



The Ordinary Meaningful Life

ABSTRACT: *It is widely thought that we have good reason to try to be important. Being important or doing significant things is supposed to add value to our lives. In particular, it is supposed to make our lives exceptionally meaningful. This essay develops an alternative view. After exploring what importance is and how it might relate to meaning in life, a series of cases are presented to validate the perspective that being important adds no meaning to our lives. The meaningful life does need valuable projects, activities, and relationships. But no added meaning is secured by those projects, activities, and relationships being especially significant. The extraordinary life has no more meaning than the ordinary life.*

KEYWORDS: meaning, importance, significance, meaningful, value

Introduction

The baseball player Ted Williams famously said, ‘All I want out of life is that, when I walk down the street, folks will say, “There goes the greatest hitter who ever lived”’ (Stephenson 2002). And he did not just want people to *think* that. He wanted them to *know* it—their belief grounded in the truth that he was, in fact, the greatest hitter who ever lived. I suppose many people can relate to that. It is not unusual to want to be significant in some way—a gold-medal sprinter, a three-star chef, a Nobel-winning chemist. It is also normal to covet positions that are important—to be judges or members of Parliament or presidents.

Making the so-called Big Time comes with money, fame, influence, and invitations to exclusive cocktail parties, but the attraction is stronger than that: apart from any instrumental payoff that we might secure from being significant, many (like Teddy Ballgame) seem to think that it has its own value as a personal good. That is, even if you remove those downstream rewards, being important is still thought to be non-instrumentally valuable. If you can one day be a senator or a Pulitzer Prize winner, you should strive to do so, just because being important in these ways adds value to your life. At least, it will make for a better life than would a more pedestrian path, if all other things remain equal.

Earlier versions of this essay were presented at Arizona State University, the First International Conference on Meaning In Life, Macquarie University, the University of Arizona, and Victoria University of Wellington. I am grateful to the participants for helpful discussion, including Jacob Affolter, Nick Agar, Sondra Bacharach, Stuart Brock, Cheshire Calhoun, Ramon Das, Matthew Hammerton, Terry Horgan, Jeanette Kennett, Simon Keller, Iddo Landau, Keith Lehrer, Catriona Mackenzie, Joan McGregor, Richard Menary, Doug Portmore, Steven Reynolds, Lucy Schwarz, Lucas Sclipper, Ikuro Suzuki, Justin Systyma, and Mark Timmons. I am also grateful to Shani Long Abdallah, Kayla Brown, Kristi Mitrick, and Rebecca Robinson for their feedback provided during our regular research group meetings. Final thanks go to an anonymous referee for this journal for extensive feedback and dialogue.



Curiously, this widespread enthusiasm for being important has received relatively little scrutiny in philosophers' explorations of personal well-being. This silence is all the more surprising in light of the fact that several values widely thought to be components of well-being—achievement, flourishing, being moral—seem to be naturally implicated in valuing importance. The neglect is even more glaring if Ted Williams and common sense are mistaken. Consider Frida Kahlo. After living in the United States, the artist said, 'It is irritating that the most important thing for everyone in Gringolandia is to have ambition, to succeed in becoming 'somebody', and frankly I no longer have even the least ambition to be anybody, I despise the conceit, and being the *gran caca* does not interest me in any way' (Herrera 2002: 172).

I am with Kahlo: I think that being important has, by itself, no prudential value for us. (Are there other ways to interpret Kahlo's statement? Yes, but those interpretations would be less useful for making my point, so I neglect them.) It would be too ambitious to try to vindicate such a sweeping claim in just a handful of pages. So I tackle a narrower tranche of the prudential question: Does being important specifically add *meaning* to one's life? For this is where philosophy has at least found itself with something of a consensus. And that consensus sides with Williams, against Kahlo: the more important your undertaking, they say, the more meaningful it makes your life, other things being equal. For some, this relationship between importance and meaning is entailed by the *semantic* conjecture that a meaningful life is by definition a life that is important, significant, impactful, or has some purpose that matters (Bennett 1984: 582; Martela 2017; Metz 2002: 801; Metz 2013: 18, 21, 187, 247; Nozick 1981: 575; Smuts 2013: 547–48). Others stop short of saying that importance is part of the very definition of meaning in life but still claim that achieving something important is *necessary* for securing meaning. A. J. Ayer (1990: 196) insists that a meaningful life 'is a matter of one's standing in one's society and the historical influence, if any, that one exerts'. And Kurt Baier (1957: 27–29) argues that to lead a meaningful life is to be significant, where he explicitly limits significance to making above-average contributions to the betterment of society. (Later in life Baier [1988: 47] seemed to relax his standards for meaning, holding that meaning cannot be subject to any 'unfair gamble'; but in the same piece he re-asserts that meaning can depend on qualities like importance, which are hostage to fortune. Belliotti [2001: 73] rejects Baier's theory on the grounds that it incentivizes us to remove all humans who make bigger contributions than we do.) One last way of tying meaning to importance is weaker yet. On this account, being significant is not required, semantically or otherwise, for meaning. After all, could you not find meaning in some excellent activity even if it does not make you important (Schlick 2008)? But still, this third view says, doing significant things—making a big difference in the lives of others, having a sizeable impact, creating long-lasting value—can at least *add* substantial amounts of meaning to your life. This additional value is not secured in merely ordinary lives (Audi 2005; Baier 1988: 49; Belliotti 2001; Brogaard and Smith 2005: 445; Dworkin 2000: 252–53; Hooker 2008; James 2010; Kauppinen 2012; Levy 2005; Metz 2003: 66; Metz 2013: 247; Persson and Savulescu 2019; see also Schmidtz 2002).

