as members of groups, such as religious, racial or ethnic groups, support groups (e.g., AA membership), or professional groups (e.g., academic). Sometimes we freely choose our membership in a group – e.g., a person must acquire credentials in order to become an academic. In other cases, our group membership is out of our control. We are born a member of a racial group, and we may be raised into a particular religious group.

Not all characteristics that could be attributed to a person will be ones that she *identifies* with, however. As an important example, a person may be characterized biologically and physiologically as female, yet identify as a male (gender). I will not be defending a conception of identification in this chapter. However, I do want to clarify what I mean by *identification* and therefore what I mean by one's practical identity.

We identify with some characteristics and are alienated from others. Harry Frankfurt (1988b) has focused explicitly on alienation from *desires*. In the same way that external forces can cause involuntary movements in our bodies (e.g., someone pushes us), internal forces can cause desires to arise in us that we do not experience as our own. A person experiencing an addiction may feel that her desire to take drugs is not caused by her own will but by some

outside force. Frankfurt would say that she does not identify with her desire to take drugs.

In his earlier work, Frankfurt argues that a person identifies with a desire when she forms a second-order desire that her first-order desire be effective in motivating her to action.³⁷ For example, I have a first-order desire to revise my dissertation and a first-order desire to do anything other than revise my dissertation. I identify with my desire to revise my dissertation if and only if I desire that my desire to revise my dissertation be effective in motivating me to action. In identifying with this desire, I alienate myself from my desire to do anything other than revise my dissertation. This latter desire may not disappear. However, I do not take it as representative of my will. Many objections have been raised against Frankfurt's conception of identification and Frankfurt has alienated himself from this conception. Therefore, I do not wish to defend it, here. I just wanted to give some idea of what a conception of identification might look like.

There will also be characteristics that other people would attribute to us that we would not describe ourselves as possessing. In some cases, this is because we are deceived about who we are. A person may believe herself to be an honest person but not realize that she is actually a dishonest person. She does not identify with dishonesty as a character trait, even if her friends and family would characterize her in this way. In other cases, such as sex and gender identification, other people may classify us in ways that we ourselves do not. On my account, only those characteristics that a person would attribute to herself will be included in her practical identity. As a result, the conception of practical identity that I am utilizing may best be described as one's self-conception. I am concerned only with those characteristics that a person would self-describe herself as possessing.

³⁷ See especially Frankfurt (1971).

One implication of the conception of practical identity that I am utilizing is that a person may identify with a characteristic out of self-deception and this characteristic will be included in her practical identity. Some philosophers include reality constraints in order to rule out cases of self-deception. As I am not defending a conception of practical identity, I will not take a stand on whether or not we ought to include a reality constraint. I do not believe I need to take a stand on this in order to defend my conception of positive meaning.

Like Frankfurt (1971), I accept that a person may identify with some characteristics that she does not endorse. I may endorse my desire to learn a musical instrument but accept in resignation my desire to feel superior to others. I may identify with both desires, even if I do not endorse the latter desire. Or, someone may recognize that she has prejudiced beliefs about a minority group while simultaneously working toward changing her beliefs. These beliefs may affect her emotions, motivations, and behavior. Her beliefs may cause her to avoid certain neighborhoods or to act suspiciously or unfriendly toward certain individuals. A person may recognize that she identifies with her characteristic yet not endorse it.

As a result, my conception of practical identity is different from Christine Korsgaard's (1996). Korsgaard does not appear to distinguish between identification and endorsement. She has characterized a person's practical identity as "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking" (1996, 101). A person's identifications give rise to "reasons and obligations" (101). It is unclear whether or not Korsgaard believes that there are identifications that do not give rise to reasons and obligations. If I accept in resignation a desire to feel superior to other people, then I would not take my identification with this desire as providing reasons for action or as

creating obligations. Also, though my Lutheran upbringing factors into my self-conception – i.e. it partially defines who I am – it no longer provides me with reasons for actions and I no longer acknowledge the obligations that might otherwise stem from it. As I distinguish between identification and endorsement, I do not accept that all of a person’s identifications provide her with reasons for action

Korsgaard's conception of practical identity appears too exclusive. However, her conception of practical identity as “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking” may be an excellent description of the subset of those identifications that make our lives meaningful (1996, 101). Therefore, when it comes to defending a conception of positively meaningful identifications, only those identifications that one *endorses* will be counted as positively meaningful. Additionally, some of our identifications play little role in our lives; we no longer take them as providing us with reasons for action. Only those identifications that are *fundamental* to who we are will be counted as positively meaningful. Therefore, I am defending a conception of positive meaning where a subset of our identifications count as positively meaningful parts of our lives. Before demarcating which identifications count as members of this subset and which do not, I want to explain why identification is a superior subjective condition to fulfillment.

One benefit of focusing on our identifications as positively meaningful rather than the activities that we find fulfilling is that a person may only feel fulfilled by an activity while engaged in it. As argued in Section 3, the fact that fulfillment is transitory may mean that our activities are positively meaningful one day and meaningless the next. We may get the same

result if fulfillment only arises when we are actively engaged. We are often not engaged in those activities most meaningful in our lives. Most of us take off ample time to watch TV, clean our homes, and eat food. Also (as an example), it seems possible that a person who used to run competitively for many years can still identify as a runner even after injuries have prevented her from running. It seems possible that this identification remains meaningful to her, even if she no longer runs.

A focus on identification enables us to make sense of a number of Viktor Frankl's (2006) remarks in *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl discusses how some people who were detained in Nazi concentration camps during WWII were still able to find positive meaning in their lives. Frankl suggests that "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (66). Most concentration camp prisoners were deprived of meaningful activity, their autonomy, and relationships with loved ones. One way to interpret Frankl is that the camps could not deprive prisoners of their capacity to continue identifying with important values, principles, or goals – i.e., of being a certain sort of person. Some prisoners could find positive meaning in the fact that they retained these values, principles, or goals and did their best to act in accordance with them, even while being deprived of everything else.

A related benefit of my view is that it involves a more inclusive conception of what counts as a part of a life. For Wolf, the primary bearers of positive meaning are activities. However, we may identify with roles, values, and desires that do not necessarily prescribe a particular course of action. While identification as a mother prescribes certain actions as obligatory (in order for the role to be fulfilled), identification as a mother involves more than

identification with the *activities* associated with motherhood. Identification as a mother may involve identifying with a set of emotions and attitudes that are fitting of a mother to have toward her children. While a person may have to be actively engaged to experience fulfillment, identification does not always require activity. This allows us to say that a person can find positive meaning in her life by striving to be a certain sort of person and then maintaining those virtues throughout one's life.

It seems possible that we also identify with our desire to live in certain places. For example, I may not only desire to raise children in the future but to raise children in Minnesota. If I have the opportunity to raise children in Minnesota, I feel that this would at least make my life more positively meaningful than it otherwise would have been. If so, then a focus on activity as the proper bearer of positive meaning forces us to overlook other characteristics that we also identify with and could also provide us with sources of positive meaning.

The fact that we identify with more than just our activities can also help to explain an objection raised by Robert Adams (2010) against Wolf's fulfillment condition. Adams cites an example of what he considers to be a positively meaningful project that probably lacked many positive feelings. Adams describes German officer Claus von Stauffenberg's project to "rescue Germany from Nazism," including his failed attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler on July 20, 1944 (77). He believes this project may be paradigmatically meaningful. However, Stauffenberg's failed attempt resulted in his execution.

Adams imagines that near the end of Stauffenberg's life, he probably did not feel very fulfilled. However, Adams says that Stauffenberg could at least console himself by the thought that "at least I don't have to despise myself. I've done what I could" (78). Adams suggests that

Stauffenberg's consolation was probably enough (or at least ought to have been enough) for him to view his failed project as positively meaningful. And, he suggests, feeling consoled need not feel good in the way that fulfillment feels good.

In response to Adams, Wolf (2010) concedes that fulfillment may not be the only positive feeling that satisfies the subjective condition of positive meaning. She suggests that there may be a set of different types of positive affect (e.g., consolation, love, excitement) that satisfy the subjective condition. However, I believe we can account for the meaningfulness of Stauffenberg's project without resorting to a disjunctive subjective condition. It seems probable that Stauffenberg's project may have been motivated by his identification with the following values: respect for human life and dignity, and equality. The fact that he fought for what he most closely identified with means that his project was positively meaningful for him – even if it was not fulfilling. The fact that Stauffenberg failed in his attempt to assassinate Hitler need not retroactively detract from the meaningfulness of his life. In an important sense, Stauffenberg's life was a success. For, up until his death, he lived a life that was in accord with his identity-defining values.

In addition to explaining why Stauffenberg's project was meaningful, my conception can also account for why caring for an elderly parent can count as positively meaningful. We can make sense of why a woman would opt to care for her elderly parent when doing so is incompatible with the pursuit of more rewarding, fulfilling, or satisfying activities. It may be that her role as daughter is the fundamental component of her identity. Because she views her role as fundamental to who she is, she would also view the obligations that stem from this role as providing weighty reasons for action.

I want to discuss one last benefit of my conception of positive meaning. In Section 3.1 of this chapter, I suggested that the feeling of fulfillment may only be associated with the initial periods of participation in an activity and then sporadically throughout the remainder of the activity. If this is so, it may explain the cliché phrase: “I didn't know the value of what I had until it was gone.” A person may not have felt very fulfilled during the course of a relationship. However, it may not be until her partner has left that she realizes all of the connections between her partner and other aspects of her life – her daily routines, her goals, her hobbies, and so on.

This relationship may have been positively meaningful all along, she just didn't judge it to be so until it was over. One explanation for why it was positively meaningful all along is that she identified with the relationship and it played a fundamental role in her life. If Baumeister's (1991) analysis of fulfillment is correct, one explanation for what occurred is that the woman was waiting for her relationship to become perpetually fulfilling. Her recognition of its value after the fact may have involved recognition that there was more to the value of her relationship than its level of fulfillment.

Now, I will argue that only those parts of our identities that are fundamental to who we are and which are endorsed by us count as positively meaningful. I first want to explain what I mean by *fundamentality*. One way to explain the difference between important romantic relationships in our lives and playing chess is that examples of the former constitute fundamental components of our identity. A person's relationship to her spouse may play a central and integrating role for her identity – it may explain and justify most of what she does on a daily basis, her goals, values, and desires for the future. If she were to lose her spouse, she may have to significantly change her practical identity to accommodate this loss. If the woman self-

describes her relationship as one of the most positively meaningful in her life, it is more probable that the greater degree of positive meaning is not equivalent to the strength of the feeling of fulfillment – which may have started out very high and then slowly dissipated during the course of their marriage. It is the fundamental, organizing role that the relationship plays in her practical identity that explains the greater level of positive meaning.

In contrast to activities that play an important role in one's practical identity, a person may find playing chess with a good friend to be a fulfilling activity, yet playing chess is a largely compartmentalized activity. For most people, being prevented from playing chess would be disappointing, however it would not impact other aspects of their practical identity – goals, dreams, values not directly related to playing chess. When such a person imagined herself in the future, she would not have to picture a different type of person.

While playing chess would not count as a positively meaningful activity for most of us, it may count as positively meaningful to a Grandmaster who dedicates her life to playing chess. I'm arguing that the primary difference between chess for most of us and chess for the Grandmaster is the importance of that activity for one's identity. It seems possible that a person can feel fulfilled while playing chess yet not find that activity to be very meaningful. Similarly, a Grandmaster need not always feel fulfilled while playing chess and the activity can remain positively meaningful to her.

Joseph Raz's (1986) discussion of the difference between standard and comprehensive goals can provide a helpful analogy for my discussion of fundamental parts of our identities. Raz has differentiated between standard goals and comprehensive goals, where the latter “have ramifications which pervade important dimensions of my life” (1986, 292). Raz claims that

goals can include “projects, plans, relationships, ambitions, commitments, and the like” (291). Comprehensive goals are more important goals for a person, where importance is understood here as the extent to which a goal “permeates all aspects of one's life” (Raz 293). Goals are nested within a hierarchical structure, with comprehensive goals serving as the source for a large number of a person's other goals. So, for instance, a person's passion for philosophy may motivate a person's goal of getting into graduate school in philosophy, her desire to teach, and her goal of getting a job at a college. Similarly, our practical identities have a hierarchical structure where its fundamental components – e.g., important goals and values – explain and justify the presence of other components of our practical identities and also explain and justify much of what we do on a daily basis.

So far I have argued that positively meaningful parts of our lives are fundamental components of our identities. The mere fact that we identify with an activity, value, or goal does not entail that it is positively meaningful for us. Instead, the part needs to explain and justify much of what we do on a regular basis. The problem with my conception as it stands now is that it may incorrectly label some parts of our lives as positively meaningful. For example, an abusive relationship may play a fundamental role in a person's life. What may make it play this role is that it takes over many other features of her life – e.g., career, hobbies, or other relationships.

Intuitively, most abusive relationships are not positively meaningful for the people abused. If they were, it would be difficult to explain how positively meaningful relationships are more desirable than meaningless ones. If some abusive relationships *are* positively meaningful, we need an explanation for what makes them different from most other abusive relationships

which are intuitively meaningless.³⁸ Momentarily, I will explain why it is the case that most abusive relationships are meaningless but a select few may actually be meaningful.

I now want to consider possible responses to this objection. First, it seems that aspects of the relationship may be positively meaningful and therefore desirable even if, all things considered, the relationship is not valuable. For example, it may be that the woman desires companionship, financial support, and a partner who helps raise her children. And, she identifies with these desires. If these desires are also fundamental to who she is, then they are positively meaningful. This is the case even if there are other features of the relationship that she does not identify with and which are not positively meaningful. One of the benefits of focusing on identification as the bearer of positive meaning, rather than activities (like Wolf), is that we can make sense of why aspects of our activities are desirable, even if the activity as a whole is not valuable.

