

# Remorse and the Ledger Theory of Meaning

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## Abstract

A common idea about assessing meaning in life is that one draws up a list of those various positive values that one has achieved and subtracts from it one's negative deeds in life. The resulting balance is the meaningfulness of one's existence. I call this the ledger theory. Drawing on the work of Raimond Gaita and Julian Barnes's novel *The Sense of an Ending*, I argue for a phenomenology of remorse that gives us reason to reject the ledger theory. Even those agents whose lives have been exceptionally meaningful in some respects may remain haunted by their past. Certain sorts of misdeeds – those that involve significant, irreparable damage – leave life marred in such a way that the negative remains, even in the face of all the meaningful deeds of life.

## 1. Introduction

Call the following the *ledger theory* of meaning in life. When assessing the meaningfulness of one's existence, one draws up, as it were, a list of those various positive values that one has achieved and subtracts from it one's negative deeds in life. If one's total account balance remains positive in the end, then one's life is meaningful. If one's balance is exceptionally high, then one might count as one of those paragons of meaningfulness often mentioned in the literature, e.g., Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Einstein, and Mother Theresa, to name some of the most popular figures. If it dips below a certain point, then one's life is meaningless or, even, meaning's opposite, the equivalent of being in the red, having the costs of one's existence exceed its returns, so to speak.

Whether or not the ledger theory is a widespread intuition about how meaningfulness works, it has been suggested in recent academic literature on those things that detract from the meaningfulness of a life, what has been called 'anti-matter' (Metz, 2013, p. 64) or 'anti-meaning' (Campbell and Nyholm, 2015; Nyholm, 2021). Consider a few examples. Iddo Landau (2017, pp. 15–16) suggests that the matter of meaning in life boils down to having sufficient value in life:

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Complaints that there is no meaning in life are complaints that there is insufficient value in life. Questions about the meaning of life are questions about what is of sufficient worth in life. A meaningful life is one in which there is a sufficient number of aspects of sufficient value, and a meaningless life is one in which there is not a sufficient number of aspects of sufficient value.

Determining the value or meaningfulness of a life involves, on his view, a reckoning of life's merits and demerits. As Landau (2011, p. 314) puts it elsewhere:

Different kinds of behavior can balance each other, to a degree, and we may deem a life that encompasses a limited degree of certain negative elements to be, overall, meaningful. Once a person crosses a certain threshold, however, we cannot regard the life as having sufficient value and, therefore, as meaningful.

Similarly, Stephen M. Campbell and Sven Nyholm (2015, p. 704) suggest the ledger theory when they write, 'a life's overall meaningfulness is a function of the meaning *and* the anti-meaning in the life...a meaningful life is a life in which the meaningful elements substantially outweigh the anti-meaningful ones, or in which the anti-meaningful ones are entirely absent'. Likewise, Thaddeus Metz (2013, p. 64) writes that 'meaning has two scales' (one positive, the other negative) and adds that an agent's misdeeds 'weigh *against* whatever meaning he might have had in his life. In evaluating whether this person's life is meaningful on balance or not, one would not merely overlook this action [his example is blowing up the Sphinx]...instead, one would consider this action to have set one back with respect to the aim of living meaningfully overall'. The language of 'balancing', 'weighing', and 'set backs' used by these authors implicitly suggests the logic of a ledger.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its intuitive plausibility, I will argue that the ledger theory of meaning is mistaken. Our sense of life's meaning doesn't, in fact, work like a balance sheet. Businesses weigh their costs and their sales to arrive at a figure of profit. A certain equality is found in the

<sup>1</sup> The ledger theory, on my use, refers to the reckoning of those pro-meaning and anti-meaning elements within a life. For another use of the ledger metaphor see May (2017, ch. 4), who, responding to Wallace (2013), discusses weighing one's existence against the necessary historical conditions for it. See also Tartaglia (2015, p. 17), who takes issue with what he calls Metz's 'meaningfulness calculus' on different grounds than this essay.