Everyone in these three camps agrees on one thing: being important can contribute meaning to our lives. My goal in this essay is to articulate, with Kahlo and against this consensus, how being significant arguably adds *no* meaning to our lives merely by virtue of being significant. It is not only that, as Masahiro Morioka (2015: 54) claims, significant accomplishments can have their meaning drained or overridden by a small but powerful incident elsewhere in life. It is rather that importance does not add any meaning that might be overridden. Importance (or significance—terms I use interchangeably throughout) is not just unnecessary for meaning—it is downright irrelevant. Importance and meaning travel on different tracks. (For brief other departures from the dominant trend, see also Campbell and Nyholm [2015: 707–8]; Rescher [1990: 161–62]; Wolf [2014: 106].)

To be clear: I do not supply a grand proof in favor of this thesis. I do not believe such a knockdown argument is possible for either side on this question. Instead, I use a collection of real-world cases and thought experiments to support the claim that our importance does not, by itself, have an impact on the meaning we draw from life. Although some readers will no doubt have diverging judgments about these cases, I hope that the intuitions I highlight are at least plausible and worthy of further consideration—and in any case, they demonstrate how we can explain the relevant dimensions of meaning in life without significance being a contributor to those explanations. The ultimate payoff is increased confidence that we can find as much meaning in a merely ordinary life as we can find in an exceptionally important life, and that the mere fact of being important does not add any special meaning to the lives of important people.

Being Important

Sometimes we use the word *meaningful* in the sense of *important* or *significant*, such as when we talk about *making a meaningful contribution* as equivalent to making an *important* contribution. If that is what we wanted to explore—and again, some just stipulate definitions of *meaning* and *importance* that render them semantically equivalent—then we could end this investigation before it starts, for *importance* or *significance* would be baked right into the relevant meaning of *meaning*. But an equivocation lurks in these words: claiming that someone made a meaningful-qua-important-contribution is not the same as claiming that having important lives, projects, or actions adds meaning-qua-prudential-value to those lives. The matter at issue between Williams and Kahlo is whether doing what is important adds value to one's life, so what we want to examine is an extra-semantic, non-stipulatable question of whether being important in that way also makes one's life more meaningful. And to get a grip on that, we need to know what it means to be important or to do something important, in the sense that concerns Kahlo and Williams, Ayer, Baier, and the others. (For the argument that significance and meaningfulness should be defined in a way that allows them to do different conceptual work, see Calhoun [2018: 22–23].)

Michael Smith (2006) argues that doing something of *value* is tantamount to doing something of *importance*. This too captures a perfectly normal way of using

the term *important*. If somebody glumly says that their life is worthless, you might try to convince them otherwise by showing how important it is in this sense: it has some value. But this, too, is not the relevant sense of importance. If I find fulfillment in crocheting a sweater, then by Smith's lights I have done something of value; but I have not achieved the kind of importance that distinguishes the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, from your Average Joe—the kind that concerns Williams and Kahlo. Among other things, understanding importance as mere value fails to meet the requirement that to be important is at a minimum to be worthy of people's attention (Kahane 2014). The minor value in crocheting, playing soccer, baking bread, and reading does not call the world to turn its gaze upon us. The operative question, instead, is: What is the difference between the ordinary and the extraordinary? What separates a pretty good batter from the greatest hitter of all time?

The first part of the answer has to be that not everyone can be equally significant in the same way. Only one person can be the greatest hitter who ever lived. To be important in some endeavor is to be, among other things, relatively *rare* in that respect (Kahane 2014; Smilansky 2012: 120). This rarity requirement means that you and I are probably not especially significant. Or if you are rare in some respect and so important in that respect—your son's only mother! The peninsula's greatest arranger of dominos!—you are probably not important in most other respects. We implicitly talk in such a way that how rare, and so how significant, you are, depends on both what you are compared to (the peninsula or the world?) and what the relevant standards of evaluation are (arranging dominos or ending global poverty?)—two parameters that I refer to jointly as *context*. That said, while implicit contextualization is normal in judgments of importance, we arguably can also remove all context and ascend to some cosmic megacontext where one supreme standard of evaluation determines importance compared to everything that exists. Some religious people, for example, believe that their god is that cosmically most important thing—even more important than the peninsula's best domino artist.

The contextual nature of importance suggests one potential recipe for being important: just define the parameters in a way that shines a light on your specific traits, and you will have guaranteed your rarity and so your importance. After all, as Thomas Nagel (1986: 222–23) points out, a certain kind of value attaches to things just by virtue of their *particularity*. So, since we are all particular, can we not each be equally important by being rare in our own special way?

Well, no. Nagel reminds us that a ketchup bottle has its particularity, too. Behold its glorious redness and glassness and hereness and nowness! For all its specificity, this value does not get us the kind of importance that we are focused on—the sense in which the Buddha was more important than the Average Joe; the sense that Kahlo repudiates and Williams celebrates. If everything is rare in its own way, and if that is not enough to make everything important in this relevant sense, then some other element besides rarity must also help determine significance.