The problem with this response is that I am merely stipulating that the woman in the example identifies with the more positive features of her relationship rather than the more deleterious ones. However, in some cases, it may be that a person *does* identify with the deleterious features of the relationship. We would have to say that these clearly undesirable features of her relationship add positive meaning to her life (assuming that they are also fundamental to who she is).

There is a larger problem lurking, here. Most everyone will have fundamental identifications. Therefore, most people will be leading positively meaningful lives. However, it

³⁸ I provide a very cursory discussion of the abusive relationship example. I recognize that many women in abusive relationships do not leave their relationship out of fear that their partner will retaliate against them. In this case, they do not leave because they are concerned for their own safety and, or, the safety of their children. Additionally, some women feel that they do not have the financial resources to leave their partners. However, I am limiting my discussion to people who are in abusive relationships and who identify with those relationships and do not desire to leave. I recognize that this type of example may represent the minority of cases.

is generally accepted that some lives are positively meaningful and others are not. We need some way of demarcating between meaningful and non-meaningful fundamental identifications.

One way to rule out abusive relationships as positively meaningful is to utilize Wolf's objective condition. We can say that abusive relationships are not objectively valuable and therefore not positively meaningful. As discussed in Chapter 1, one of the motivations for the inclusion of an objective condition is that we think that people can be wrong about the positive meaning of their lives. If meaningfulness is an evaluative category at all, then there must be standards that we can fail to meet. And, an intelligible interpretation of the abusive relationship example is that the woman finds her relationship to be positively meaningful but is wrong about its meaningfulness.

However, it seems to me that there is an important difference between Hitler's commitment to Naziism as supplying positive meaning for his life and the abused woman's relationship as supplying positive meaning. Hitler may have considered his activities to be valuable and found them to be rewarding, fulfilling, and challenging. We can imagine that Hitler's life may have been made better in a number of ways through his activities, even if the activities were morally atrocious. In contrast, it is unclear how an abusive relationship can be in any way desirable *for the person who is abused*. While we may be guilty of a type of moralistic fallacy in evaluating Hitler's life as meaningless, we ought to be able to explain why most abusive relationships are undesirable from the perspective of meaning in life.

I should point out that even if I included an objective value condition in my conception, my conception would still be incomplete. I mentioned earlier that we can identify with characteristics that we do not endorse. A person may recognize that she is a racist yet wish that

she were not and work toward changing this aspect of her identity. In many cases, those characteristics that we do not endorse will be ones that are also not objectively valuable. However, this need not be the case. For example, a person could identify as an extrovert but wish that she were more of an introvert. Being an extrovert is not a worthless or dis-valuable character trait. We may believe that there is nothing wrong with being extroverted; we just don't desire that this trait define us.

Also, I argued in Chapter 1 that philosophers have yet to provide a fully-worked out conception of objective value. As Christine Vitrano (2013) pointed out, we have no way to actually evaluate whether or not an activity is worthwhile or worthless. I suggested that a more fruitful approach would be to examine what motivates people's intuition that an objective value condition is necessary to see if we can get what we want without the help of objective value. I provided two such motivations. First, many people share the intuition that people can be wrong about the meaningfulness of their lives. Second, some philosophers want to rule out certain paradigm examples of meaningless lives as positively meaningful. My inclusion of an "endorsement" condition on meaningful identifications will enable us to do both, without being committed to a controversial objective value condition or a moralistic fallacy.

But what does it mean to endorse an identification? I adopt from Charles Taylor (1989) the idea that some of our identifications play an important justificatory role.³⁹ This justificatory role can explain the difference between those fundamental identifications that we endorse and those identifications lacking this endorsement. Taylor explains that "there are ends or goods which are worthy or desirable to us in a way that cannot be measured on the same scale as our

³⁹ I am not primarily concerned with providing an accurate interpretation of Taylor's *Sources of the Self*. I am borrowing ideas from Taylor's work in order to introduce the notion of basic ends or goods.

ordinary ends, goods, [or] desirabilia” (20).⁴⁰ I will refer to these unique ends and goods as *basic ends* and *goods*. One type of basic end or good pertains to our conceptions of which lives are worth living. It is this type of basic end or good that is most relevant for meaning in life. For example, Taylor (1989) suggests that some people view family life as incomparably higher in value to other modes of life. Taylor explains that “he [the householder] senses that his ultimate allegiance is there, that against those who decry or condemn family life or who look on it as a pusillanimous second best, he is deeply committed to building over time a web of relationships which give fulness and meaning to human life” (46).

I take it Taylor (1989) would agree that the householder may interpret a request to justify the value of family life or the importance of supporting one's child as absurd. Their value is obvious to him and not in need of justification. We need standards by which to evaluate our more “ordinary” desires, actions, and choices. And some of these standards must appear intrinsically justified to us if they are to justify ordinary ends and goods. By “intrinsically justified,” I mean that they do not appear to require further justification; their value is “basic” or obviously justified to us. I will refer to the justificatory role that basic ends or goods play as the *basic justificatory role*.

More specific identifications will be unable to play the basic justificatory role. A person may view finding a partner to be essential to a worthwhile life. However, a person can take as basic the value of romantic relationships and family life while simultaneously doubting the value of a specific relationship, such as the value of her marriage to her spouse. It is simply too easy to doubt the value of more specific identifications. If we were to take a specific relationship as basic – as justifying many of our other ends, goals, or decisions without needing its own

⁴⁰ Here, Taylor is referring to his notion of “strong evaluation” (4).

justification – and doubts emerged concerning the value of the relationship, the entire system of justification would be uprooted. Our conception of which (basic) ends or goods are essential to a worthwhile life must be abstract enough to be compatible with the pursuit of many different instantiations of those ends or aims (e.g., relationships, activities, goals).

Earlier, I argued that only those identifications that are fundamental to our identities – i.e., that explain and justify many other identifications – will count as positively meaningful. However, not all of our fundamental identifications will be *basic*. We will not take the value of all of our fundamental identifications as without need of justification. Most specific romantic relationships will not play the basic justificatory role, even if they explain and justify most of what a person does on a regular basis.

However, many of us *do* count specific relationships, activities, goals, values, or other identifications as positively meaningful to us. The explanation for their meaningfulness is that fundamental identifications are not only endorsed when they play the basic justificatory role, but when they are *justified* by those ends or goods that do play this role. Someone who views family life as essential to a good life will take various ends or goods as basic. And, some relationships will be compatible and others incompatible with the pursuit of these basic ends and goods. For example, whether or not a person believes her abusive relationship is compatible with the love, fulfillment, support, and other basic ends or goods that she most likely conceives as essential to worthwhile family life, most abusive relationships will fail to be justified by them.

In “Geographies of Meaningful Living,” Cheshire Calhoun has suggested that those philosophers who feel that they must include an objective condition in their conception of positive meaning in life are primarily concerned that they avoid the perils associated with the

“attitudinal subjective conception of meaning” (2015, 30). On the attitudinal subjective conception, constructing a large ball of string could be a positively meaningful activity if someone has a passion for the activity. However, Calhoun states that “were *mere* passion meaning-conferring, this would place the string collector's activities beyond criticism, *even by the string collector himself*” (30). Calhoun does not believe that we need to adopt an objective condition of positive meaning to criticize the string collector for his choice because we can point out that he is “failing to be properly responsive to his own reasons” (30).

On my account, a person's reasons stem from her *basic ends* and *goods*. In most cases we would be able to point out to a person in an abusive relationship that she is not being responsive to her own reasons – namely, those stemming from the fact that she values love, commitment, and support as basic ends of family life. Her relationship is not justified by these basic ends.

In contrast, Hitler's basic ends or aims may have justified his morally atrocious actions. If Hitler's fundamental identifications, such as his commitments to anti-Semitism and German nationalism, functioned as basic identifications, then they would count as endorsed. And, for someone who takes the (dis) value of anti-Semitism as basic, many morally wrong aims may have been justified. As a result, a number of Hitler's identifications may have counted as positively meaningful. Calhoun points out “that Hitler's normative outlook made his life meaningful does not bar us from condemning him for choosing morally monstrous ends; nor does a Kantian duty of beneficence to adopt others' ends as our own extend to promoting others' immoral ends” (31).

It is hard to imagine the sorts of basic ends or goods that a person would have to accept to justify her engagement in an abusive relationship. This is why most abusive relationships are not

meaningful. However, it is *possible* that a person could set oppressive and destructive ends that could justify her engagement in an abusive relationship. In these rare cases, the relationship may count as positively meaningful.

One benefit of my conception is that I am able to provide a preliminary explanation for the difference between happiness and positive meaning. Meaningfulness necessarily involves our practical identities. In contrast, we need not identify with the eating of ice cream cones or shopping in order for them to give us pleasure. Additionally, while happy lives are experientially superior to unhappy ones, positively meaningful lives need not be. What makes positively meaningful lives more desirable than meaningless lives is that they have a point or a purpose – something that they are “about.” Additionally, the point or purpose of positively meaningful lives is one that a person can stand by or endorse, for the point or purpose is compatible with their conception of which lives count as worthwhile.

5. Conclusion

At this point it should be clear that I have defended a conception of meaningful identifications and said very little about what makes a *life* positively meaningful. The primary purpose of this chapter has been to draw a link between practical identities and meaning in life. I assume that if positive meaning in life is integrally related to our practical identities, it is reasonable to conclude that negative meaning (i.e., meaninglessness as a dis-value) also involves our practical identities. I defend my conception of negative meaning in Chapter 4. However, before moving on, I want to draw an important conclusion about positive meaning.

I argued that we need not always be actively engaged in projects that we identify with in

order for them to remain positively meaningful for us. The implication is that we are leading a minimally meaningful life when we possess some fundamental identifications that we endorse, even if not presently engaged in activity. As suggested in Chapter 1, a positively meaningful life is a life that makes sense to a person. And, a person who has fundamental identifications that she endorses is living a life that makes sense to her. Even if she is not presently making progress in completing her projects or accomplishing her goals, her identifications give her direction in life. Her life has a point or purpose – something it is “about” – even if she is not presently engaged. In other words, a person must have fundamental identifications that she endorses to avoid negative meaning in her life. I will be defending this claim in Chapter 4. In order to defend my conception of negative meaning in Chapter 4, I will have to expound on my conception of positive meaning. In doing so, I will explain how a person can add positive meaning to her life (above the minimal threshold to avoid negative meaning).

Chapter 4

Practical Identity and Meaninglessness

Introduction

In his classic paper, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” Bernard Williams (1973) argues that an immortal life would necessarily be undesirable. More specifically, Williams argues that an immortal life would be undesirable because it would be meaningless (89). One way in which an immortal life would be meaningless is if it became perpetually boring – a condition he believes is inevitable if we assume a person's character remains the same over time.

The philosophical debate that has emerged in response to Williams's paper has focused primarily on the nature of boredom and on which conditions would have to be present in an immortal life to cause perpetual boredom. However, as Connie Rosati has pointed out, Williams does not provide an independent conception of meaning in life from which to evaluate the meaningfulness of immortality (2013, 366). Therefore, even if Williams is successful in arguing that immortal lives would inevitably become boring, he has not thereby shown that immortal lives would necessarily become meaningless.

In this chapter, my primary aim is *not* to discuss the desirability of immortality in the context of meaning in life. In contrast, my aim is to develop a conception of negative meaning (e.g., meaninglessness as a dis-value). However, a philosophical conversation that arose in response to Williams's work has focused on different types of boredom and which type of boredom Williams likely had in mind in his paper. I will provide a sketch of this conversation in Section 2. I am primarily interested in a distinction some philosophers have drawn between

ordinary boredom and more radical forms of boredom. In Section 3, I argue that radical boredom and negative meaning share an important phenomenological feature in common. Radical boredom and negative meaning are each (distinct) forms of hopelessness. Therefore, Williams may have been correct to posit a link between the two, even if he did not make clear the nature of this link in his paper.

After discussing the phenomenology of boredom and negative meaning in Section 3, in Section 4, I provide a more detailed conception of negative meaning – one that is compatible with the conclusions drawn in previous chapters. More specifically, I explain the relationship between one’s practical identity, hopelessness, and negative meaning. In Section 5, I point to potential causes of negative meaning. In doing so, I will be able to more fully elucidate the connection between one’s practical identity and negative meaning. And, in Section 6, I explain why meaninglessness is best conceived as negative meaning – i.e., meaninglessness is a dis-value.

2. Immortality and boredom

Williams (1973) argues that death is typically bad for a person who dies because it frustrates her desires. However, not all desires are frustrated by one's death. For example, conditional desires are desires one has on the condition that one will be alive (85). For example, I desire to get a good night sleep tonight only on the condition that I will be alive in the morning to feel rested. In contrast, I would consider it a great loss if death prevented the satisfaction of my desire to care for my children. This type of desire – i.e., a categorical desire – gives a person a reason to continue living and in this respect “propels him” into his future (86). Death frustrates

only categorical desires.

It would seem, then, that an immortal life would be desirable, since death would never frustrate our categorical desires. However, Williams (1973) argues that immortality would eventually become undesirable for a person with a fixed character (e.g., preferences, tastes, interests or goals) because it would inevitably become boring. Eventually, a person would no longer have any categorical desires left to propel her into the future.

Williams has us imagine the life of a woman, EM, who spends 300 years at the age of 42.⁴¹ Williams explains that, at 342, EM experiences a type of boredom “connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her” (90). Given that a single character is presumed to have a limited number of cares or interests, immortality would eventually involve a repetition of the same types of experiences over and over again.