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accounting books: exceptional gains can wipe away lesser losses without remainder. But the ethical life, in which considerations of meaningfulness are located, doesn't operate according to this logic. The experience of remorse reveals significant and irreplaceable losses, the sorts of things that cannot be fixed and often haunt a person to the grave. Attention to this sort of experience exposes the limits of ledger-thinking and suggests an alternative set of metaphors for conceptualizing meaning in life. Instead of a negative *weight* or *balance*, anti-meaning behaves more like a *spectre* or a *stain*. These metaphors better capture the complexity of our feelings with respect to meaningful living and the misdeeds of life.

This essay concerns how various meaning-positive and meaning-negative elements are related and how judgments of overall meaningfulness are formed. It does not assume any particular theory of meaning in life, e.g., subjectivist, hybrid, objectivist, or narrative. The criticism advanced in this paper applies to those theories that buy into a certain underlying conception of how we reckon pro-meaning and anti-meaning elements of a life to reach an overall judgment of meaningfulness. Insofar as these theories accept the underlying idea that pro-meaning and anti-meaning elements of a life should be treated in terms of 'balancing' or 'weighing', then they will come within the purview of the following critique. That said, while my argument does not assume a theory of meaning, I offer reasons for rejecting a purely subjectivist interpretation of the mere feelings of remorse as anti-meaning.

My argument begins with a phenomenology of remorse that draws on two sources: Julian Barnes' novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2012) and the philosophical writing of Raimond Gaita (2000; 2004). Despite their very different styles and backgrounds, I argue that these two viewpoints resonate with each other and offer a phenomenology of remorse as betokening a persisting negative presence expressed by the two authors in metaphors of, respectively, 'accumulation' and 'haunting'. Next, I argue that remorse reveals a special sort of anti-meaning occasioned by *significant* and *irreparable damage*. While prominent examples of this sort of remorse might be moral in nature, this sort of anti-meaning is not restricted to moral concerns. Focusing on remorse may give the impression that it's the possession of a subjective feeling that betokens the loss of meaning, yet this would be a mistake. In contradistinction to this view, I defend the objective significance of remorse for meaning in life. Having spelled out the significance of remorse, I argue that the ledger theory of meaning fails because certain sorts of wrong-doing leave life marred in such a way that the negative remains, even in

the face of all the meaningful deeds of life. Consequently, the implicit balancing principle fails as an adequate account of how meaning-positive and meaning-negative elements are related and therefore also fails as an account of overall meaningfulness. In light of these reflections, the image of meaningfulness determined by some sort of abstract ledger falls flat. Our experience of meaning turns out to be more textured and problematic than can be captured by the ledger theory of meaning.

## **2. Remorse Amongst the Varieties of Regret**

Regret is an essentially ‘backward-looking emotion’, i.e., one that takes as its object something that is necessarily in the past, as opposed to those that take as their object the open and unknown future, e.g., fear, anxiety.<sup>2</sup> There are many varieties of regret in human life. Some regrets are self-directed as in regretting to study for a difficult and important exam. Others are other-directed as when one forgets to fulfil a promise for a loved one. Still others seem to straddle the line as in the case of regretting wearing insufficient deodorant on a hot summer day. Some regrets are trivial like ordering the wrong meal at a restaurant and being disappointed by one’s choice; other regrets are weighty as in committing a gaffe at a career-defining meeting that one recalls with horror for years afterwards. Some regrets are limited while others are, as R. Jay Wallace (2013, p. 51) has put it, ‘all-in’ modes of regret, cases where an agent regrets everything about a choice rather than merely some of its aspects.

Tolstoy’s (2008) [1886] *The Death of Ivan Ilych* presents a paragon account of a special sort of regret, one that can only happen at the end of life – namely, deathbed regret.<sup>3</sup> Yet the story has some unique features. First, the regret is of a relatively global and amorphous nature. Ivan Ilych’s complaint that ‘he had been living the wrong kind of life’ (p. 210) doesn’t specify any particular action but rather a pervasive pattern of behaviour, one that is grounded, the reader quickly realizes, in a mistaken set of values. Ivan Ilych was a man driven by a concern for social prestige and propriety. What we come to discover is that the ailing man facing his imminent death calls into question the value of living a life organized around climbing the social ladder and

<sup>2</sup> On the philosophy of regret see Nussbaum (2017), Wallace (2013), and Rorty (1980).