The missing element, I believe, is that the important thing needs to have relatively *high value* (see Nozick 1989: 173; Singer 1992: 114). The sense of importance that concerns us—the goal that Williams embraced before ensuring that his postmortem

head would be separated from his body and immersed for indefinite storage in liquid nitrogen—contrasts both with being *ordinary* and with being *trivial*. It is what we are talking about when we say that the problem of kids going hungry is important, while a celebrity's hangnail is not so important (trivial); and that curing cancer is important, while eating a cantaloupe is not (ordinary). Relative to context—to a contrast class and to a standard of evaluation—important things in our sense do not just matter; they matter *a lot*.

So these are the crucial ingredients for significance in the relevant sense: significant or important things are both rare and of high value, relative to a context. In turn, this means that importance can come in degrees: other things being equal, the higher the value you produce (or instantiate), the more important you are; and, again other things equal, the rarer you are with respect to that value, the more important you are. And if that is the relevant sense of *significance* in the matter of Kahlo versus Williams, what we need to find out is this: If you could produce some rare and especially high value in the world, if you could be extraordinarily significant in *that* sense, would it add a portion of meaning to your life that would be unavailable if you were merely ordinary?

The answer, of course, depends on how we understand meaning in life.

Meaningful Lives

It is now standard to divide views on meaning in life into three camps. I believe that the first two (pure subjectivism and pure objectivism) are flawed and, separately, unhelpful for demonstrating that importance adds meaning to our lives; the third (hybridism) is more plausible, and its implications for being important are more complicated.

Subjectivist theories of meaning say, roughly, that what we find meaningful in our lives actually adds meaning to our lives. (More refined treatments of subjectivism about meaning in life can be found in Calhoun [2018: ch. 2]; Luper [2014]; Rowlands [2015]; Singer [1992: 110]; Taylor [2008].) That is, since Kahlo thinks that importance does not add meaning to life, being significant did not pack any extra meaning into her life; but since Williams cared about being important, achieving significance did add meaning to his life. Significance is in his interests, but not hers, simply because he invested it with meaning while she did not. For subjectivists, that is pretty much the end of the discussion when it comes to whether we have meaning-related reason to be important.

But subjectivism about meaning in life faces the well-documented problem that we can make mistakes about what is meaningful, in which case securing meaning must not entirely reduce to securing what we subjectively find meaningful. (See Metz [2013: 175] for a helpful summary of many cases, from the harmful to the wasteful to the pointless, that have been used to show that people can make mistakes in subjectively judging that things are meaningful when they really are not.) Now in pressing this charge it also should be acknowledged that sophisticated subjectivism can account for many such mistakes by framing the mistake as confusion about what *we ourselves judge* meaningful (Calhoun 2018: 41). This powerful explanation capitalizes on the fact that we do not know

ourselves very well: *I thought I wanted to spend all of my time and money on a new motorcycle, but now I understand that this was just symptom of a midlife crisis—it wasn't what I truly judge meaningful.* But although ignorance of one's own self is a real source of mistakes about what makes life meaningful, still other mistakes seem to be rooted, not in gaps between what we *think we judge* valuable and what we *actually judge* valuable, but in discrepancies between what we *actually judge* valuable and what *actually is* valuable. It seems like we can wake up one day and realize that what really have been our genuine motivating reasons for acting were way off base. We were doing what we cared about and what we thought was meaningful, but we were simply misguided. That phenomenon is what even sophisticated subjectivism cannot account for.

Moreover, the nature of our discussion gives us a dialectical reason to sideline subjectivism. Anyone who is recommending or praising importance, beyond merely reporting how they are satisfying their own preferences, is already grasping for something beyond the purely subjective that can *warrant* the preference for being important. And this is what we are interrogating: the idea that being important is something *worth* wanting. Is significance something we ought to seek for our lives—is there some reason to pursue it beyond the fact that we might want it? Who is *correct*, Kahlo or Williams? To have that conversation, we need to assume that there are some standards outside of the subject's attitudes toward being important, for assessing whether those attitudes are well placed. So, in addition to the principled reason to reject subjectivism about meaning in life, the form of our question also means that it must be answered outside the subjectivist's porthole. We are not asking what we *do* want for our lives; we are asking what we *should* want for our lives. (Obviously, for the subjectivist who finds that question hopeless, this will be where the investigation ends.)

The second theory of meaning is pure objectivism, which states that what adds meaning to our lives is fixed by standards that have nothing at all to do with our desires, preferences, or other wants. Instead, producing, finding, or instantiating objective value is what gives our lives meaning. For example, Thaddeus Metz (2002: 797; 2003: 63; 2013: 183–84) maintains that the subjective element is unnecessary for meaning—Mother Teresa's work was meaningful even if she was bored by it, he claims. (Metz agrees that subjective engagement can amplify the meaning of a project, so it may not be fair to label him a pure objectivist. But, he thinks, the subjective element is unnecessary, and objective impact can also increase meaning [2013: 247].) And others argue that everyone points to important people like Mother Teresa, Einstein, and Gandhi as obviously leading meaningful lives precisely because of the huge impacts they had, that is, because of their special importance (Bramble 2015: 452; Martela 2017: 244; see also Smuts 2013).