It may be helpful to distinguish between two different ways in which an immortal could become bored. First, when we focus on the immortal as a subject of experiences, it seems that boredom can arise as a result of the repetition of similar experiences. For example, an immortal would likely experience the thrill of riding a roller coaster multiple times, experience an indefinite number of sunrises, and eat the same foods over and over again. Eventually, these types of experiences may cease being thrilling, exciting, or awe-inspiring. However, not everyone shares this intuition. John Martin Fischer has suggested that some types of pleasures are repeatable (2009, 85). For example, he believes a person can take pleasure in food and sex over and over again, as long as she takes a break from these activities on occasion.

Second, we can focus on the effects of immortality on human agency. It may be that

⁴¹ The details of this case are not important for the purposes of this chapter.

boredom would arise if a person accomplished all of her goals and worked to satisfy all of her desires. In this case, the immortal may believe she has nothing left to do. It seems possible that the two types of boredom can come apart. For example, it may be that an immortal could become bored *qua* agent without becoming bored *qua* subject of experiences. In mortal lives, someone in the late-stages of her life may feel that she has accomplished all of her life goals but may, nonetheless, look forward to future sunsets or meals in fine restaurants. This distinction will become relevant again in Section 3.

Fischer (2009) has objected to Williams's argument that immortality would inevitably become boring for a person with a fixed character. In particular, Fischer objects to Williams's perplexing claim that “nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*” (Williams 1973, 95). Fischer believes that it is odd to require that boredom be unthinkable in immortal lives when boredom is a normal occurrence during most mortal lives (83). Fischer adds that “surely, we think of certain mortal lives which involve considerable stretches of boredom and even pain nevertheless worth living and even very appealing” (2009, 83).

In “Is the Immortal Life Worth Living,” Jeremy Wisnewski (2005) responds to Fischer's objection against Williams. Wisnewski agrees with Fischer that Williams's argument would seem absurd if it entailed that immortal lives could never “contain a single instance of boredom” (Wisnewski 30). He points out that boredom is perfectly compatible with the presence of categorical desires. Sometimes we just need to take a break from an activity if we have been pursuing it for too long (Wisnewski 31).

However, Wisnewski believes Williams may have a stronger argument if we understand

boredom as a more radical state that involves the exhaustion of all categorical desires – a state he terms “fatal boredom” (Wisnewski 32). As an example, he has us imagine a person whose only categorical desire is to become the best musician of all time (Wisnewski 32). In the event that this person mastered every instrument and therefore satisfied her categorical desire to become the best musician, she would no longer have a categorical desire that could propel her into the future. The musician may then enter a state of fatal boredom, one that involves the “inability to see things as worth pursuing” and which arises only after “one has exhausted the possibilities of a life” (Wisnewski 33). Wisnewski doesn’t consider the possibility that the exhaustion of categorical desires may arise if an immortal’s single desire was frustrated rather than satisfied – a point I will also return to in Section 3.

Wisnewski does not actually think that this type of boredom is “fatal” in the sense of being *final*. Instead, he considers the possibility that a categorical desire could become reignited. For example, it may be that in a few hundred years a new musical instrument will be developed (Wisnewski 34). Then it is no longer the case that the musician has mastered every instrument; as a result, she now has a reason to continue living - one that can propel her into the future.

Neil Levy (2005) has provided a slightly different solution to the problem that a person could one day accomplish all of her goals and be left with nothing to do. Levy proposes that people engage in what he terms “open-ended” activities, activities where the “goal they pursue is not fixed prior to the activity itself” (185).

Levy (2005) is not only concerned that a person might accomplish all of her goals and then find her life to be pointless. He is also concerned that, before arriving at such a state, a person may take a futural perspective on her life and imagine herself in this state. The worry is

that the positive meaning of a person's present activities may be undermined if she recognizes that what she most desires – i.e., the completion of her projects – is also that which would render her life without purpose.

One example of an “open-ended” activity would involve the quest for knowledge. Not only would one not be able to achieve such a goal, “since the ends at which they aim alter and are refined” during its pursuit (Levy 186). One cannot even conceive of what a completed system of knowledge might look like; therefore, when one takes a futural perspective on one’s life, one would not even be able to imagine a state in which one has achieved one's primary goal. Presumably, one way for an immortal to avoid the exhaustion of her categorical desires would be to pursue “open-ended” activities.

Wisnewski and Levy’s proposals answer to the concern that a person could exhaust all of her categorical desires and then enter a state of fatal boredom that is also *final*. However, Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa (2009) have presented findings from psychological studies, which suggest that the more radical form of boredom is not caused by the exhaustion of categorical desires (i.e., the satisfaction of all desires).⁴² Instead, they suggest that the satisfaction of all desires would be a sign that one is living a highly successful life (272-273). In contrast, psychological findings support the hypothesis that those who experience the more radical form of boredom are people whose psychologies either prevent them from acquiring life goals in the first place or who have difficulty maintaining them (272).

For example, Bortolotti and Nagasawa (2009) reference the work of the psychologist, Richard Bargdill (2000), who examined why some people find that they are bored with life in

⁴² See, for example, Richard Bargdill (2000) and John Eastwood, Carolina Cavaliere, Shelley Fahlman and Adrienne Eastwood (2007)

general. Bargdill (2000) found a pattern of behavior among study participants (all of whom reported boredom with life in general). All of the participants were initially actively engaged in pursuit of projects (195). However, each eventually experienced an event that presented itself as an obstacle to their projects and which they perceived as outside of their control (195). As a result, they gave up on their life projects and decided to pursue other projects that they cared less about (196). In response, they experienced anger and resentment, as they still desired to pursue their original projects but felt that they were forced to pursue projects they did not identify with (196). They quickly became bored with these projects that “their hearts were not in” (201). Additionally, participants did not appear to take responsibility for their predicaments and simultaneously blamed other people while waiting for other people to help fix their lives (196). As a result, they became passive with respect to changing and influencing their own lives.

If Bortolotti and Nagasawa (2009) are correct in their assessment of the more radical form of boredom, then the fact that categorical desires could be reinvigorated would not necessarily prevent fatal boredom from becoming *final*. Similarly, the pursuit of “open-ended” activities would not necessarily prevent radical boredom. In Section 3, I will be investigating further Bortolotti and Nagasawa’s suggestion that there may be a condition that restricts or prevents the formation of categorical desires. Additionally, this condition may explain why some people frustrate easily in pursuit of the object of their desires.

3. Hopelessness, radical boredom, and negative meaning

In this section, I argue that there is a phenomenological similarity between radical boredom and negative meaning. I suggest that each are versions of hopelessness. As a result,

before addressing this phenomenological similarity, I will provide a brief digression on the nature of hope. Then, I will propose a conception of hopelessness. As it turns out, when we conceive of radical boredom and negative meaning as types of hopelessness, we can account for why people who experience these phenomena would be unlikely to form new categorical desires or would frustrate easily in the pursuit of the object of their desires.

In “Hope Matters,” Calhoun (unpublished manuscript) defends a more complicated version of the widely-accepted belief-desire model of hope. On a basic version of this model, hope is present when both a belief and desire condition are met. First, “hope necessarily includes a belief that a state of affairs is possible but not inevitable or assured” (Calhoun 3). In contrast, if one believed a future state of affairs was inevitable, then one would *plan* for that future, not hope for it. And, hope “necessarily includes a desire that a possible state of affairs actually materializes in the temporal unfolding of events” (Calhoun 3). In hoping, one forms a preference concerning possible future states of affairs.

Contrary to first appearance, Calhoun argues that the belief-desire model of hope requires “sophisticated cognitive and attitudinal capacities” (unpublished manuscript, 4). For one, hope requires that a person be able to entertain different future possibilities and form preferences concerning those possibilities. And when a person forms a hope concerning herself, she is not just forming a preference about a specific state affairs, but is taking a stand on which “version of me, of my life” is most desirable (Calhoun 7).⁴³

Calhoun (unpublished manuscript) cites two reasons why hoping (for ourselves) involves taking a stand on which “version of me, of my life” is most desirable. First, when a person forms

⁴³ This isn’t to say that all hopes concern oneself. For example, a person can hope that her mother’s surgery goes well the next day.

a preference about her future possibilities, she also forms a preference “about the real present experienced by oneself – just in the future” (Calhoun 7). In other words, in hoping, a person imagines her future self reaping the benefits of the hope’s actualization. Hope requires that a person care about the welfare of her future self.

Additionally, Calhoun states that we form preferences about the “temporal unfolding of events,” rather than just states of affairs, because we care about more than just the attainment of a state of affairs (unpublished manuscript, 5). In hoping, we also care about the process that leads up to the attainment. Imagine that Samantha is a person who hopes that one day she will have children. Samantha prefers a possible future where she has children to one in which she does not have children. However, Samantha also prefers a future where she meets her partner, gets married, and then has children to one in which she has children before meeting a long-term partner. In this way, Calhoun states that “entertaining possible futures means both entertaining a hypothesis about what the options might be, as well as entertaining those options as developing from the present – that is, it requires some sense that events proceed from here (now) to there (then)” (6).

I take it that Calhoun (unpublished manuscript) would agree with my following interpretation of those hopes concerning ourselves: in the process of forming hopes, we imaginatively project ourselves into the future, imagining different possible story lines for our life story. And, when we form a hope we take a stand concerning which of the possible story lines we want actualized. In projecting ourselves into the future, we construct a narrative that starts at the present and ends at the point of when our hope becomes actualized. In other words, in forming hopes we construct a narrative of how we *want* our lives to go. When Samantha

hopes for a future with children, she not only forms a hope concerning a future state of affairs where she has children, but also concerning which of a set of possible story lines she wants her actual life to follow.

This model of hope is suggestive of the following model of hopelessness. When a person experiences hopelessness, she loses the capacity to imaginatively project herself into the future in an effort to select which of the set of possible story lines she wants her life to follow.

Hopelessness may take one of (at least) three different forms. First, a person may lose the ability to “imaginatively project herself into the future.” Second, a person may be able to imaginatively project herself into the future, but when doing so she views her future as fixed. This may be because she believes there is only one storyline available to her. Or, she may believe that even if she has control over her life, she will inevitably fail at everything she tries to do. Hope is not possible when one believes that a future state affairs is certain to happen. In this case, a person can only plan for her future, not hope for it. Lastly, a person may experience hopelessness if she is able to imaginatively project herself into the future *and* views her future as open (i.e., multiple story lines available to her), but all of the possibilities appear undesirable. One cannot hope for a future that one views as necessarily undesirable.

This model of hopelessness is compatible with phenomenological literature on the nature of hopelessness and despair. The following remarks by Anthony Steinbock (2007) and Margaret Walker (2006) emphasize how hopelessness involves the loss of a capacity to take a futural perspective on one’s life. As Steinbock suggests, “hopelessness projects itself into the future” and “closes down possibilities forever” (442). Similarly, Walker has suggested “to those 'outside' catastrophic losses of hope, it is impossible to grasp how there can seem to be 'no future' or how

people with much life ahead can feel 'it is over' or 'I'm already dead'" (61).

As a result, Steinbock (2007) suggests that those who experience despair often report feeling stuck in the present.⁴⁴ He states that “through the experience of being abandoned to myself, I experience being abandoned to the present . . . It is in this way that despair confines us to the present and functions as a kind of imprisonment (whereas hope is experienced as a liberation of the present from its fixity)” (Steinbock 449).

Steinbock has also suggests that “when I despair, I experience the future as closed off of meaningful possibilities that should otherwise be there” (447). Interestingly, philosophers have also suggested that *radical boredom* and *meaninglessness* involve a “loss of meaningful possibilities.” According to Ratcliffe, when one experiences the most profound type of boredom, “boredom is all-encompassing” and “a sense of there being any alternative to this way of finding oneself in the world for anyone is absent from experience” (2009, 358). This is a type of necessary boredom where a person would be incapable of imagining herself in pursuit of activities that are not boring.

Additionally, Tim Oakley (2010) has differentiated between ordinary failure and loss one on hand and meaninglessness on the other. Oakley explains that “while we can be frustrated in our pursuits (things do not go well for us), it is a different situation when we find that we do not value anything. We find our pursuits undermined by judgments of the worth of their objects” (111). Ratcliffe has similarly characterized meaninglessness as involving a “loss of possibilities” or the loss of the “possibility of actually experiencing things as mattering in the

⁴⁴ Steinbock (2007) actually differentiates between hopelessness and despair. According to Steinbock, a person can lose all individual hopes (and experience hopelessness), but this would not cause despair. When one experiences despair, one loses the capacity to form hopes. In this paper, I will not be discussing this distinction. Instead, I believe that hopelessness (the loss of all individual hopes) can also have a profound impact on the meaningfulness of a person's life, even if their capacity to form new hopes is still intact. And, the quotes of Steinbock's that I cite in this section that are about despair are ones that are equally applicable to hopelessness (on his account).

ways that they once did” (2009, 360). Someone experiencing this “loss of possibilities” does not just cease caring about what she cared about before. For example, a person who decides that she no longer wants to pursue an academic job may decide to quit because she no longer cares about the responsibilities associated with such a position. However, we can imagine that most people who cease caring about their jobs will eventually find a new pursuit that will matter to them in the ways the previous job did not. In contrast, some people actually experience the loss of value as a permanent state. Such a person cannot project herself out of her current condition in order to imagine herself in pursuits that she values.