<sup>3</sup> For a philosophical analysis of this novel see also Kamm (2003).

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keeping up appearances. All of this is shot through with regret. There is no particular wrong that haunts Tolstoy's protagonist. It is the adverbial shadow of 'wrongly' that attaches to his life rather than a specific action.

The second and, for our purposes, most important aspect of Ivan Ilych's regret is that despite leading a failed life, in the end he feels a sort of reconciliation with the world. In his final moments, Ivan Ilych has an atoning experience. Shortly before his death, he realizes that, even confined to his bed with no hopes of further projects or actions, things 'could still be put right' (p. 216). We are then told of a mysterious yet redemptive experience where Ivan Ilych is consumed in light and passes from this life. It seems, at least from the perspective of Ilych and, presumably, Tolstoy himself, that this final moment was an absolution of Ilych's life of wrongful living. Thus, Ilych's final moments speak to a *redeemable regret*.

There is another sort of regret, however, that differs both from the sort of deathbed regret described by Tolstoy as well as the more garden variety regrets of everyday life. The common name for this is 'remorse'.<sup>4</sup> We find philosophical meditations on the significance of this emotion in both the work of Julian Barnes (2012) and Raimond Gaita (2000). In what follows, I will argue that their accounts of remorse resonate with each other and share certain overlapping features that are relevant to better understanding the phenomenology of meaningful living, especially the bearing of moral failing on it.<sup>5</sup>

Julian Barnes's account of remorse is embedded in his novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2012), a tale about memory's failings, love, death, and, above all, the ravages of time.<sup>6</sup> Without getting into the intricacies and nuances of this rather complex narrative, let me

<sup>4</sup> For an alternative account of remorse see Wallace (2013, pp. 64, 115–17).

<sup>5</sup> One reason to think that regret is relevant to thinking about meaning in life is precisely that a number of writers have associated questions of life's meaning with the phenomenon of deathbed reflection. For instance, Susan Wolf (2010, p. 8) remarks, 'An interest in meaning is also frequently associated with thoughts one might have on one's deathbed, or in contemplation of one's eventual death'. Metz (2013, p. 31) concurs, 'we often associate enquiry into life's meaning with deathbed reflection and eulogies. To assess whether one's life is meaningful or not, a person tends to imagine that she is at the end of her days on earth and considers how she would appraise her life from that perspective'.

<sup>6</sup> For another philosophical reflection on the significance of this novel see Jagannathan (2015).

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offer a brief sketch of the story's frame. Upon hearing that his former girlfriend Veronica and high school friend Adrian are a couple, the narrator, Tony Webster, writes a nasty letter wishing they would inflict 'damage' upon each other's lives and planting a seed that bears terrible fruit. Apparently forgetting or repressing his memory of the letter, the narrator re-reads it many years later after receiving a copy from Veronica. He also comes to discover that Adrian's suicide, which Tony previously had been led to believe was done out of high-minded philosophical considerations, was prompted by precisely the sort of 'damage' that he had wished upon the couple. We learn that Adrian had impregnated Veronica's mother and shortly thereafter committed suicide, apparently related to this devastating news. Adrian's son, whom he would never meet, is born mentally disabled and looked after by a caretaker and occasionally visited by his sister Veronica.

Embedded in this narrative of youthful rage and its unfolding destruction, Barnes offers us an account of remorse as a powerful backward-looking reflection characterized, above all, by the inefaceable character of the harm. Remorse, as Barnes (2012, p. 99) characterizes it, is '[a] feeling which is more complicated, curdled, and primeval [than guilt or shame]. Whose chief characteristic is that nothing can be done about it: too much time has passed, too much damage has been done, for amends to be made'. Remorse signifies what Barnes calls 'accumulation', an amassing of wreckage that cannot be undone.<sup>7</sup>