Now because we can be attracted to what is objectively attractive, Cheshire Calhoun (2018: 40) has noted an alternative explanation for why these are meaningful lives, an explanation that is open to pure subjectivism and the third, hybrid view, to be explored below: we suspect that these people found their work enormously engaging. If we later discover that they were alienated from their work—as when we discovered that Mother Teresa experienced crises of faith—

these cases buckle as paradigm cases of meaningful lives. And as with pure subjectivism, there are cases that tell against pure objectivism. Consider two different kinds of crisis in meaning. The first comes from looking at your life and recognizing that you have been prioritizing the wrong things. The hedge fund manager retires at the young age of fifty already worth a fortune. But it then dawns on him that having spent his adulthood in the single-minded pursuit of wealth, he neglected and ultimately became estranged from his partner, children, and the friends he once had. His life is not just lonely; he also (rightly) recognizes now that it is completely lacking in meaning. Objectivism (and hybridism, but not subjectivism) can capture this kind of crisis in meaning: the hedge fund manager failed to secure the things that objectively matter, or at least failed to secure them to the right degree and in the right way. But a second kind of crisis in meaning comes not from prioritizing projects that lack sufficient objective value; instead the second crisis stems from prioritizing projects that you rightly recognize as valuable but that do not energize or excite or mobilize you (Wolf 2010: 21). Thus John Stuart Mill famously discovered that his humanitarian goals left him rudderless. Though he judged his life's work immensely valuable, he still found himself in crisis: '[t]he end had ceased to charm,' he wrote, 'I seemed to have nothing left to live for' (Mill 1971: 81). We need a theory that makes room for that second kind of crisis in meaning, too, and that requires incorporating a subjective element.

Of course, objectivists have their cases, too, and one type of case in particular may seem to support the importance of being important. Brad Hooker (2008: 193) points to someone who is a fantastic teacher, substantially improving the lives of his students, but who does not care about this work and in fact is disappointed at the end of his life that his teaching did not serve what he really cared about, his research. If we wanted to console him on his deathbed, we might try to convince him that his teaching was meaningful by pointing to its impact on his students. According to Hooker, this way of approaching our friend suggests that the objective value of teaching is sufficient to make the work meaningful, regardless of his subjective attraction to that work. In a similar vein, Ben Bramble (2015: 447) says that it makes sense to try to convince a depressed person that their life is meaningful by pointing exclusively to its objective value. And in these sorts of cases, if we can point to a *lot* of objective value as a surplus meaning-maker in these people's lives, that might seem to support the idea that being important adds extra meaning to life.

But there is an alternative, non-objectivist way of reading these cases. In calling these people's attention to the objective value of these lives, the goal is not simply to prove that they are objectively valuable. Crucially, the depressed friend and the dying teacher might well already *agree* with that point. Indeed, one way that depression commonly manifests is as an inability to find motivation to pursue, affirm, or take satisfaction from what one deems valuable. This means that, more than just getting our despondent friends merely to *acknowledge* the value in their lives, we must try to *engage* them with their lives' objective value. We want them to latch onto that value in a way that is powerful enough, affectively and motivationally, to help lift them out of their funk. We want them to *care* about that objective value, to find it *energizing*.

If I were disappointed to find myself unclogging septic lines for a living, you would not have to convince me that this is valuable work. I agree that it is crucial. And I might even be happy in that life: maybe I am just a happy-go-lucky person, maybe I am loaded on uppers, or maybe I just enjoy my co-workers' banter and the podcasts I listen to all day. The problem is that I am alienated from the work, leaving this portion of my life emptied of meaning, even while I recognize its value and bask in my happiness. Flushing septic lines is not work I find fulfilling or rewarding—it does not excite my emotions or mobilize me to action (I groan every day before work, in it only for the paycheck). Consequently, my life has a hole that is ordinarily and aptly characterized as a lack of meaning. How could you help me in that situation? I think the instinct that Bramble's and Hooker's cases tap into is actually, not that we want to convince the despondent people that their lives have objective value, but rather that highlighting objective value can be *a way of getting us subjectively engaged*. We hope that when the disappointed teacher fully appreciates the value in his accomplishments, he will also care about them. We want the people we love to not just see the value in what they are doing—which, again, they already might recognize in some affectless way—but to let that knowledge color their lives (see Evers and van Smeden 2016: 360). If they can find the space to do that, meaning will come rushing in.

At our friend's deathbed we want to respect his predicament. We do not baldly invalidate his claim that his teaching has not added any meaning to his life. For him teaching is no more interesting than it would be for you if you were to work on some project that you did not care about. Perhaps like me it is clearing septic systems; or maybe you would be alienated from something else, like giving people parking tickets or playing the sousaphone. When we find our lives filled with valuable activities that do not stir our passions, life can both feel and *be* empty of meaning. But when the task is not only objectively valuable but also engaging, then what could have been a meaningless activity for us becomes meaningful.

Thus the cases that might seem to support not only pure objectivism but also a way that meaning can increase with importance do not in fact support those views since they can also be plausibly explained without appealing to those views. But in case you are not convinced to turn away from pure objectivism about meaning in life, there is a crucial distinction that even objectivists should consider when they value importance. Even if we only need objective value (and not also subjective engagement) to get meaning out of this life, why should we add that the objective value must also *escalate to increase* that meaning? Why cannot the objective value of making lunch for some homeless people in your town be as meaning giving as ending global hunger? There might be an answer to this escalation question—and we will give it an independent examination shortly—but merely being an objectivist about meaning in life is not enough: objectivist escalationists still need to defend the separate claim that *more* objective value equals *more* meaning. If we take the dispute between Williams and Kahlo seriously, a fan of escalation cannot, on pain of circular reasoning, simply insist without argument that more value generates more meaning.