This literature supports the following analyses of radical boredom and meaninglessness. In the case of radical boredom, one is not only presently bored, but cannot imagine one's future self not bored. And when one experiences meaninglessness, one cannot imagine one's future self engaged in projects and pursuits that matter or which she finds valuable or worthwhile. It seems, then, that radical boredom and meaninglessness may be more specific versions of hopelessness or despair. In the case of boredom, the possibilities that are closed down are future rewarding, fulfilling, satisfying, exciting, or thrilling experiences. This may be because one's future is imagined to be full of pain, suffering and misery, such as when facing a terminal illness. However, it may also be the case that a person is apathetic toward her future experiences.

In contrast, meaninglessness is a type of agential hopelessness; in such a state, one cannot imagine one's future self successfully engaged as an agent. This would suggest that ordinary boredom, failure, and loss are perfectly compatible with a meaningful life. We all experience these types of experiences during the course of living a life. What may partially explain why our lives do not plummet into meaninglessness every time we experience a negative event is that our

present condition has little impact on the meaningfulness of our lives. Instead, our ability to avoid meaninglessness is contingent on our ability to project ourselves out of the present (no matter how dire it is) and into a future – an imagined future where we are *successfully* pursuing ideals we are committed to, projects that we care about, in roles that we value, and in relationships with people we care about.

The distinction between radical boredom and meaninglessness mirrors the distinction I provided earlier of two ways in which an immortal could become bored. I suggested that when we focus on the immortal as a subject of experiences, it may be that she becomes bored when she experiences the same types of experiences over and over again. And we can focus on the immortal as an agent and it may be that the agent who has exhausted all of her categorical desires becomes bored.

However, radical boredom is likely not caused by the repetition of experiences. Bortolotti and Nagasawa (2009) also cite psychological literature demarcating between what psychologists call situational and habitual boredom. Empirical findings suggest that situational boredom (i.e., ordinary boredom) is typically caused by “an inadequately stimulating situation,” such as repetitious and monotonous activity or experiences (268). In contrast, those facing habitual boredom are typically bored with life in general and may be subject to any of the following: “inactivity, withdrawal, anxiety, alienation, anti-social behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse, and even depression and suicide” (268-9). Habitual boredom is not caused by inadequately stimulating situations. In fact, habitual boredom does not appear to be caused by one's environment at all but is rather associated with some types of psychological traits (269-270).

I suggested that radical boredom involves the inability to project oneself into the future and imagine oneself thrilled, excited, or experiencing other positive affect. This position further supports the idea that radical boredom is not caused by inadequately stimulating situations. It seems clear that while one's present engagement in inadequately stimulating activity could cause situational boredom, it would not necessarily affect one's relationship to future stimulating activity. As discussed in Section 2.2 of Chapter 2, when one experiences ordinary boredom, the experience is partially caused by one's awareness that one could be engaged in more exciting activities if one was not stuck doing one's present activity (Ratcliffe 2013b). In the case of situational boredom (i.e., ordinary boredom), one *can* imagine one's future self engaged in stimulating activity, as this is what partially causes the boredom in the first place. In contrast, whatever causes radical boredom prevents one from imagining future activity that would be stimulating.

Meaninglessness also does not necessarily involve the exhaustion of categorical desires. If there was something problematic about the satisfaction of our desires in general, then the satisfaction of even one desire would necessarily render one's life less meaningful. This seems highly counterintuitive. It also seems counterintuitive that a person leading a highly successful life – i.e., the person who has satisfied all of her desires – would lead a less positively meaningful life than others who are less successful. Therefore, I am doubtful that there is any connection between the exhaustion of categorical desire and negative meaning. However, if the exhaustion of all categorical desires is problematic at all, it is because a person whose categorical desires have been exhausted may find that when she projects herself into the future she cannot imagine herself engaged in pursuits she finds valuable, because she cannot imagine herself

engaged in any pursuits at all; there is nothing left for her to do.

Even if the satisfaction of all desires can have this effect on the meaningfulness of one's life, the exhaustion of desires is not a necessary condition to be in this state. A person who frustrated all of her desires would be in a similar position to the one who satisfied all of them. But also, people can lose the ability to project themselves into the future and view that future as open and desirable. And, they may also find themselves in a meaningless state.

Williams (1973) may have been correct, after all, that there is a connection between boredom and negative meaning – a phenomenological one, as it turns out. Avoiding each is contingent on one's capacity to project one's self out of the present and into the future. However, Marya Schechtman (2005) has provided comments that suggest radical boredom and negative meaning may share an even closer connection. She states that “in conceiving of ourselves continuing as agents, we project ourselves into the future as subjects as well – imagining what will bring us satisfaction, when we will be filled with regret, what is likely to tempt us away from our purpose, and so on” (Schechtman 21).

When we project ourselves into the future and imagine ourselves successfully engaged in our projects, we imagine the satisfaction we feel when we are successful in our pursuits. Also, we imagine the pride that we will feel when we are successful in our roles. Or, we picture the pleasure we will experience when engaged in relationships with those people we care about. This may also mean that if we lose the capacity to imagine ourselves successfully engaged as *agents* in the future, we may also imagine our futures deplete of a wide range of positive affect. Meaninglessness may lead to radical boredom.

4. Practical identities and meaninglessness

In Section 3, I provided a phenomenological conception of meaninglessness. I suggested that meaninglessness is a type of agential hopelessness. I now want to fill in the details of this conception. Calhoun (unpublished manuscript) states that

the principle motivational underpinning to practical pursuits is not hope. It's *commitment* to the practical pursuit. Hope never sustains practical pursuits all by itself, but always *seconds* a prior commitment. (19-20)

I suggested that hope involves imaginative projection. And, in forming a hope, we imaginatively project ourselves into the future and construct a narrative of how we want our lives to go. However, this process is not possible unless there is already a self intact that can be projected into the future. As Calhoun is suggesting, hope is not possible unless we have already identified ourselves with various commitments, desires, goals, or plans.

Not surprisingly, the self I have in mind is one's practical identity. When we “project ourselves into the future,” we imagine a future where *we* – the selves composed of our fundamental identifications – are flourishing. Why must we imagine ourselves flourishing? It is not enough that we are capable of imagining *some* future for ourselves. We could not, for example, draw meaning from a future we imagine as necessarily full of misery, failure, and loss. We must be able to imagine a desirable future, one where we are successful in our pursuits, relationships, commitments, and roles.

In other words, positive meaning in life requires an operating *meaning narrative* – a narrative that organizes the fundamental features of our identity into a coherent story about how we *want* our lives to go. In projecting ourselves into the future, we imagine ourselves as the

protagonist of a successful life story. Therefore, I will argue that if positive meaning in life requires an operating meaning narrative, then negative meaning arises when one's meaning narrative is inoperative. One way in which it would be inoperative is if a person does not have enough of a practical identity left to project into the future. In this case, the person wouldn't have a meaning narrative at all. In other cases, a person will have a meaning narrative, but she will be unable to rely on the narrative in order to make sense of her life.

I want to start this section by returning to my discussion of practical identity and meaning in life from Section 4 of Chapter 3. There, I suggested that our practical identities are composed of the following types of characteristics: desires, commitments, goals, values, roles, and character traits. I argued that meaningful parts of our lives are fundamental identifications that we endorse. Those identifications that are fundamental are ones that are central to who we are – i.e., they explain and justify most of what we do on a daily basis, as well as our goals, values and desires for the future.

I argued that if an identification must be fundamental in order to be positively meaningful, then we can explain why identification with activities like chess are not positively meaningful for most of us. In most cases, if a person were prevented from playing chess, this would not impact other components of her identity – e.g., other commitments, desires, or values. However, I argued that fundamental identifications are not yet positively meaningful ones. For one, if fundamental identifications were all positively meaningful, then practically anyone with a practical identity would be leading a meaningful life. This is counterintuitive. Therefore, I argued that only those fundamental identifications that we *endorse* are positively meaningful.

I argued that in identifying with certain basic ends and goods, we identify with certain

ways of life that we take to be worthwhile. So, for example, there are certain basic ends and goods that are central to worthwhile family life. What makes basic ends and goods different from ordinary ones is that they can justify more ordinary desires, actions, and choices without needing their own justification. I concluded by arguing that meaningful identifications were fundamental ones that either played the basic justificatory role or were justified by those ends or goods that do play this role.

In light of the discussion in previous sections of this chapter, I am now in a better position to refine what I mean by endorsement. At the start of this section, I suggested that when we project ourselves into the future, we imagine someone (ourselves) constituted by our fundamental identifications flourishing. Now, I want to suggest that when we *endorse* an identification, it is included in our meaning narrative – our conception of how we *want* our lives to go.

Identification with basic ends and goods make up the basic building blocks of a storyline. For example, one of our storylines might revolve around family life. In constructing a narrative of how we *want* our lives to go, not any storyline focusing on family life will do. Instead, only those storylines that exemplify the basic ends and goods that one identifies with will be viable. For example, when projecting ourselves into the future, we may imagine ourselves in a committed, loving, and supportive relationship.

At this point, our meaning narratives are very abstract. While our identification with basic ends or goods places constraints on what count as viable storylines, it is our more specific identifications that provide the content for our storylines. When we include our commitments to various loved ones in our meaning narrative, these loved ones become characters in our stories.

The projects, plans, and goals that are endorsed create a plot for our narrative. We also imagine ourselves in particular settings. For example, some people want to raise their future children in a home similar to the one that they were raised in. As a result, our stories of how we want our lives to go take place in specific settings. Therefore, while imagining ourselves successfully engaged as agents, we imagine ourselves successfully engaged in projects that we care about, in roles that we value, with those with whom we love and care about, and in environments that we identify with.

Our ability to engage in imaginative projection in these ways is important for a number of reasons. As Calhoun suggested, “hope sustains practical pursuits by seconding the degree of commitment we have already made to a practical pursuit” (unpublished manuscript, 20). When we imagine ourselves successfully engaged as agents, we might imagine the satisfaction we will feel when we accomplish our goals. This can help provide additional motivation in the present when one is facing an obstacle, exhausted from hard work, or when doubting the value of one's pursuits. For example, there are many times during the process of writing a dissertation that a graduate student may feel like giving up. However, the feelings of satisfaction that a person imagines she will feel when picturing herself successfully defending her dissertation may help her to carry on with her work.

Second, in constructing a meaning narrative, we give our lives direction and a sense of purpose and point. At the end of Chapter 3, I suggested that a life (at a given point) is minimally meaningful when a person has fundamental identifications that she endorses. I want to clarify this position by saying that a person's life is minimally meaningful (at a given point) when she has an operating meaning narrative that enables her to make sense of the point and purpose of

her life. We also hope that at the end of our lives our actual life story is one of success, rather than failure. In other words, at the end of our lives we hope that our actual lives resemble our meaning narratives. One way to evaluate the overall meaningfulness of our lives would be to evaluate the extent to which our actual lives resemble our meaning narratives. A future project of mine will involve determining how it is we make this type of evaluation.

We can also reflect on the extent to which our lives are positively meaningful while we are still actively engaged in living our lives. We can also do this by evaluating how far we have come to realize our narratives. This can be helpful in inspiring us to make life changes that will enable us to better actualize our narratives. For example, I think sometimes when people complain that their romantic relationships aren't "going anywhere" it is because they cannot imagine their partner playing a role in one of their narrative's storylines. Their inability to envision this person in their future may cause them to end the relationship.

I suggested that our meaning narratives can provide additional motivation for us to complete our projects and goals when facing obstacles. Our meaning narratives also supply an additional, related benefit that is tied to the fact that we do not always get to pursue those commitments, projects, and ideals that we most closely identify with. This may be because we recently experienced failure. Or, it may be because external circumstances prevent our pursuing that which we most desire. For example, a person's need to help pay rent may force her to take a break from graduate school or to pursue employment that is not rewarding to her.

Present engagement in what may otherwise be deemed "meaningless work" need not detract from the overall meaningfulness of our lives. Why? For one, our ability to project ourselves out of the present and into the future and to imagine ourselves successfully engaged as

agents can give us the needed sense that our present condition is not permanent.

Additionally, a person can still conceive of her life as having a point or purpose, even when her present work feels pointless or futile. For, her life's direction, point and purpose stem not from her present activity but from her meaning narrative – her story of how she *wants* her life to go.

This last point inspires me to make a few important qualifications about the nature and function of meaning narratives. A number of objections have been raised against narrative views of identity – especially those that describe narratives as “stories.”⁴⁵ I am not defending a narrative view of identity and will remain agnostic about whether or not one constitutes one's practical identity in this way. However, one might think that my view will be susceptible to similar objections that have been raised against such views. Without getting into the details of these objections, I want to lay out what my view does and does not entail.

My view does not entail that we must always take a futural perspective on our lives. If we always took a futural perspective on our lives, then we would never be capable of being fully in the present. We must be fully in the present in order to concentrate on the task at hand. What is important for avoiding negative meaning is that one have the *capacity* to project one's self into the future as an agent. And, those people who experience negative meaning have lost this capacity.

This isn't to say, of course, that we don't have some conception of how we want our lives to go working in the background while involved in present pursuits. It is our meaning narrative that enables us to quickly provide an answer to others when they ask us “why” we are doing what we are doing or to justify the point or purpose of our work. However, it is likely also the case that our meaning narratives become especially relevant when facing obstacles or crises that

⁴⁵ For a notable paper objecting to narrative views of identity, see Galen Strawson (2004) in “Against Narrativity.”

threaten to undermine the value of our pursuits. I suggested that our meaning narratives can help supply us with additional motivation when we might otherwise give up.