The grounds for the narrator's remorse are themselves problematic and require some unpacking. Tony Webster writes an awful, fuming letter cursing 'damage' upon two lovers, but he hardly *causes* the resulting existential ruin. The links between his own action, whatever his ill intentions had been, and the ensuing damage – the subsequent affair between Adrian and Veronica's mother, the pregnancy, and the suicide – are tenuous at best. On a causal level, the most one can say with respect to Tony's own involvement is that he suggested Adrian speak to Veronica's mother. Whatever his intentions were in suggesting the meeting, the reader can only speculate. Nevertheless, the causal linkage is broken. Other actors made crucial choices in that

<sup>7</sup> In the story, the term 'accumulation' has the added layer of describing a rather obscure theory held Adrian that moral responsibility and damage build up over time in a mathematical manner. For our purposes, however, this second meaning is irrelevant and will be bracketed in favor of the more fundamental sense of the term.

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chain of events culminating in Adrian's suicide. The central narrative arc of the story is shot through with others' agency and whatever moral responsibility one might ascribe to Tony must be seen in light of this.

In spite of the formidable difficulties in pinning the blame on Tony's letter, when he rereads his letter in light of the revelations about his friend's situation, the uncanniness of his words seizes him with remorse. As he puts it:

Remorse, etymologically, is the action of biting again: that's what the feeling does to you. Imagine the strength of the bite when I reread my words. They seemed like some ancient curse I had forgotten even uttering. Of course I don't – I didn't – believe in curses. That's to say, in words producing events. But the very action of naming something that subsequently happens – of wishing specific evil, and that evil coming to pass – this still has something otherworldly about it. The fact that the young me who had cursed and the old me who witnessed the curse's outcome had quite different feelings – this was monstrously irrelevant (Barnes, 2012, p. 138).

Remorse, as Barnes portrays it, doesn't necessarily track causal responsibility. Even in cases where the links connecting an agent to an outcome are tenuous or, upon reflection, broken, remorse can be present given ill intention and ill-fated circumstances. The result of such ill will combined with accidental success in foretelling the future is enough to stir a sinking, negative feeling in the pit of one's stomach – remorse. Despite the complexity of circumstances occasioning the emotion, one feature remains prominent: the harm is *irreparable*. Tony cannot apologize to his deceased friend. Nothing can undo or fix the nastiness of his past.

A resonant account of remorse can be found in the philosophical work of Raimond Gaita (2000, pp. 29ff). He tells the story of man called N who on his hurried way home encounters an old beggar who grabs him. In the subsequent struggle to free himself from the panhandler's grip, he pushes the man away. Quite accidentally, the force of the shove causes the beggar to fall off the pavement in the way of an onrushing truck that strikes him dead. Gaita (2000, p. 31) describes N's subsequent feelings as remorse: '[p]ained bewilderment is the most natural expression of remorse. "What have I done? How could I have done it?" These questions express a shocked realization of the meaning of what one has done, a shocked realization that anything could have that meaning'. On Gaita's view, remorse sets in when one's backward-looking understanding

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of one's acts reveals them to be otherwise than one's state of mind at the time of committing the deed.

How might N feel following the ill-fated encounter with the beggar on the street corner? Gaita speculates:

We know that N's remorse might haunt him all his life, blighting it. At times – especially early on – he might even say that he cannot live with himself, and although he would be unlikely to kill himself in his grief, the thought might come to him. Many would be critical of such suicidal thoughts, but we all find them understandable, and that is important, because our finding it so partly conditions our sense of the seriousness of this kind of wrongdoing...our victims remain with us in their individuality haunting us (2000, pp. 31–32).<sup>8</sup>

What's important here, as Gaita notes, is not that N would necessarily respond this way but that it is an intelligible mode of response, that it makes sense to us that N may feel 'haunted' or 'blighted' by the chance encounter. Indeed, if N felt nothing at all about the event, shrugged his shoulders, and went on his way after, presumably, handling things with the police investigation, we'd find him callously inhumane.