The third account of meaning in life is the most influential and in my estimation the most plausible. It departs from objectivism by retaining a starring role for the subjective, while also departing from subjectivism by carving out space for the objective, too. On this hybrid view, our lives gather some meaning when we are subjectively drawn to, engaged in, and at least somewhat successful at pursuing projects that have objective value. In Susan Wolf's (2010: 9) memorable slogan, we find meaning in life when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness. This two-aspect view has captured many.¹ The hybrid view implies that if collecting rainbow stickers provides you, subjectively, with plenty of fulfillment but lacks objective value, then collecting those stickers will not actually contribute any meaning to your life. (In case it does not go without saying, note that claiming that collecting rainbow stickers does not add *meaning* to one's life allows that this activity might still add *happiness* or some other value to one's life.) And if cleaning out septic systems is objectively valuable but you are not subjectively engaged in that project, then it will not add meaning to your life, either. You need both ingredients, the subjective draw and the objective merits. And for most hybridists, you also need to be actively engaged in whatever is both subjectively and objectively attractive, and your pursuit of it needs to be at least moderately successful, in order for it to add meaning to your life.

Though I am a fan of the hybrid view of what can make life meaningful, it is a short walk from hybridism to the conclusion that important activities add meaning to our lives. It just requires adding the premise that projects, pursuits, and relationships add increasing meaning to our lives as their objective value increases. After all, it seems that the reason we *care* about meaning in life is that we want to connect our lives to some value outside of ourselves, and the way to *find* meaning is to invest in value outside of yourself—value that can be seen from outside of your own perspective (Bellotti 2001; Darwall 1983: 165; Kitcher 2014: ch. 4; Landau 2017; Levy 2005; Metz 2013; Nozick 1981; Singer 1992; Singer 1995; Wolf 2010, 2014). Raise a kid, promote justice, set a record, run conduit in a building, create beauty. Find yourself—or maybe lose your self—in monkish meditation. Live ethically. Love someone! These are the things that fill our lives with meaning, and the reason why seems to be that they capture value beyond what we merely find ourselves wanting to do. Notice that the external objective value we want to connect with is not limited to affecting *others* in a valuable way. On this construal of meaning's outside-in vector, although seeking enlightenment helps me rather than others, it is nonetheless meaningful because whatever value enlightenment has lies outside of my merely choosing it. Meaningful goals might revolve around *self-focused* values, just not merely *self-created* values. As Hooker asks, if my life can get meaning from having a positive impact on someone else, why can it not also get meaning from having a positive impact on myself

¹ For a list of other hybridists (to which I would add Bellotti 2001; Frankl 1959; and Landau 2017), see Metz (2013: 182n1), who judges it 'probably the most commonly held view period among contemporary philosophers who have thought about meaning in life'.

(Hooker 2008: 192; see also Kitcher 2014: ch. 4; Metz 2013: 191–92; Wolf 2010: 42; 2014)?

What we want to know is this: On the hybrid view, does it make a difference in meaning to go big with that external value—to end global hunger, or to achieve enlightenment—or can meaning be equally secured by smaller value—buying a kid an ice cream cone, or embracing some weekend mindfulness meditation? This is where many maintain that because connecting with objective value is what adds meaning to our lives, connecting with *more* value makes life *more* meaningful. In a line of thought similar to Ayer, Baier, and the others noted earlier, Metz (2013: 247) holds that the more impactful one's accomplishment, the more meaning it gives one's life. And Neil Levy (2005: 177, 185) says that 'the highest, most satisfying, kind of meaning' must involve open-ended projects 'in which supremely valuable goods are at stake.' This standard, for Levy, limits the meaning of routine activities such as farming or raising kids or investing in friendships. Those pursuits do generate a humdrum, ordinary meaning; but the bigger things in life, like doing philosophy, pursuing justice, and creating art, have the capacity to generate a special 'superlative' meaning that Levy valorizes. (Note that Levy's valuation of escalation is separate from his main claim, which is that open-ended projects are key to meaning.)

What these views have in common is what I will call the *escalation premise*: *As a project or relationship or pursuit has more value, it adds more meaning to your life.* Now recall one of the key elements in our analysis of importance: *other things equal, to say that something is more important is to say that it has more value.* Together the escalation and analytical premises yield the conclusion that, other things equal, the more important a project is, the more it adds meaning to your life. Given the good reason articulated above to accept the analytical premise, if this argument for being important goes astray, the problem must lie with the escalation premise.

Meaning in the Ordinary Life

Imagine that on your twenty-fifth birthday, a trickster presents you with a choice that will determine how the rest of your life goes. One option is to have a life where you are a devoted parent, you enjoy a thriving and loving partnership, your career as a primary school teacher is fulfilling if unglamorous, and you are a fully integrated member of your local community. Call this path the *ordinary* option. The alternative path is *extraordinary*: you can cure cancer. You cannot have it both ways, for the trickster has been taken in by the view that truly great people 'must organize their whole lives around a single enterprise. They must be monomaniacs, even megalomaniacs, about their pursuits' (Simonton 1994: 181). So, the trickster tells you, if you choose the extraordinary path, you will have to move to Atlanta, with no time for friends other than colleagues you see once in a while at conferences. Your life will not have the space for raising children or even a functional romantic partnership. And when you one day return to your hometown for your fiftieth high school reunion, your circle of childhood friends will remain close-knit, and you will be acutely aware of how you became so distanced from the people you once loved. But you would cure cancer.