Meaning narratives become especially relevant when we need to make important life changes that affect the direction of our lives. For example, our meaning narratives may become especially relevant when facing what Catriona Mackenzie has called “self-transformative decisions” (2008, 128). Examples of this type of decision may include a person's decision to leave her church, “deciding to proceed with or terminate a pregnancy, cutting tie's with one's family and migrating to another country” and “ending a significant long-term relationship” (Mackenzie 128). What makes this type of decision different from ordinary, every-day decisions is that in deciding on a course of action, significant changes are made to a practical identity. For example, parenthood transforms a person's goals, commitments, and values and will “shape her future self” (Mackenzie 129). In other words, in making a self-transformative decision, a person adopts a new storyline for her life.

In Section 3, I suggested that when one experiences agential hopelessness, one is unable to imaginatively project one's self into the future in an effort to choose which of a set of possible storylines one wants one's life to follow. Now that I have specified the type of self in question, we can form a more complete conception. On my account, a person is in a period of negative meaning if and only if she is unable to project fundamental identifications into the future in order to construct a narrative of her life where she is flourishing. Additionally, in Section 3, I specified that there may be three distinct forms that hopelessness can take. First, I suggested that a person may lose the ability to “imaginatively project herself into the future.” Second, I suggested that some people who are still able to imaginatively project themselves into the future may then

experience their future as fixed. Lastly, some people who project themselves into the future and who do not view their future as fixed may still view all of their possibilities as undesirable.

In the next section, I will focus on potential causes of negative meaning. In doing so, I will be explaining which types of crises can cause each of the three aforementioned versions of agential hopelessness.

5. Causes of negative meaning

In order to understand when and why a person enters a meaningless period in her life, we need to understand which events have the potential to undermine a person's meaning narrative. Not surprisingly, psychologists working on the topic of meaning in life focus primarily on when and why people self-describe as being in a meaningless period in their lives. As a result, psychological research may be especially helpful in determining causes of negative meaning. Therefore, in this section I will be drawing conclusions from both philosophical and psychological literature on the causes of negative meaning.

In this section, I will focus on three potential meaning threats. First, I argue that some people who experience a devastating loss (e.g., of a spouse) lose the ability to project themselves into the future. In this case, they would be unable to even form a meaning narrative. Second, I argue that those people who have experienced demoralization may feel that they no longer have control over their lives. As a result, they may feel that their futures are “closed” to them in some sense. Lastly, I argue that those who experience trauma may lose basic assumptions about the world and themselves that must be in place for their future to appear desirable. I do not want to suggest that these three types of meaning crises are mutually exclusive. For example, I will

suggest that some types of loss undermine a person's capacity to project herself into the future. However, a person's experience of loss can also undermine her perception of her future as desirable.

5.1 Loss

I have argued that a person is in a period of negative meaning in her life when she is unable to project herself into the future and imagine herself successfully engaged as an agent. One explanation for why a person is unable to construct a *meaning narrative* is that she is unable to project herself into the future. How might this happen? A person who has experienced a devastating loss, such as the loss of a spouse, may not have much of her practical identity left intact after her loss. As a result, there may not be enough of a “self” to project into the future. Ratcliffe (2013a) has provided a helpful example of hopelessness. Ratcliffe suggests that some people who have faced a devastating loss will find that all hopes are rendered meaningless.

Suppose a person has spent the last thirty years in a loving relationship with a partner. It might well be that all or almost all her activities and projects (other than those that are purely functional and would not ordinarily be associated with attitudes such as ‘hope’ anyway) make reference to the partner, are regulated to some extent by it, and take on the significance they do because of it . . . For example, money is earned in order to sustain ‘our’ life together. The contents of all the person’s hopes, all her aspirations, thus involve her partner. (Ratcliffe 602)

A helpful interpretation of this woman's experience is that all of the storylines that make up her *meaning narrative* are now meaningless, because all of her storylines revolved around her

partner. In contrast, some people have very distinct storylines. It may be that the storyline revolving around a person's career is entirely distinct from that revolving around family. If this is the case, then the loss of one storyline need not undermine the other storylines.

The psychologist, Tricia Linville (1985), has actually tested this possibility. Linville presents findings that suggest that people with less complex self-representations were more prone to depression. They tended to define themselves using a relatively small class of self-concepts (e.g., professor or mother) that were interrelated. She argued that for those with more simple self-representations, when something negative affected one of their self-concepts (e.g., professor), it also tended to affect her other self-concepts.

Linville (1985) provides the following example.

Suppose a scientist gets a paper rejected and has a simple self-representation in which professional aspects are closely linked in memory to family aspects and social aspects of the self. Then the negative affect and self-appraisal associated with professional failure will be widespread, resulting in negative feelings about other areas of the self. (95)

In the example of the widow, we can imagine that all of her self-concepts were closely linked with her relationship to her husband. Additionally, we can imagine that all of her plans, goals, commitments, and dreams were connected with her relationship to him. It should come as no surprise that with the destruction of her most fundamental relationship, the rest of her practical identity crumbled with it.

It seems probable that failure could have a similar impact on one's life. We can imagine that the woman in my example lost her husband through divorce rather than death. While the

divorce is likely less devastating than her husband's death, the separation would still have the same impact on her practical identity. It would still be the case that all of the storylines involving her husband would now be meaningless.

5.2 Demoralization

Calhoun has suggested that people “take for granted that deliberation has a point: Our actions do affect, or stand a good chance of affecting, the world in the ways we intend” (2008, 204). However, when people experience demoralization, they no longer have faith in their ability to be successful as agents. For example, people who experience poverty may lose faith that they will be able to acquire the resources necessary to achieve their goals. Such people may set goals for themselves and then give up on their pursuit because they lack the material resources. In this case, they engage in instrumental reasoning, but then do not take the means necessary to acquire their end because the means is inaccessible to them.

Calhoun (2008) suggests that other people entirely give up on instrumental reasoning. They do not deliberate on how best to acquire their ends because they do not feel that they the power to affect the world through their agency. In this case a person may feel that “too much of one's life, or the most important parts of one's life, are not under one's control but are controlled by good and bad luck or by other people” (205). In such cases a person may decide that there is no point in engaging in deliberation at all (205).

On my account, people who do not believe that they have control over the outcome of their agency may perceive their future as “fixed” or “closed.” These people may be capable of projecting themselves into the future. However, they do not experiences themselves as the

author of their own life stories. As a result, they may believe that the only storyline that is open to them is that which is determined by fate or someone else's will (e.g., abusive partner). Or, they may feel that they are in control over their life story, but no matter what they try to do they will always manage to fail. As suggested earlier, hope requires that a person believe that there is more than one future open to her. If, for example, one's poverty seems inescapable, then one may view only one possibility for one's future – more poverty.

5.3 Trauma

As discussed in Chapter 1, Section 2, some psychologists working on the causes and phenomenology of meaning crises have argued that people rely on a relatively stable set of assumptions about how the world is organized and operates.⁴⁶ In particular, people operate under the assumption that the world is predictable, benevolent and just, that they are good people who are deserving of good things happening to them, and that they have some control over their lives.⁴⁷

Most of time, our assumptions enable to us to interpret the significance of events in our lives. When a negative event occurs, we have to find a way to interpret the event such a fashion that we can maintain our basic assumptions. For example, a traumatic event may undermine our assumption that we have control over our lives. Susan Brison has suggested that it can sometimes be helpful for a victim to blame herself because “it can be less painful to believe that you did something blameworthy than it is to think that you live in a world where you can be attacked at any time, in any place, simply because you are a woman” (2002, 13). In this case, a

⁴⁶ See, for example, Travis Proulx, Keith Markman, and Matthew Lindberg (2013); Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1989; 2002); Crystal Park (1997); and Roy Baumeister (1991).

⁴⁷ See especially Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1989; 2002) for work on the importance of these assumptions.

person can point to concrete situations to avoid in the future to prevent victimization. Even though this sense of control is often illusory, it helps some people regain their sense that they have control over their lives.

However, as Baumeister has described, “victimization through crime or accident, for example, disproves the view of the world as benevolent, it threatens one's view of the world as fair, and it undermines the positive view of oneself as someone who deserves positive, desirable things to happen” (1991, 235). In other words, sometimes a negative event contradicts our assumptions to the point that we can no longer maintain those assumptions. However, those assumptions are what enable us to make sense of ourselves and our world.

When trauma undermines our assumptions about the world and self, it also has the capacity to undermine our meaning narrative. Our capacity to project ourselves into a future where we are successfully engaged in our pursuits is contingent on our ability to envision a world that is hospitable to our self and our projects. A world perceived to be hostile to our projects is not one that inspires faith that we can be successful in our projects when we try hard enough. Additionally, a person whose sense of self-worth has been undermined by a traumatic event may be unable to imagine a future where she is flourishing, for she must believe she is deserving of such a future in order for it to have any traction for her.

If a person must maintain some sense of self-worth in order to maintain her meaning narrative, then it may be that actions where one is the perpetrator of wrongdoing rather than the victim may also face a crises of meaning. Crystal Park has argued that people have a need to belong and feel like a valued member of their social group (2013, 194). Most of the time, we can maintain “moral self-regard” by finding ways to justify our moral transgressions. However, Park

states that “there are instances of inhumane behavior that are sufficiently extreme or powerful to crush our moral self-perceptions, and the psychological impact is devastating” (194). For example, Park suggests that many people who served in the military in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan “reported direct involvement in perpetrating or endorsing atrocities” (194). Park found that these individuals were unable to make compatible their actions and their conception of themselves as morally good people and a valued member of one’s social group. Again, a person who is unable to make sense of themselves as a morally good person may also be unable to project herself into a future that she perceives to be desirable, as she must believe she is deserving of a desirable future.

In the cases of demoralization and trauma, a person may be able to project herself into the future. However, if she does not feel that she has control over how her future will turn out, she may not view herself as the author of her own life story. And, if a person does not feel that her future will be desirable, then she will be unable to construct a narrative of her life where she is “flourishing” rather than “declining.” She might be able to make sense of her life, but not in a way that makes apparent its value and purpose.

5.4 Concluding thoughts

Before moving to my final section, I will present some general conclusions about negative meaning based on the suggestions of this section. In Chapter 2, I argued that failure and immoral actions do not necessarily detract from the meaningfulness of a person’s life. At that point, I stated that I would later explain possible connections between failure and negative meaning and immoral behavior and negative meaning.

I have now pointed to two possible scenarios where they might have an impact. In Section 5.1, I suggested that a devastating failure might have a similar impact on one's life as a devastating loss. Each have the power to undermine one's fundamental identifications to the extent that a person no longer has enough of a "self" left to project into the future. In Section 5.3, I suggested that in some cases highly immoral behavior has the power to undermine one's assumption that she is a morally good person. Like Laurence Thomas (2005), I suggested that immoral behavior can undermine one's sense of self-worth. And a person must have enough self-worth to believe that she is deserving of a future where she is flourishing. And, like Thomas (2005), rather than merely using intuition to posit a connection between failure and immoral actions and negative meaning, I have provided evidence for a contingent causal connection between these types of events and negative meaning.

What I have so far failed to acknowledge is that in countless psychological studies, people have demonstrated that they are highly resilient.⁴⁸ It may take people months or years to recover from some types of traumatic experiences or losses, however, most people eventually do recover. The upshot is that, for most people, once they are in period of negative meaning in their lives, this period is likely not permanent. However, the fact that a period of negative meaning in a person's life is not permanent does not detract from the fact that, once in such a period, a person is in a very undesirable condition.

I have yet to fully motivate the idea that meaninglessness is best conceived as a dis-value and not the absence of positive meaning. In other words, I need to explain why meaninglessness is a

⁴⁸ See, for example, George A. Bonnano (2004) in "Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive After Extremely Aversive Events?" Bonnano defines resilience as "the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning" (2004, 20). Based on this definition, Bonnano argues that most people who experience bereavement or a traumatic event display resilience.

condition that actually detracts from the overall meaningfulness of a life, rather than just failing to add to it. I will address this topic in the next section.

6. Meaninglessness as a dis-value

I have provided the following conceptual analysis of negative meaning. I have argued that negative meaning involves incomprehensibility (Chapter 1, Section 2). In other words, people who are in a period of negative meaning are unable to make sense of their lives. Additionally, I have distinguished between the following: negative meaning, positive meaning, and the absence of positive meaning.

Though the primary aim of my dissertation has not been to construct a conception of positive meaning, there is a very intuitive way to account for positive meaning on my account. Namely, a person adds positive meaning to her life when she makes her actual life story resemble her meaning narrative. In other words, the more her actual life story resembles her meaning narrative, the more meaningful her life is.

I suggested that in order to conceive of negative meaning as undesirable – as something to avoid in one’s life – we ought to conceive of negative meaning as a dis-value (Chapter 2). However, I suggested that this is a controversial position to take. Most philosophers writing on meaning of life adhere to the Standard Account. They accept that a life where positive meaning is absent is the worst case scenario (from the perspective of meaning in life).

Why think that negative meaning is a dis-value, rather than the absence of positive meaning? For Metz (2013), incorporating negative meaning into his account of meaning in life was necessary to account for why some actions seems much worse from the perspective of

meaning in life than others. If negative meaning is merely the absence of positive meaning, then we have no way to account for the difference between playing *Candy Crush Saga* and blowing up the Sphinx (64). While someone who is playing *Candy Crush Saga* may be missing out on opportunities to add positive meaning to her life, someone who blows up the Sphinx may be doing something to count against the overall meaningfulness of her life.

I argued that, on this approach, we will have a difficult time differentiating between actions that detract from the meaningfulness of a person's life and those that detract from the moral worth of a person's life. And in Chapter 3, I explained how someone who sets immoral ends may still lead a meaningful life. Such a person could still be able to make sense of the point and purpose of her life, even if the point and purpose are overwhelming destructive and immoral.