Remorse as it is described by both Gaita and Barnes share a common point of emphasis: the persistence of something negative. For the novelist, it is the 'accumulation' of the past in the present; for the philosopher, it is the mark of being 'haunted' or 'blighted' by the past. Remorse signifies something dark from the past that lingers. However, the scenarios discussed by the two writers diverge in a remarkable way. The story of N describes a situation of casual agency without intention to harm. The beggar's life is brought to an untimely end by the actions of N, and yet there is no intent to maim or destroy – only the desire to push past the beggar and get on with tasks of the day. The resulting destruction is an accidental by-product of a myopic rush. By contrast, Tony's letter expresses causally impotent ill will. It rages with palpable enmity yet remains causally ineffectual, even if uncannily prescient. The resulting combination fuels remorse too. Both are victims of what Bernard Williams (1981, ch. 2) called 'moral luck', albeit in inverted ways.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere Gaita (2004, ch. 4) develops his account of remorse in the context of a richer theory of good and evil.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the story of N resonates strongly with Williams's (1981, ch. 2) description of a lorry driver who accidentally runs over a child. N gets



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With respect to the idea of immoral action understood as a causally effective ill will, both of the remorse-inducing scenarios described by Barnes and Gaita are outliers. And yet the remorse experienced in these variants, lacking either causal efficacy or malice, is intelligible nonetheless. Taken together, the descriptions of Barnes and Gaita of remorse reveal to us a wide range of situations where we may feel the bite: when we bring about unintentional damage, when we seethe with venom yet remain toothless, or when we enact enmity and bring about destruction. Neither a good will nor casual impotence is enough to immunize us from the possibility of experiencing haunting remorse.

Moreover, it would be a mistake to assume that remorse is occasioned only by actions or intentions. One can also be haunted by *omissions* as is well illustrated in Albert Camus's *The Fall* (2013) [1956] by the character Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who heard a young woman fall into a river but for reasons somewhere between fear and apathy failed to do anything to help her, even to report the apparent suicide, and was subsequently haunted by mysterious laughter that drove him to demonic despair.

Remorse, then, differs from both garden variety regret as well as Ivan Ilych's deathbed regret. The former, ordinary sort of regret picks out those things that are not of an existentially weighty character. The failure to wear deodorant on a hot day or even poor performance on an annual review may be the sort of things that an agent regrets, but in the grand scheme of things, they may not be very significant. Tolstoy's regret, by contrast, concerns something existentially weighty – namely, that his entire existence had been misspent following a wrong set of values. Yet Tolstoy's regret was ultimately the sort of thing that he thought could be redeemed in something like a deathbed conversion. By contrast, *remorse* as we find it described in Barnes and Gaita concerns those sorts of misdeeds that are neither trivial nor can we do anything to undo them. From these authors, we can distill a conception of remorse as occasioned by (1) *significant* and (2) *irreparable damage*.

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morally unlucky insofar as he causes unintended damage; Tony Webster gets unlucky insofar as his willed damage quite accidentally comes true, despite little to no agency of his own. For discussions of the role of luck in relation to meaning in life see also Brogaard and Smith (2005), Himmelmann (2013), Metz (2013, pp. 68–69), and Hammerton (2022).

### 3. Remorse and Anti-Meaning

The above analysis has been focused on the emotion of remorse, which may lead one to form the opinion that it is the negative *feeling* that blights our lives. Yet this poses certain problems. Is it the feeling that takes away from the meaningfulness of a life? Or does the feeling point to something that takes it away? More concretely, if Tony hadn't been reminded of his devastating letter, he'd go on living in peace. Would this make his life more meaningful? If N could only forget about his encounter with the beggar and continue his life unbothered, would this restore the meaningfulness of his life to its previous levels? Before proceeding further, we need to get clear on the relationship between remorse and anti-meaning.

The significance of remorse for theories of meaning in life depends on how we conceive of anti-meaning. As Stephen M. Campbell and Sven Nyholm (2015, p. 696ff) have argued, we can think of theories of anti-meaning as parallel to various theories of meaningfulness. Thus, for starters, if we think of meaning as a sort of subjective property, e.g., desire (Taylor, 1970, pp. 256–68) or care/love (Frankfurt, 2004), then we might conceive of anti-meaning as a sort of subjective attitude that diminishes the meaningfulness of a life (Campbell and Nyholm, 2015, pp. 698–99). On such a subjectivist interpretation of anti-meaning, the presence of the emotion of remorse itself *is* the source of anti-meaning. In virtue of feeling remorse, it would make an agent's life less meaningful. If the pangs of contrition were absent, the anti-matter would be gone too.