Now add to this story that you are the type of person who finds lab work extremely tedious. Worse still, the cancer-curing path requires a serial process of writing grants, supervising junior scientists, and managing a small bureaucracy that collectively would envelop your entire world in what for you is soul-crushing drudgery. It devastates you to think about spending the prime of your life drowning in pipettes and budgets, even though you know that if you take this path, you can cure cancer. Compounding the problem, all that you really wanted out of life was to have a couple of kids and be active in the small-town goings-on of Nowhereville. Your dream was always to live on the same block as your childhood friends, raise kids alongside each other, grow old together, and reminisce on front porches until the sun sets on that long and connected life. The trickster has presented this predicament: the life you really want for yourself will be the life you cannot have if you cure cancer; and the life you really want to avoid will become the life you get if you cure cancer.

As you deliberate, you conclude that there are more overall points in favor of curing cancer than there are in favor of pursuing the ordinary life. Curing cancer is morally required, you recognize, and because of its immense value, it is probably rationally required all things considered. For the crucial fact added by the trickster is that you are the only one who can cure cancer. Your situation is similar to many of the important people we lionize, the Kings and Huertas and Einsteins and Malalas, where the scary possibility is that had they not acted as they did, perhaps nobody else would have either. There is no Leibniz to your Newton. Nevertheless, because it would tear you away from what you care about and offer as a replacement unrelenting toil and chore, the extraordinary option has a much weaker grip on your motivational and emotional resources than does the possibility of spending your prime years on the ordinary path. While being the one to cure cancer might be rational and moral, one certain thing is that it would be a sacrifice. You believe that this path is a *worthwhile* sacrifice, since you know it is the most choice-worthy choice you could make. And at times you will take some genuine satisfaction from all that you accomplish. Still, your life will be much emptier than the life where you would have been surrounded by laughing children and the love of people close to you. To be sure, the problem is not that you will be unhappy. On the contrary, we can stipulate that on the extraordinary path you will see a fair amount of happiness: the pride, the adoration, the fine dinners ain't nothing, and anyway you are the lucky type whose baseline happiness is stable at a relatively high level regardless of life circumstances. Rather it is that your life would have a massive hole in it. A profound sense of emptiness and loss will persist even while you enjoy your life and proudly remind yourself that you have done work of tremendous, historic impersonal value. Looking around, some of your colleagues will seem different from you in this regard: they (monomaniacs that they are) are fulfilled in their singular focus, while you know a bone-deep loneliness and a mixed but very real regret.

It is undeniable that the extraordinary path demands a sacrifice; the question is how to characterize that sacrifice: is it a sacrifice of well-being for meaning, or is it a sacrifice of meaning itself? Like many have said about Mill, my conjecture is that at least a good chunk of what you sacrifice on the extraordinary path is

meaning—a kind of meaning onto which your fellow cancer researchers would still seem to latch. It is not merely that you would *think* the ordinary life would be more meaningful for you than the extraordinary life; it is that for you it would *be* more meaningful to parent children than to cure cancer. (Apparently for Mill the cure that restored meaning in his life was not having kids but instead reading poetry. Chalk up another score for experiments in living.) Of course, this is not to deny that your engaged, monomaniacal colleagues are not getting meaning, too, out of their important lives; it is merely to say that there are profound implications for your life that stem from your own lack of engagement. If you were to choose the extraordinary path, you would be important. You would do the right thing. You would even be happy to a degree. And still your life would lack meaning. This type of sacrifice is, for a certain kind of person, a real possibility.²

Other cases reinforce this judgment. Jerry Garcia destroyed himself through heroin because, apparently, it offered relief from the exhausting regimen of relentless touring, which he kept up in order to keep his crew employed and Deadheads happy (Bar-Lev 2017). Assume for the sake of argument that he created objectively valuable art and helped sustain an objectively valuable social and creative movement. Still, that important work had become a burden for him. It apparently deprived his life of so much meaning that his only refuge was the hazy cloud of a smack high.

A pair of familiar tropes cements the image: the executive who steps down from her demanding position at a world-changing charity in order to spend more time with the kids, versus the alienated mother who wants expand her horizons beyond homemaking in order to work with that world-changing charity. Both women find the charity work valuable, and the nonprofit in question is doing important work. And both women also value their children and the project of rearing them in a loving, supportive home. But the lives that they have been leading equally lack meaning for them because each of the women is subjectively alienated from the way their lives are structured: they wish that they could trade places. Since it is possible for both lives to equally lack meaning, the fact that one of the women is doing world-changing work while the other's projects are merely ordinary—the two women's differing levels of importance—appears not to be what is shaping the meaning in their lives.