Moving on, I believe people sometimes make the following judgments about their entire lives: “my life was worthwhile” or “my life was not worth living.” I believe that people who judge that their lives are not worth living are sensing that their lives do not make sense – there is no clear purpose or point to their lives. And, if there is no clear point or purpose to a person's life, then she likely would see no reason to continue living. I want to suggest (controversially), that it is better not to exist at all than to continue living a life that does not make sense.

This is not to say that I am advocating for people who are in a period of negative meaning to commit suicide. As suggested in Section 5.4, periods of negative meaning are usually temporary. While someone in such a state might want to commit suicide, it would be reasonable to try to talk her out of it, as her life will likely become worth living in the future. Even if she doesn't have a desire propelling her into the future, she still has a reason to continue living. However, my view *does* entail that a person who lives most of her life in a period of negative

meaning is living a life not worth living. In other words, it may actually have been better for this person not to exist at all than to live in this state.

I am suggesting that a life that is negatively meaningful (e.g., dis-valuable from the perspective of meaning in life) is not a life worth living. In contrast, Metz (2012) has argued that the concepts of meaningful lives and worthwhile lives are distinct. For example, he suggests that the hedonist's life might be meaningless, but it could still be a life worth living (443). It seems better to exist in the experience machine than to not exist at all. Additionally, Metz believes that it is not incoherent to talk of the following life as positively meaningful: the life of someone who chooses to live a life not worth living so that others will be prevented from this fate (443).

I do not share Metz's intuitions in these cases. Metz suggested that the hedonist's life may be meaningless but still worth living. However, on my conception, the hedonist's life is not meaningless in the sense of being dis-valuable. Instead, it is a life where positive meaning is absent. As suggested in Chapter 2, I think it is reasonable that a person could consider her options and decide to pursue happiness in her life at the cost of positive meaning. However, such a person has not lost the capacity to project herself into the future as an agent and imagine herself in pursuit of ends she finds valuable. The capacity is still there, even if she rarely uses it. Therefore, the hedonist's life is not necessarily *undesirable* from the perspective of meaning in life. All that Metz (2012) has shown is that a life where positive meaning is absent is not necessarily a worthless life.

Next, Metz (2012) provides examples of people who appear to choose positive meaning in their lives at the expense of living a worthwhile life - e.g., nurses "who elect to face stench, filth, distress, and the like so that such conditions are lessened for others" (444). Metz suggests

that a nurse's work might make her life more positively meaningful, but (characterized as such) it doesn't make her life more worthwhile. This type of example is usually used to show that positive meaning and happiness are distinct concepts. The nurse may be living a positively meaningful life even if it is not a life that would make her happiest. While the nurse's life might rank low in terms of happiness, is it also less worthwhile than other lives?

Viktor Frankl (2006) has suggested that suffering stops being suffering when a person gives the suffering a purpose. A life full of meaningless suffering *is* a worthless life. In contrast, there is a reason to live a life that has a purpose, even if one has to find that purpose in her own suffering. I think we sometimes assume that lives full of suffering are lives not worth living. This is because suffering *can* prevent us from pursuing purposes and ends that we value. Additionally, it is very difficult to find a purpose in one's own suffering. But, suffering does not by itself make a life not worth living. Instead, suffering makes a life not worth living when it renders the life negatively meaningful.

I cannot pinpoint at what point a life has too many periods of negative meaning such that it becomes worthless. Presumably, there will be some threshold point of meaning that a life must not fall below. My view also entails that most lives *are* worth living. A life that is not negatively meaningful is a worthwhile life. And, lives can be worthwhile to different degrees.

7. Conclusion

I have developed and defended a new conception of negative meaning. On my conception, a person is in a period of negative meaning in her life when her *meaning narrative* is inoperative. When a person's *meaning narrative* is inoperative, she is unable to project herself

into the future as an agent and imagine herself successfully engaged in pursuit of ideals, projects, or relationships. A person's *meaning narrative* can become inoperative when she experiences a highly negative event, such as a loss, failure, or trauma, or when she has become demoralized. As a result, people in periods of negative meaning are typically the victims of highly negative events rather than the perpetrators of negative events. I have suggested that this is one reason why we ought not to conceive of negative meaning as involving conditions that warrant revulsion or shame, as people are not always blameworthy for their condition. Lastly, I suggested that negative meaning ought to be considered a dis-value rather than the absence of positive meaning because long periods of negative meaning in a life can make the life not worth living.

Chapter Five

The Meaning of the Afterlife

Introduction

In *Death and the Afterlife*, Samuel Scheffler (2013) investigates the possibility that the continuation of human life on earth after our own deaths is a largely overlooked but necessary condition for our lives to have meaning. In fact, Scheffler argues that the collective afterlife – i.e., the continued existence of other human beings after our deaths – may matter more for the meaningfulness of our lives than our own personal survival. In defense of his claims, he provides two thought experiments (presented in Section 2) – *Doomsday* and *Infertility*. We are asked to imagine that we will live out the remainder of our natural lives with knowledge that the extinction of all human life on earth occurs shortly after our deaths.

Scheffler purports to show that if we obtained knowledge of the loss of the collective afterlife, this knowledge would undermine the value and significance of many (if not most) of our most valued human practices, projects, traditions, and social identities. In contrast, he points out that recognition of the inevitability of our own deaths does not have such a deleterious effect on our actual lives, now. Therefore, Scheffler defends the more radical claim that the collective afterlife matters more to us than our own continued existence.

My aim in this paper is not to argue that Scheffler is incorrect in his assessment of the types of activities and projects that we would cease finding a reason to pursue if we faced *Doomsday* or *Infertility*. I believe most of his predictions are correct, with some qualifications that I recommend along the way. It seems very likely that the perceived extinction of the human race after our deaths would have a profound impact on the meaningfulness of our lives.

However, I argue that Scheffler has not shown that the collective afterlife matters more to us than our own personal survival.

Drawing from the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker and social psychologists from the terror management theory tradition (a tradition inspired by Becker's work), I suggest an alternative explanation for why the loss of confidence in the afterlife would produce widespread despair, loss of motivation, and apathy.⁴⁹ The loss of the afterlife would prevent our leaving any lasting mark on the world, whether in the form of achievement, fame, wealth, or through the propagation of the family line. In other words, we would be prevented from achieving symbolic immortality. Becker argues that the primary motivation behind our striving for symbolic immortality is that it gives us the illusion that we can overcome our own deaths, thereby decreasing death anxiety. In *Doomsday* and *Infertility*, it would be impossible to achieve symbolic immortality, which means we may be forced to directly confront our mortality for the first time. In fact, we would likely face constant reminders of our mortality on a daily basis. If I am correct, then life in *Doomsday* or *Infertility* may be far worse than Scheffler suggests.

2. *Doomsday, Infertility, Interstellar, and Meteor*

As Scheffler points out, we take the collective afterlife for granted in our everyday lives (76). We have remained blissfully unaware of how precarious the meaningfulness of our lives actually is. If Scheffler's analysis of his two thought experiments is correct, then what happens after you die can have a great impact on the meaningfulness of your life right now. Then, the degree to which your life is meaningful is partially outside of your control.

⁴⁹ I am drawing from Ernest Becker (1997) in *The Denial of Death* and Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg (2003) in *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*.

I will now present and discuss Scheffler's two thought experiments – *Doomsday* and *Infertility* – and what he intends for them to show. More specifically, I will discuss what I take to be Scheffler's three primary claims. First, the loss of the collective afterlife can affect the meaningfulness of our lives by undermining the value and purpose of projects and activities that are important sources of meaning in our lives. Second, the loss of the afterlife would make it impossible to form a “personalized relationship to the future” (Scheffler 21). Lastly, loss of the afterlife would subvert our attempts to preserve what we value over time.

The Doomsday Scenario: you will live out the remainder of your life, eventually dying of natural causes. However, you come to find out that thirty days after your death an asteroid will collide with earth, killing all human beings. Nothing can be done to prevent the asteroid from colliding with earth. (Scheffler 18)

Scheffler wants us to imagine how we would likely respond to *Doomsday* and the various ways in which *Doomsday* might affect the value and significance of our lives. He believes most of us would experience despair in response to the prospect that some people we love and care about would face premature deaths. The fact that we care about an event that takes place after our deaths shows at the very least that “things other than our own experiences matter to us” (Scheffler 20). However, Scheffler hopes to show that the collective afterlife matters to us in many important ways unrelated to the well-being of the loved ones who will outlive us.

For example, Scheffler believes that *Doomsday* would undermine the purpose and value of many activities that are sources of meaning in many people's lives. People facing *Doomsday* would likely choose not to have children, given that their future children would not be able to live full lives. Scheffler suggests that “neither would they [adults facing *Doomsday*] be as

motivated to engage in the wide, varied, and life-altering array of activities associated with raising and caring for children” (25).

While I think Scheffler is correct that many people would decide against having children, he doesn't discuss the impact that *Doomsday* might have on people's motivation to *adopt* children. For those people who chose to adopt, they could still engage in the “life-altering array of activities” associated with child-rearing. Some adults may actually feel that they have a special obligation to adopt, given that younger generations would be left to cope with the end of the world.

However, while focusing on the import of our loved ones dying prematurely, Scheffler points to a more general way in which our lives would be affected by *Doomsday*. He argues that *Doomsday* would undermine our ability to “personalize our relationship to the future” – a strategy we have developed to cope with the fact that we die. The most direct way in which we seek to personalize our relationship to the future is by ensuring that there are people alive after our deaths who will remember us. Scheffler points out that, for some people, being forgotten is what “being gone” means – not death in and of itself.

Faced with fear of being forgotten, the fact that there are other people who value their relations with you and who will continue to live after you have died makes it possible to feel that you have a place in the social world of the future even if, due to the inconvenient fact of your death, you will not actually be able to take advantage of it. (Scheffler 29)

Scheffler is alluding to two distinct ways in which our capacity to personalize our relationship to the future is important for our perception of our lives as meaningful. First, the

prospect that we will be completely forgotten after our deaths may undermine the meaningfulness of our lives now. If we are completely forgotten after our deaths, then it may feel as though we never existed. If so, then it would be difficult to reconcile our belief in the meaningfulness of our lives with our perception of our life's overall insignificance.

However, it is also important to us that we retain a social identity in the world after our deaths. Scheffler suggests that we want to imagine that the world after our deaths is like a “party one had to leave early and less like a gathering of strangers” (30). To this end, our identification with communal and national groups also enables us to “personalize our relationship to the future.” There may not be individuals who will remember us after we are gone. However, our ability to project ourselves into the future and imagine ourselves at home in that future may make the prospect of our complete annihilation less terrifying.

In light of the previous remarks, Scheffler points to a major limitation with *Doomsday*. The dismay that we feel at the prospect that our loved ones will face premature deaths may be tainting our intuitions about the scenario. As a result, he posits a second thought experiment – *Infertility* – that does not involve the premature death of loved ones.

The Infertility Scenario: you live out the remainder of your life, eventually dying of natural causes. However, you come to find out that all human beings have become infertile. After this point, there will be no additional human births. As a result, human beings will soon become extinct. Nothing can be done to cure the infertility. (Scheffler 38)

Contrary to *Doomsday*, Scheffler suggests that *Infertility* avoids tapping into “the particularistic character of a concern for the survival of our loved ones” (39). However, he

acknowledges that the extinction of humankind due to widespread infertility would also result in loss of particular social groups and traditions that we identify with (40). Later in this section I argue that Scheffler has not shown that we care about the collective afterlife in its own right, apart from its being a condition for much else of what matters to us continuing to matter to us.

Scheffler believes that *Doomsday* and *Infertility* would affect our motivation to engage in activities and projects now, our perception of their value, and our emotional investment in them. I have already discussed the impact that *Doomsday* might have on one's motivation to have children. Clearly, this motivational consequence of *Doomsday* is not relevant to *Infertility*, for in *Infertility* people have lost the capacity to have children. However, in both cases people will be prevented from engaging in activities associated with the raising of children

Additionally, there may be no obvious point in continuing cancer research when the value of the research lies primarily in its ultimate aim of finding a cure (Scheffler 24). Scheffler suggests, more generally, that other projects' value would be similarly undermined. This would include projects where success is a long way off and, or, those projects where the purpose is to benefit large numbers of people over time (24). This category would likely include projects such as promoting social justice or cleaning up the environment.

These scenarios may also undermine one's motivation to pursue scholarly and creative projects undertaken with the aim of producing work for a future readership or audience (Scheffler 25). There are, of course, some people who draw, paint, or write short stories and never intend to share their work with others. It is not obvious why *Doomsday* and *Infertility* would undermine these individuals' motivation to pursue their projects. Scheffler is at least

correct that for those who do envision an actual or imagined audience when completing their projects, they would either need to find other ways to ground the value of their projects or would likely lose motivation to pursue them.

Scheffler suggests that in valuing something we also desire to preserve or sustain that thing (22). However, our deaths pose an additional problem for the meaningfulness of our lives. After we die, we are unable to continue our efforts to preserve and sustain what we value. One way to maintain confidence in the continuation of those things we value after our deaths is through participation in traditions – “human practices whose organizing purpose is to preserve what is valued beyond the life span of any single individual or generation” (33). But of course, both *Doomsday* and *Infertility* entail not only the extinction of human life on earth but human practices, as well.

Scheffler concludes that the collective afterlife matters to us in its own right and as a condition for much else of what we value continuing to matter to us. I want to pause for a moment to consider whether or not Scheffler has adequately defended both claims.

One of Scheffler's intentions in presenting *Infertility* (in addition to *Doomsday*) is to demonstrate that we care about the collective afterlife in and of itself. He wants to show that some of our concerns regarding the collective afterlife are not particularistic concerns. In other words, he believes that the loss of the collective afterlife would still have profound effects on our lives now, even if we had no personal relationships with future generations.