There are strong reasons, however, not to prefer the subjectivist theory of meaning, reasons that also cast suspicion on the subjectivist interpretation of anti-meaning. Most notably, the problem is that if merely adopting a positive attitude toward something is enough for meaningfulness, then it is an 'overly permissive' theory, as Cheshire Calhoun (2015, pp. 16, 29) has put it.<sup>10</sup> All sorts of stupid, bizarre, and downright disturbing activities could qualify as filling a life with meaning, e.g., taking care of one's goldfish or eating faeces.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the subjectivist theory has another problem. As Aaron Smuts (2013, p. 554) has argued, merely feeling that one's life is meaningless, doesn't make it so. People can wrongly feel that their

<sup>10</sup> Calhoun goes on to advance a subjectivist theory that she believes avoids this problem.

<sup>11</sup> These examples come from, respectively, Wolf, (2010, p.16) and Wielenberg, (2005, pp. 22–23). See an extensive listing of the various examples of this sort of objection in Metz (2013, p. 175).

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lives are meaningless.<sup>12</sup> If these objections are correct, then we can feel our lives to be both more and less meaningful than they actually are, and this provides grounds for rejecting the subjectivist theory.

Similarly, a subjectivist interpretation of remorse generates some strange implications. It would mean that an exceptionally cold-hearted individual who feels no compunction for his ruinous actions suffers no loss in meaning. And an overly sentimental person who feels unwarranted remorse would still suffer a loss of meaningfulness in virtue of the misguided feelings.<sup>13</sup> We thus have reason to question a subjectivist interpretation of anti-meaning generally and a subjectivist interpretation of remorse more specifically.

By contrast, if we take an objective view of anti-meaning, then it is, say, one's failings rather than one's feelings of failure that matter with respect to meaning (Campbell and Nyholm, 2015, pp. 697–98). This view fits nicely with a conception of emotions as a mode of 'awareness' of the significance of things (Taylor, 1985, pp. 47ff). So understood, it isn't the *feelings* of remorse that take away from the meaningfulness of one's life but the *deeds* themselves, which occasion feelings of remorse, that matter with respect to anti-meaning.<sup>14</sup> Our experience of remorse draws our attention to anti-meaning rather than constituting it.<sup>15</sup> This fits with a plausible reading of Barnes's protagonist Tony Webster, who only feels remorse years after he wrote his friends a devastatingly cruel letter. The failures of his memory, itself a theme of Barnes's novel, sheltered him from the toxicity of his past self, but the failures of memory do not erase what he did. Feeling remorse is not the reason one's life is meaning-deficient, but rather the feelings reveal one's negative exertion on the world.

There is still a third relevant possible construal of anti-meaning considered by Campbell and Nyholm – one that parallels the hybrid view of meaning. On this view, anti-meaning is both subjective and objective. This creates the further possibility, as they note, that such suppression of the subjective element (the felt remorse) may itself be even more damning as we think that insensitive and

<sup>12</sup> See also Kauppinen (2013) and Bramble (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to address this point.

<sup>14</sup> Remorse plays an objective role in Gaita's theory, which doesn't see it as a mere subjective feeling but as a pointer toward a real moral loss – what he calls an 'absolute' view of good and evil. See Gaita (2004, ch. 4).

<sup>15</sup> This position also gives us resources to respond to the charge that the negative *feelings* of regret in general are unreasonable. For this view, see Bittner (1992). Also see the response to Bittner's view in Wallace (2013, ch. 2); also relevant is Nussbaum (2017).

callous people are more depraved than those that feel appropriate contrition. In other words, anti-meaning is not constituted by an agent's subjectivity but still the absence of the appropriate subjective response to the wrongdoing makes it even worse (Campbell and Nyholm, 2015, pp. 700–703).