These are all cases where we must trade one set of goods against qualitatively different goods: a rich home front versus profound professional possibilities, restoration for oneself versus musical joy and full employment for others, rescuing countless people from a terrible affliction versus having a well-rounded personal life. Similar results emerge when we keep the kinds of goods in question identical

² Aaron Smuts (2018: 38) argues that in a similar case, curing cancer would not improve your well-being (leaving meaning aside). For an intuition that diverges from mine in a variation on the ordinary/extraordinary case, see Bramble (2015: 448), who interprets Mill as doubting the value of his activities. But with others (Kekes 1986; Sigrist 2015: 88–89), I understand Mill, when he says 'the end had ceased to charm', as indicating that the end was still the end—that is, he still recognized its value. Instead, it no longer held any grip on his affective or motivational wherewithal—it failed to charm. R.W. Hepburn (1966: 128) puts the point nicely: 'To seek meaning is not just a matter of seeking justification for one's policies, but of trying to discover how to organize one's vital resources and energies around these policies'. This is what eluded Mill during his crisis.

and vary only their quantity. Imagine that you are a successful writer of popular history. You have won both riches and the admiration of your fellow historians. Your books have received awards and ecstatic reviews, and you have been rewarded with fancy appointments. As you plot out your next project, you come to realize that in these times the most impactful thing you could do is to write on tyranny and demagoguery. However, you find that project uninspiring, boring, *obvious*, even though you have good reason to think that the public would eat it up, and that it may actually help nudge the world in a healthier, anti-authoritarian direction. You would rather write your next book on an obscure revolution in the textile industry. Your grandparents worked in the Garment District, and when you were young, they traded captivating stories as you played at their feet. So this project has more meaning for you even though it is the less important project. Here, too, the intuitive verdict seems to be, again, not just that you would *think* this is more meaningful, but that you would be right: the less important project would *be* more meaningful for someone like you, with your particular background and proclivities.

The pattern also holds where the objective value at stake is not about impact on the world but instead is internal to oneself, such as cultivating one's own virtue or improving one's intellect or doing something creative. Say that I work on my fear of spiders rather than doing something more virtuous like developing my courage in battle, or I read a history book rather than getting a PhD in history. Assume that the preferred activities all have *some* objective value by enriching the life of the person doing them, even though they have *less* objective value than the alternative projects. All the same, in these cases if our less objectively valuable option is more engaging, it will have more meaning for us than the alternative. For people with a certain set of leanings, the more important alternative would be a *grind*.

Next, consider situations that combine value for oneself and impact on the world. Calhoun (2018: 24) offers up a case of someone struggling to choose between becoming a biology professor and becoming a philosophy professor. Even if these careers will equally contribute both to the world and to the person's intellectual development, that does not mean that they each would be equally meaningful pursuits for that person. Keeping all else equal, what would tip the scales is whatever the person finds more interesting, more engaging.

These cases collectively reinforce the position shared by hybrid theory and subjectivism—but rejected by objectivism—that you must be attracted to a project or relationship for it to add meaning to your life. Moreover, to add to the already established hybridist picture of meaning in life, the novel specification, key for our purposes, suggested by these cases is that the *level* of subjective engagement, the intensity of the subjective attraction's grip on our motivational and affective resources, is what determines *how much* meaning the project or relationship adds to your life. (Though he is sometimes interpreted as an out-and-out subjectivist about meaning, it is plausible to read Harry Frankfurt [1999: 87] as advocating for something similar to this.) Conversely, increases in a project's objective value do not by themselves increase that project's meaning, contrary to the escalation premise. Having *some* objective value, on this account, is required for a project to

give your life meaning. However, that is the only role objective value plays. Cranking up objective value past the minimal threshold—wherever that is—does not by itself add extra meaning to your life. Which in turn means that being important—being of exceptionally high value as opposed to being of more pedestrian value—does not itself make your life more meaningful. What makes an above-threshold project more or less meaningful is the project being more or less subjectively engaging—not being more or less important.

Introducing a threshold raises several questions. As in other domains, it is tricky to identify exactly *where* the threshold is. (In keeping with the rest of the arguments made here, I suspect that we would need to tease the answer out of multiple cases that reside on the margins: Wolf is right that a lifetime full of passively watching sitcoms lies below the threshold, but a lifetime spent actively engaged in the theatrical arts need not be; as we bring those lives closer together, where do we draw the line?) But we can settle other questions. One is why we should think that the threshold for sufficient objective value is low enough to encompass most ordinary lives. I think the answer to this follows straight from the argument made so far: intuitions about our cases, such as the two mothers, indicate as much. But a harder, explanatory question is *why* meaning in life is sensitive enough to objective value that it requires a minimal threshold, but not so sensitive as to escalate with increasing objective value above the threshold? Here is one answer. Paradigm cases of *meaningless* lives are cases where the persons living them are *wasting* their lives, whether that be on pointless tasks like Sisyphus (Taylor 2008), or being confined to a closed loop of activities that feed each other (Levy 2005; Nozick 1981; Wiggins 1976), or seemingly stupid projects like counting blades of grass or passively watching sitcoms for one's entire life (Wolf 2014). Thus there is an independent motivation for the threshold: for a project to be meaningful, it must not be a waste. It must participate in some amount of genuine value. But there is no such independent motivation for the escalation premise. And again, there is reason to doubt it: intuitively, meaning can be found in raising a child or writing a new song. Thus the explanatory burden falls on showing that the escalation premise is true, that it matters whether that child turns out to be Mother Teresa or the song is 'Let It Be'.