Even if Scheffler has shown that some of our concerns regarding the collective afterlife are not particularistic concerns, he has not thereby shown that the collective afterlife matters to us in its own right. To do so, he would have to show that the collective afterlife matters to us

apart from its being a condition for other things we value continuing to matter. Scheffler doesn't need to defend this position in order to defend his primary claim that the continuation of the collective afterlife is importantly connected to the meaningfulness of our lives. However, in Section 3 I object to Scheffler's claim that the collective afterlife matters more to us than our own personal survival. One way to respond to my objection would be to demonstrate that we care about the collective afterlife in its own right, apart from its influence on our own lives. Therefore, I will now argue that we don't care about the collective afterlife in its own right, at least not that much.

I will now present a third thought experiment that I believe can better test our intuitions about how much the collective afterlife matters to us in its own right. This thought experiment is drawn entirely from the recent movie, *Interstellar* (2014).

The *Interstellar* Scenario: the earth is dying and there is worldwide starvation. If NASA scientists are unable to find a new planet that can sustain human life, human beings will soon become extinct. A lead NASA scientist asks you to go on an expedition to locate a new planet. If a habitable planet is discovered, then they will proceed with one of two plans. For *Plan A*, a massive space station will transport large numbers of human beings – i.e., current residents of earth – to the new planet. This plan will only work if the lead scientist can figure out how to manipulate gravity, which is required for travel of a large space station.

If *Plan A*, will not work, then the astronauts are to proceed with *Plan B*. According to *Plan B*, astronauts stay on the new planet to care for human embryos. However,

in *Plan B*, all of the current inhabitants of earth will eventually starve to death.

After locating a habitable planet, you come to find out that the lead scientist lied to you – *Plan A* was never possible.

You now have two choices. You can travel back to earth and live out the remainder of your life with your family. Or, you can travel to the planet and carry out *Plan B*, thereby ensuring the survival of humanity. Which option do you choose?

My guess is that readers are giving this choice a serious thought. It is simply not obvious which option is all-things-considered the correct one. And, I believe this hesitancy does not necessarily reflect the fact that people are inordinately selfish. More often than not, people would not choose to pursue their own personal interests over the interests of all of humankind.

To test this point, I want to consider a slightly different thought experiment.⁵⁰

The Meteor Scenario: you are an astronaut already in space. You are given two options. If you accept the first option, you will return to earth and live out the remainder of your life with your family. However, if you accept the second option, you will travel to, and land on, a meteor that is projected to hit earth 30 days after your death. You will then set off a bomb that scientists are certain will destroy the meteor. Though you will save all of human life from immanent destruction, you will be killed when the bomb explodes; therefore, you will never get to see your family again. Which option do you choose?

I have the intuition that most people will find it easier to make this decision than the

⁵⁰ This thought experiment is inspired by the 1998 movie, *Deep Impact*.

decision proposed in *Interstellar*. And, I believe more people would opt to save humanity in *Meteor* than they would in *Interstellar*. The primary difference between *Interstellar* and *Meteor* is that, in *Interstellar*, all of the current inhabitants on earth will soon die off. However, human life will not become extinct, assuming the proper care of the embryos on a different planet. In contrast, if a person chooses to save humanity in *Meteor*, human life will continue on earth as we know it indefinitely.

It seems to me that the problem with *Interstellar* is that saving humanity by ensuring the survival of the embryos doesn't seem the same or as good as saving the human beings already on earth. And, Scheffler can explain why this is the case. Namely, in *Interstellar*, human beings on earth will not be able to “personalize their relationship to the future,” nor will they be able to preserve what they value after their deaths. It may seem that, from the perspective of human beings on earth, what they care about with respect to the collective afterlife is not preserved with *Plan B*. If I am correct in my assessment of *Interstellar*, then we have reason to be skeptical that the survival of humanity matters to us in its own right, apart from its making possible many other things that matter to us.

One could object that, in contrast to the people on earth, the astronaut in *Interstellar* could still personalize her relationship to the future and preserve what she values after her death. As the primary caregiver of the embryos and future children, the astronaut could ensure that her family history was passed on to the new generation through stories. Additionally, she could encourage the new generation to participate in traditions and activities that she personally values. For example, she could encourage the children to celebrate her favorite holidays and play her favorite sports.

In response, I would say that if *Plan B* now sounds better to you than it did before you considered these possibilities, it is because the plan now appears to offer all of the benefits normally associated with the continuation of the collective afterlife – i.e., the preservation of values. However, this only further supports my contention that we do not care about the collective afterlife in its own right, but as a condition for much else of what we care about. *Plan B* still sounds unappealing if we imagine ourselves to be one of the human beings on earth (and that none of our embryos will be any of the lucky few saved). Again, this is because what we value in the collective afterlife is now lost to us.

3. The meaning of the afterlife

However, Scheffler is far more successful in arguing that the preservation of the collective afterlife is a condition for many other things that matter to us continuing to matter to us. One interesting implication of Scheffler's work is that it shows how our perception of what happens in the future can affect the meaningfulness of our lives right now. His work highlights the fact that we regularly take a futural perspective on our lives. For Scheffler, we take up such a perspective when we take measures to ensure that future generations will preserve our values or when we work hard to leave a legacy that outlives us. More generally, we take up such a perspective when we commit to long-term projects and goals. Sometimes, we plan to complete our projects or accomplish our goals later during our lifetimes. But, as Scheffler rightly points out, we also commit ourselves to projects that we hope others will take up after we are gone.

I want to take this point a bit further and suggest that in order to find one's life meaningful in the present, a person must be able to imaginatively project herself into the future,

imagining herself successfully pursuing ideals she is committed to, projects she cares about, in roles that she values, and in relationships with others whom she cares about. I believe Scheffler's conclusions about the importance of the collective afterlife support this view. Namely, our loss of confidence in our ability to be successful as agents in the future can systematically undermine the meaningfulness of our lives right now. In contrast, people regularly experience failure or cease caring about their projects in the present, and these experiences do not seem to affect the meaningfulness of their lives in the same way.

When a person imaginatively projects herself into the future, she imagines someone constituted by her fundamental identifications successfully engaged as an agent. In other words, she projects the fundamental components (i.e., those most fundamental to who she is) of her practical identity into the future. In doing so, she imagines herself as the protagonist of her own life story, engaged in identify-defining goals and projects, in desirable settings and with important friends and family.

The connection between imaginative projection and practical identities is also implicitly supported by Scheffler's work. Earlier, I presented Scheffler's point that we identify with traditions and social groups that will likely outlive us. In doing so, we can help to ensure the preservation of our values after our deaths. Doing so also enables us to retain a social identity in the world after our deaths. Scheffler states that our ability to retain a social identity is important to us because our ability to project ourselves into the future and imagine ourselves at home in that future makes the prospect of our deaths less terrifying. In other words, imagining ourselves persisting (in some sense) after our deaths weakens our death anxiety. By identifying with social groups, values, traditions, and projects that outlive us, there is a sense in which we *do* live on

after our deaths. For, our identifications make up our self-conceptions; they define who we are.

However, as Albert Camus (1991) has pointed out, there is a drawback to taking a futural perspective on our lives. Camus states of the “absurd man” that “tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it” (14). The irony is that our orientation to the future may be necessary for our lives to have meaning (or at least to maintain it), but death, also in our future, has the power to undermine life's meaning. Death can prevent the successful satisfaction of our goals, the completion of our projects, and the continued participation in valued relationships. The fact that we die can also make us feel that our lives are insignificant, given that the world seems to move on so easily without us.

Given the futural perspective we take on our lives and our fear of death, it should come as no surprise that we extend our imaginative projections past our deaths and draw meaning from future times when we no longer exist. In doing so, we cease to experience death as a final end. Our death anxiety causes us to imagine our life stories extending past our deaths. The fact that our life stories can continue indefinitely after our deaths gives us a sense of personal immortality.

The connection between death anxiety and meaning in life was a central theme in Becker's (1997) research. Additionally, Becker's work inspired social psychologists Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg to develop terror management theory. Psychologists in this tradition have conducted hundreds of studies testing the central ideas behind Becker's work.

Becker (1997) has argued that we have the same instinctive drive for self-preservation as non-human animals. However, unlike non-human animals, we are conscious of our mortality

and, given our desire for self-preservation, the fact that we will die terrifies us. Becker explains that “this is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression – and with all this yet to die” (87). In response to this terror, Becker states that we desire to distinguish ourselves from non-human animals and prove that, from the perspective of the universe, we are special and can leave a lasting mark on the world.

Becker argues that we identify with cultural worldviews that give us the illusion that our lives have a special meaning and stable significance (that non-human animals cannot achieve) and that our deaths do not undermine the meaningfulness of our lives. Cultural worldviews are almost guaranteed to outlive a single person's life. For example, a person who identifies as a Christian can be confident that Christianity will persist after her death. By contributing to something that appears more valuable and durable than one's own life, a person's life can acquire significance and meaning.

Becker refers to cultural worldviews as “hero systems,” as each provide prescriptions governing how one ought to live one's life to attain hero status (1997, 5). And, when one obtains hero status one achieves symbolic immortality. These prescriptions can include social roles that are valued by one's society or achievements that count as particularly noteworthy. For example, Becker suggests that some people obtain hero status by becoming a good mother, provider, or “solid citizen” (1997, 170). Similarly, Pyszczynski et al. state that some Americans feel that “being a patriotic American makes one significant – no longer a purposeless, transient animal, one is now an eternally significant contributor to a great nation that represents eternal values of freedom and democracy” (2013, 19).

Others achieve hero status through their achievements. As Becker describes, “they earn this feeling [of cosmic specialness] by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations” (1997, 5). And, Pyszczynski et al. suggest that Americans are particularly interested in “amassing great futures, writing that great book, winning Nobel Prizes and Olympic gold medals, their kids' achievements, or entering one of a variety of theologically prescribed versions of heaven” (8). Additionally, “people can pass on their genes, inheritance, and values to their own children, assuring some lasting mark on future generations” (Pyszczynski et al. 20).

When people meet these standards, they boost their self-esteem. And, according to Pyszczynski et al., “the primary function of self-esteem, then, is to buffer anxiety, especially anxiety associated with vulnerability and death” (22). Therefore, for Becker and Pyszczynski et al., people are unable to handle their death anxiety. As a result, they deny their mortality by believing that they can attain symbolic immortality by meeting the standards of their worldview. In doing so, they repress their death anxiety. However, if this model of motivation is correct, then we have reason to be skeptical of Scheffler's claim that the collective afterlife matters more to us than our own personal survival. The collective afterlife may only matter for mortals conscious of, and terrified, of our future deaths.

As Susan Wolf (2013) points out in her comments on Scheffler's lectures, Scheffler's project is primarily descriptive in nature, not normative. His objective is to describe how people would actually respond to *Doomsday* and *Inferlity* and not how they ought to respond. As a result, Scheffler's arguments may be susceptible to debunking-style objections that, if successful, undermine the empirical assumptions that ground his arguments.

If Scheffler were primarily concerned with how we *ought* to respond, he could point out that despair in response to not achieving symbolic immortality is irrational. He could point out that it was already the case that no mark we left on the world would last forever. And, it was never the case that we would be remembered indefinitely. However, in providing a descriptive account of how he thinks we would respond to *Doomsday* and *Infertility* and a proceeding interpretation of our responses, we can object that Scheffler has not interpreted our responses correctly.

I should state that Scheffler does carefully qualify his position. He is not arguing that “we are less motivated to ensure our own survival than we are to ensure the survival of humanity” (Scheffler 77). This view would seem almost laughably incorrect, as evidenced by how many people refuse to take even minimal steps to reduce their “carbon footprint.” Instead, Scheffler focuses on the diverse ways in which we are *dependent* on the collective afterlife for our lives to have value. And this dependence becomes pronounced when we imagine our emotional and motivational responses to the inevitable extinction of human life. In contrast, he argues that our lives need not continue indefinitely in order for them to have meaning.

I want to return to the three claims I attributed to Scheffler earlier in this paper. First, the loss of the collective afterlife can affect the meaningfulness of our lives by undermining the value and purpose of projects and activities that are important sources of meaning in our lives. Second, the loss of the afterlife would make it impossible to form a “personalized relationship to the future.” Lastly, loss of the afterlife would subvert our attempts to preserve what we value over time.

In each of these cases, we can provide an explanation of the importance of the collective

afterlife for the meaningfulness of our lives by referring to the role that death anxiety plays in motivating our behavior. What is interesting is that Scheffler also describes our attempts to personalize our relationship to the future and ensure the survival of what we value after our deaths as responses to problems posed by our deaths.

I discussed earlier Scheffler's point that death makes it possible that we will be forgotten. And, if we are forgotten it is unclear how we are leaving any lasting mark on the world; it will be as though we never existed. Therefore, one explanation for why we would react with terror and dismay in response to the loss of the collective afterlife is that we would necessarily be forgotten.

Additionally, Scheffler posits a "close connection between valuing something and seeing reasons to act so as to preserve or sustain it ourselves" (22). However, we recognize that when we die we will no longer be in a position to act on these reasons. The best that we can do is take measures to ensure that others after our deaths will work to preserve our values. And feeling confident that our values will be preserved is important for avoiding death anxiety. As long as our values are preserved, a part of us continues on, as well. However, in *Doomsday* and *Infertility*, all human values and traditions will be destroyed.