This hybrid model strikes me as a useful way of thinking about remorse. There are various ways in which the feeling of remorse can be attenuated, blocked, or repressed, and all of these, it seems to me, are relevant to the meaningfulness of a life. For example, an agent may be unaware of what he or she brings about. This would have been the case with Tony Webster if he had never discovered the true fate of Adrian and Veronica. We might similarly imagine a scenario where N pushes the beggar to the side without even noticing the ensuing death. Call this *obliviousness*. But even with an awareness of one's deeds, an agent may still fail to appreciate the significance of what one has done. Perhaps an agent underrates or downplays the true impact of her actions. Call this *insensitivity*. Still, even if an agent appropriately appreciates the significance of what has happened, he or she may fail to appreciate the irreplaceability of what has been lost. Call this an attitude of *cheapness*, the thought or attitude that what has been done can be fixed or made up for in some way, the failure to recognize the true value of things. These failures to feel remorse when it is warranted may also detract from the meaningfulness of one's life as one fails to be attentive, sensitive, or properly appreciative of the world transcending the self.<sup>16</sup>

While I myself favour the hybrid view, it is not crucial to my argument going forward. I only need to maintain the implausibility of the subjectivist account and the relevance of the objective sense of anti-meaning. Thus understood, it is not the feelings of remorse that detract from meaning in life, but rather remorse when appropriately felt signals an underlying source of anti-meaning. It is a felt awareness of the negation of meaning in life.

#### 4. Anti-Meaning and Significant, Irreparable Damage

The phenomenon of remorse, as described above, reveals a peculiar sort of anti-meaning that poses problems for what I'm calling the ledger theory of meaning, the view that the overall meaningfulness of a life is determined by weighing the pro-meaning and negative-meaning

<sup>16</sup> On the relevance of 'transcendence' to meaning see Nozick (1981, pp. 594ff).

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values against each other. This special variety of anti-meaning that occasions remorse has two defining characteristics – namely, it is (1) *significant* and (2) involves *irreparable damage*. Such pangs of conscience, I have argued, reveal that one has done (or failed to do) something that is both weighty and whose harms cannot be fixed or remedied.

Much of the discussion involving anti-matter or anti-meaning has a moral tenor, indeed, Landau's (2011) discussion takes place explicitly within the context of arguing that gross immorality is incompatible with leading a meaningful life. This is true also for the specific sort of anti-meaning that occasions remorse – namely, *significant, irreparable damage*. The reason why moral cases seem to fit this pattern is that gross acts of immorality often involve significant and weighty damage that cannot be undone or redeemed. This is true, for example, of murder or manslaughter. As in the case of N discussed above, to take a human life is to do something existentially weighty and that cannot be repaired.<sup>17</sup> A family might be compensated financially, but this is a symbolic gesture that in no way counts as moral restoration. Nothing can return the deceased to life. The damage inflicted is essentially irreparable to the victim.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, not all acts of immorality fall in this category. Some misdeeds are wrong yet existentially insignificant. Think here of petty, unjustifiable lies – say, pointless deception that amounts to nothing of consequence. These deeds may be fully in the wrong and may, in some sense, detract from the meaningfulness of an agent's life, but these do not fall in the category that concerns us here.

<sup>17</sup> In Gaita's (2004, ch. 4) 'absolute' theory of good and evil, he emphasizes the 'precious' value of individual persons.

<sup>18</sup> Nyholm (2021) argues that certain collectively destructive activities, e.g., contributing to climate change, may be the source of future anti-meaning. In making his case, he points to the 'irreparable harm' of environmental destructive activities in consumer society and how this may impact future generations. While a full discussion of collective anti-meaning is beyond the scope of this paper, I want to suggest that it is compatible with my analysis of remorse. If it is the case that the existing society is contributing *en masse* to the 'irreparable harm' of the planet and future generations, then there may be a sort of underlying and pervasive anti-meaning flowing from our participation that gives rise to a certain ambivalence towards our lives. Even if one is wildly successful in one's meaningful pursuits, this doesn't in itself negate one's complicity in planetary degradation. The result is exactly what my account predicts: rather than being cancelled out by the positive values of one's various projects, these take on a negative tinge.