Of course, we are often subjectively attracted to what is objectively attractive. We dream of doing important things—writing that democracy-saving book on demagoguery, becoming Secretary of Education, ending climate change—precisely because the important things have outsize objective merits. Objective value can fuel subjective engagement, and arguably there is some rational pressure to align our subjective engagements with objective value, though surely that pressure is defeasible, too. This, I suspect, may go some distance to explaining why so many have been attracted to the escalation premise: they take note of the fact that we are rationally attracted to doing important things. (Another driver of the error, I suspect, is the equivocation noted above, that *meaningful* can be used to refer to one aspect of prudential value and also to refer to an important contribution.) But objective value is not the only determinant—not even the only *rational* determinant—of what we find ourselves attracted to. We are often rightly engaged in our pursuits and our relationships because of other contingencies: our culture,

our upbringing, our material and social conditions and opportunities, our idiosyncratic experiences, our individual biological makeup. Consequently, the subjective and the objective can cleave apart. When this happens, as in the cases we have looked at, it makes sense to hold that what determines how much meaning we secure is the subjective part, not the objective part—not whether our projects are extraordinarily important (though they must be minimally valuable).

This fact, though, raises another question: does the causal source of our subjective attractions matter? If we can derive meaning from projects in a way that is partly due to a variety of subjective pathways, can we engineer our attractions on purpose to increase our meaning in life? There are certain ways that this might seem troubling, such as if you took a drug to increase your interest in nature, so that you spend less time watching sitcoms and more time exploring the natural world. But because our version of hybridism is compatible with any answer to this question, we should not be troubled. We might say, for example, that since it would not diminish the meaning of John Coltrane's creations or Malala Yousafzai's activism if they had to cultivate the interests that led to their achievements, engineering subjective attraction does not diminish the meaning of ordinary pursuits, either. Or perhaps there are some limits on how the engineering happens. Maybe certain subjective attractions are more *authentic* if they stem from years of work, say, than if they stem from taking a drug. Or maybe not. If someone's alcoholism is depressing their subjective attraction to their family life; and if they take a drug to counteract that alcoholism; and if that results in more attraction to family life; that hardly seems like an inauthentic source of meaning. In any event, again, while more work would need to be done to identify the shape of such restrictions on meaning, such restrictions are adaptable to the kind of hybrid, no-escalation view being advanced here.

That said, the argument presented so far is, even within its limits, incomplete. Our cases do suggest that it is the level of our subjective attraction, rather than the level of (supra-threshold) objective value, that does the heavy lifting in determining how much meaning in life we enjoy. But all the case pairs so far used feature different levels of objective value *and* different levels of subjective attraction. What happens if we keep subjective attraction stable and vary only the levels of objective value? In cases where we face two paths that are equally subjectively attractive, if one path is much more objectively valuable than the other (and if both are above the minimum threshold), would you not choose the latter path—could importance act as a tiebreaker?

If I faced this kind of choice, I would choose the more important path. But though it would be the more *choice-worthy* path, I do not think it would be more *meaningful*. Increasing its objective value provides it with no additional meaning for me than would increasing the importance of some project that I have *no* subjective attraction to, such as if you moved my job cleaning septic systems from a gated community of vacation homes to an impoverished city that is knee-deep in a sanitation crisis. Unless, that is, I start to find that more important project more appealing—perhaps because I appreciate its enlarged objective value—in which case this newfound portion of subjective engagement could carry with it an emergent dose of surplus meaning. A similar verdict seems plausible if we instead

decrease objective value while subjective attraction remains stably elevated. Imagine, for example, a less valuable version of an important artist or scientist: they are as engaged in their art or science just as much as their famous counterpart, but they are less significant. My intuition, and I suspect the intuition of many who occupy an egalitarian, let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom, come-as-you-are approach to prudential value, is that the less important (but still above-the-threshold) career makes for as meaningful a life as is had by the person with the more important career.

A similar scenario features a trade-off between a little more subjective value and a *lot* more objective value. In fact, Calhoun (2018: 27–32) challenges hybrid conceptions of meaning on this point: they do not tell us how to balance the objective against the subjective. I have tried to meet that challenge by arguing for a simple answer, namely that once your pursuit or relationship or activity meets the minimum threshold of objective value, the level of subjective attraction does all the work of increasing or decreasing meaning. But even with that answer to Calhoun's challenge, we still have to wonder whether tremendous escalations of importance can at some point swamp modest increases in subjective engagement. Consider the immense objective value of curing cancer versus the comparatively low-value endeavor of making pizza for hungry pizza lovers. Can I really devote myself to making pizza instead of curing cancer if I am the only one available to perform either task and I cannot do both?

Many of us would rather cure cancer than make pizza—our subjective attraction aligns with objective attractiveness in this case. But if your subjective proclivities are different, the apron may offer more meaning than the lab coat. Even if curing cancer is what you have most reason to do, and even if you are moderately attracted to it, it may not fill your life with much meaning if you find yourself significantly more attracted to a different choice. There is abundant evidence for the intuitiveness of this assessment: while nobody I know would choose to make pizza instead of curing cancer, every single person I know makes a lower-stakes version of that trade-off on a routine basis. Instead of doing something noble and important, we hang out with friends. We watch our favorite team in the big game. We play some music. Pleasure is not the only value at stake here, nor is morality; meaning is another value hanging in the balance—in many cases we pursue those relationships and activities precisely because they flood our lives with meaning. And so it is reasonable to think that the escalation premise rests on quicksand. Like Mill, if you try to end global poverty—even if you *succeed*—you could find your life dulled in meaning even as it shimmers in significance. And if instead, like almost everyone else, you just try to live a decent regular life, then your importance will dwindle, but you might be rewarded with a life rich in meaning.

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