We can even explain why loss of the collective afterlife would undermine our motivation to pursue more specific projects. Take, for instance, Scheffler's contention that, in *Doomsday*, people would lose the motivation to have children. I suggested that people could still adopt. However, it seems that some people who desired children would not choose to adopt. A possible explanation for their behavior is that their worldviews require that symbolic immortality be achieved through the propagation of one's genes. For such people, adopting would not enable them to achieve symbolic immortality.

As a second example, Scheffler argues that we would lose the motivation to pursue scholarly and creative projects, many of which have an actual or imagined audience in mind. Loss of the collective afterlife would mean that there would be limits to the size and scope of the actual or imagined audience. However, one might wonder why artists or academics require an audience. One explanation is that they need others to view their work if they are to feel that they have left any sort of lasting mark on the world. If we are a private artist or scholar, keeping our work to ourselves, then we lose an opportunity to obtain symbolic immortality.

Before moving to my final section, I want to consider an additional claim of Scheffler's – namely, that our caring more about the collective afterlife than our own personal survival reveals the “nature and limits of our egoism” (44). In response to this claim, Wolf suggests that Scheffler has not demonstrated that we are naturally more altruistic than egoistic. At best, he has shown that “our egoistic concerns are dependent on the existence and attention of others” (Wolf 117-118).

What's the point, one of them [Donald Trump, Mike Tyson, or a contemporary Don Juan] might wonder, of being the richest man in the world, or the heavyweight champ, or the world's most impressive seducer, if the world will come to an end in thirty or fifty years? (Wolf 116)

Wolf suggests that the primary allure of becoming the richest person in the world is that others will be envious of us and we will be remembered well into the future. If loss of confidence in the collective afterlife undermines a person's motivation to become the richest person in the world, this is likely because these personal benefits cannot be obtained. I find Wolf's objection convincing. I now want to posit an additional reason to be suspicious of

Scheffler's suggestion about the limits of our egoism.

Interestingly, a widely-accepted claim about the concept of meaningfulness is that it involves self-transcendence. For example, Robert Nozick claims that “meaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value, a transcending of your own limited value” (1974, 610). Similarly, Wolf has argued that meaningfulness involves pursuing value that is “larger than ourselves” (2010, 10). By “larger than ourselves,” Wolf means value that “has its source *outside of oneself*” (19). Therefore, those activities that serve “only the needs and desires of the person whose life it is” cannot count as meaningful (Wolf 20).

Thaddeus Metz has recently objected to Nozick and Wolf's conceptual analysis of meaningfulness on the grounds that both conceptually rule out the acquisition of “internal goods” as meaningful (2013, 28-29). By “internal goods,” Metz means those goods that promote one's own value. For example, it may be that acting courageously, autonomously, or with integrity can sometimes be meaningful. Or, it may be that overcoming a drug addiction can count as a meaningful achievement. Nozick and Wolf's conceptual analysis would preclude these types of activities and achievements from counting as meaningful.

Therefore, Metz suggests we need a conceptual analysis of meaningfulness as self-transcendence that does not rule out certain types of internal goods as meaningful (2013, 29). And, we need a way to demarcate between those internal goods that are possible candidates for meaningfulness from those that are not. Metz suggests the following: “the concept of meaning is the idea of connecting with final goods beyond one's animal self” (29). According to this analysis, internal goods (e.g., autonomy) that require the use of a level of rationality beyond what is possible for “lower animals” could count as meaningful (30). In contrast, promoting one's

own survival or health, or pursuing one's own pleasure would not count as meaningful, as non-human animals are similarly motivated.

But why bring up this discussion of the conceptual analysis of meaningfulness, now? Earlier in this section, I presented Becker's suggestion that we are unlike non-human animals in that we are conscious of our mortality. As we are unable to cope with our mortality, Becker argues that we desire to distinguish ourselves from non-human animals and prove that, unlike non-human animals, we can leave a lasting and significant mark on the world. In other words, we have a desire to overcome our own deaths by acquiring symbolic immortality.

Interestingly, Becker's discussion of human motivation can provide an explanation for why, intuitively, meaningfulness involves a transcendence of the animal self. It may be that our desire to pursue meaningfulness in our lives is a desire to set ourselves apart from non-human animals and demonstrate that our lives can retain a lasting significance and value that makes us unique. If what I am suggesting is correct, then we have an additional reason to believe that Scheffler is incorrect in his conclusion about the limits of our egoism. It may be that our egoistic concern with overcoming our own mortality motivates us to achieve symbolic immortality – a type of lasting significance that is not possible for non-human animals.

4. Loss of the collective afterlife

If Becker and the social psychologists are correct about the terror we experience at the prospect of our deaths and our reliance on defense mechanisms to subdue that terror, we have additional reasons to fear lost confidence in the collective afterlife. In *Doomsday* and *Infertility*, people would have to directly confront their mortality for the first time. In fact, in these

scenarios people would likely have constant reminders of their mortality – at least if they turned on their TVs. As Pyszczynski et al. suggest in their book, this is exactly what occurred when Americans were confronted with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – repeated reminders of their own mortality. Yet, in *Doomsday* and *Infertility*, most of the ways in which one could achieve symbolic immortality would be undermined. As a result, people would be left doubting the significance and meaningfulness of their lives.

Additionally, Becker argues that there is a psychological limit to how long we can experience despair and terror at the prospect of our deaths without succumbing to depression, schizophrenia, or other mental illness. In other words, Becker believes that people cannot live for very long without a cultural worldview in place before they face highly negative psychological consequences. Therefore, those in *Doomsday* and *Infertility* who are directly facing their mortality for the first time without an operating worldview may be facing various types of mental illness.

However, some people in *Doomsday* and *Infertility* may still have enough of their worldviews in place to continue feeling that their lives are significant and meaningful. For example, those subscribing to a Christian worldview may still believe that they will achieve literal immortality in Heaven after they are deceased. However, Becker would say that in *Doomsday* and *Infertility*, such people would still be inundated with reminders of their mortality. This points us in the direction of another possible consequence of lost confidence in the afterlife.

Pyszczynski et al. describe how even the presence of contradictory worldviews threaten our confidence in our own worldview. And, if we lose confidence in our own worldview, we lose confidence in our ability to achieve symbolic immortality. They suggest that in a very real

sense (in maintaining confidence in our worldviews), our lives are on the line. They have shown that reminders of mortality (i.e., mortality salience) cause people to more strongly adhere to their worldviews and more strongly condemn those who subscribe to competing worldviews.

Often, the most compelling way to eliminate the threat posed by people who are different, especially those who have become culturally designated repositories of evil, is to kill them and thus prove that your vision of reality must be right after all. 'My god is better than your god, and we will kick your ass to prove it.'

(Pyszczynski et al. 32)

If this suggestion is correct, we have reason to believe that life in *Doomsday* and *Infertility* would be even more violent than the world is now. Bombarded with constant reminders of their deaths, people would cling more fervently to their worldviews and denounce opposing worldviews. In an effort to confirm the truth of their own worldview, people may try to eliminate those who subscribe to opposing worldviews. Life in *Doomsday* and *Infertility* may be fraught with the threat of violence.

5. Conclusion

In discussing a psychological theory of human motivation, I am not in a position to evaluate the empirical claims discussed. However, I have proposed a competing explanation for why the loss of the collective afterlife would be so disastrous for human beings – one that I believe is as likely as Scheffler's. If this explanation is true, then Scheffler is not correct that the collective afterlife matters more to us than our own personal survival. Instead, the collective afterlife enables us to achieve symbolic immortality, which is a consolation prize for not

achieving literal immortality.

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Wong, Wai-hung (2008). "Meaningfulness and Identities." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11: 123-148. Print.

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EDUCATION

Syracuse University
PhD in Philosophy, 2009-August 2015
Northern Illinois University
MA in Philosophy, 2008
Cornell College
BA in Philosophy and Sociology, 2005

AREA OF SPECIALIZATION

Ethics

AREAS OF COMPETENCE

Philosophy of Feminism, Logic

OTHER TEACHING INTERESTS

Metaphysics and Epistemology

DISSERTATION

Title: *Practical Identity and Meaninglessness*
Defense Date: August 17, 2015
Dissertation Committee: Ben Bradley (chair), Kenneth Baynes, Thaddeus Metz, Hille Paakkunainen, and Laurence Thomas

WORKS IN PROGRESS

"The Meaning of the Afterlife" (*In preparation*)

"Meaning without Fulfillment" (*In preparation*)

GRANTS AND AWARDS

\$93,849 grant (with Dr. Ben Bradley and Travis Timmerman) from the Immortality Project at UC Riverside, funded by the John Templeton Foundation; project title: "Death, Rational Emotion, and Meaningfulness," 2014-15

APA Graduate Student Travel Stipend for Central APA Meeting, 2015

APA Graduate Student Travel Stipend for Pacific APA Meeting, 2015

Graduate Student Presentation Paper Award, Creighton Club: New York Philosophical Association, 2014

Syracuse University Departmental Summer Research Fellowship, 2012

Syracuse University Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, 2012

For more information, see <http://www.syr.edu/gradschool/gsprogram/taprogram/ota.html>

Syracuse University Graduate Student Organization Travel Grant, 2012

Cornell College Philosophy Department Senior Book Prize, 2005

President and member, Cornell College Chapter of Phi Sigma Tau International Philosophy Honor Society, 2005

PRESENTATIONS

"The Meaning of the Afterlife." Immortality Project's Younger Scholars Workshop at UC Riverside, 2015

"Immortality and Meaninglessness." The Immortality Project Capstone Conference at UC Riverside, 2015.

"Immortality and Meaninglessness." Felician Conference on Ethics and Public Affairs, 2015.

"Meaningless Lives." Pacific APA Meeting (Main Program), 2015

"Meaning without Fulfillment." Central APA Meeting (Main Program), 2015

"Meaning without Fulfillment." Creighton Club: New York Philosophical Association, 2014

"Meaning without Fulfillment." Rocky Mountain Ethics Conference (Main Program), 2014

Comments on Michael Hayes's (University of Kansas) paper, "But Who's Counting? Scorekeeping and Difference-Making in the Context of Death." Syracuse University Graduate Conference, 2013

"Meaningfulness, Failure, and Loss." Syracuse University Philosophy ABD Workshop, 2012

"An Internalist Commitment to Morality." Iowa Philosophical Society Conference, 2008

CONFERENCE & COLLOQUIA ORGANIZATION

Graduate student organizer for SPAWN (Syracuse Philosophy Annual Workshop & Network), "Normative Realism," August 2012.

For more information, see <http://philosophy.syr.edu/events/SPAWN.html>

Co-Organizer, Syracuse Philosophy Women's Group Colloquium, Ishani Maitra, "Assertion and Evidence-Responsiveness," September 2011

ACADEMIC SERVICE

2015

Chair at the Syracuse University Graduate Student Conference for James Elliot's "Private Access to Physical Properties," Comments by Naomi Dershowitz

2013

Teaching Mentor Selection Committee, Syracuse University

2012

Chair at the Central APA Meeting for Christopher M. Rice's "Defending Objective List Theories of Well-Being," Comments by Jason R. Raibley

2011

Teaching Mentor, Syracuse University Graduate School

For more information, see <http://www.syr.edu/gradschool/gsprogram/taprogram/teachmentor.html>

2010

President, Philosophy Department Graduate Students

Graduate Council Representative (representing GSO), Spring 2010

Co-founder (with Kelly McCormick & Sarah Morales) and member of Philosophy Department's Women's Group (member 2010-15).

For more information, see <http://philosophywomensgroup.syr.edu/>

2009

Graduate Student Organization Representative (representing Philosophy Department)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Courses as Primary Instructor (Syracuse University)

Philosophy 391: History of Ethics

Spring 2014

Philosophy 297: Philosophy of Feminism

Summer 2013 (online)

Philosophy 192: Introduction to Moral Theory
 Summer 2015 (online), Summer 2014 (online), Fall 2013, Summer 2013 (online),
 Spring 2013, Summer 2012 (online), Spring 2012

Philosophy 107: Theories of Knowledge and Reality
 Fall 2011

Courses as Teaching Assistant (Syracuse University)

Philosophy 293 Ethics and the Media Professions: Fall 2012
 Philosophy 107 Theories of Knowledge and Reality: Spring 2011
 Philosophy 192 Introduction to Moral Theory: Fall 2010
 Philosophy 251 Logic: Spring 2009, Fall 2009

COURSEWORK

Ethics, Moral Psychology, and Political Philosophy
 Seminar on Evil

Ben Bradley & Michael
 Stocker

Independent Study on Meaningfulness in Life
 Seminar on Well-being
 Seminar on the Emotions
 Contemporary Ethical Theory
 Advanced Ethical Theory
 Political and Social Philosophy

Ben Bradley
 Ben Bradley
 Michael Stocker
 William Tolhurst
 Sharon Sytsma
 James Hudson

History of Philosophy
 Kant's Critique of Pure Reason
 German Idealism
 Topics in History of Philosophy: David Hume
 20th Century Analytic Philosophy

Kris McDaniel
 Fred Beiser
 James King
 David Buller

Language, Logic, Metaphysics, and Philosophy of Science
 Intermediate Logic
 Logic and Language

David Buller
 Mark Brown

Self, Time and Consciousness
 Philosophy of Science
 Metaphysics

André Gallois
 Harold Brown
 Alicia Finch

Epistemology and Philosophy of Mind
 Reductionism
 Epistemology
 Skepticism

Kevan Edwards, Alyssa Ney
 Jennifer Lackey
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REFERENCES*Research*

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Kenneth Baynes (krbaynes@syr.edu)

Professor of Philosophy, Syracuse University

Thaddeus Metz (tmetz@uj.ac.za)

Humanities Research Professor, University of Johannesburg

Teaching

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