Misdeeds may also be existentially weighty yet something that might be fixed or restored. Think here of making financial restitution for a great material loss. Such financial compensation may make amends for a loss of property. These acts too fall outside the domain of the sort of anti-matter related to remorse for these wrongful deeds *can* be made up – there are actions that can be taken that would undo their damage. What concerns me are those acts that are both significant and irreparable. Some of these are clearly moral in nature, yet not all acts of immorality would be such.

Immorality, however, doesn't have an exclusive chokehold on anti-meaning. On Metz's (2013, p. 64) articulation of 'anti-matter', for instance, he explicitly notes that some non-moral deeds would take away from the meaningfulness of an agent's life, e.g., his example of the wanton destruction of the Sphinx. A similarly broad range applies to the particular species of anti-meaning that occasions remorse. We might imagine that someone who destroyed, even unwittingly, a rare artefact such as the *Mona Lisa* or Rosetta Stone may be plagued with remorse for the irreparable damage done to something of cultural significance. Even if an artefact could be reproduced, it wouldn't be the same as the destroyed original for it would lack what Walter Benjamin (2019 [1935], § 2, p. 171) famously called its 'aura'. The significant, irreplaceable loss of non-moral goods may conceivably prompt remorse. The hapless destroyer of such a cultural treasure may suffer from remorse, yet it is hardly clear a moral crime was committed.

We thus have reason to see how remorse (understood as responding to significant, irreparable damage) can be occasioned by moral, aesthetic, as well as cultural losses. We can see how such remorse-inducing losses may fall within, to borrow Metz's (2013, ch. 12) taxonomy, the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. The destruction of a life, a rare artwork, or a cultural relic would all count among things whose loss cannot be replaced and thus fall within our account of remorse.

What about natural scientific knowledge? Within this sub-domain of the True, we do not encounter the same sort of irreparable loss. Consider the case of a scientist's clumsy assistant. Suppose the ill-witted helper manages to accidentally lose a manuscript or deletes the file containing a rare scientific breakthrough. What is different about this case compared to a similarly inept cultural historian's assistant is that the loss of this scientific discovery may in principle be recovered, even if it takes a lot of hard work, whereas the destruction of, say, an original, untranslated manuscript of one of Aristophanes' hitherto lost comedies would be irreplaceable.

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Of course, if the loss of such scientific knowledge has something of moral value riding on it, e.g., developing a vaccine for a highly infectious and deadly disease, then it may occasion remorse as the loss of even a few months' time may translate into thousands of human lives. But here we have entered moral rather than strictly scientific territory.

Finally, we can also encounter remorse in the territory of prudential value, especially related to the sphere of love and friendship.<sup>19</sup> The loss of a close friend or romantic partner, for instance, can occasion not simply feelings of grief but also feelings of remorse, especially if one finds oneself to blame, at least in part, for the dissolution of the relationship.<sup>20</sup> Think of the love songs laden with bitter regret about the sad course a relationship took: mistakes made, things overlooked, persons neglected, mistaken priorities. The realization that one has lost someone in one's life who is irreplaceable may occasion precisely the thought highlighted by Gaita: 'what have I done?' In such cases, no matter what other sorts of meaning one may achieve in life, one may feel a haunting loss that complicates things. New relationships may imbue a life with meaning, but this would neither undo the damage done to one's other relationships nor expunge the accompanying remorse.

Thus, while the cases of moral failing stand out as perhaps the most emotionally charged grounds for remorse, they are far from exhaustive. In spheres of cultural, aesthetic, and prudential value, we can also encounter significant and irreparable damage, the sort of thing that occasions remorse's bite.

### 5. Rethinking the Ledger Theory of Meaning

The foregoing analysis of remorse has been motivated by a dissatisfaction with a prominent way of thinking about meaning in life that I have dubbed the ledger theory, which rests on the intuition that the overall meaningfulness of a life refers to a tabulation and reckoning of those meaning-positive and meaning-negative activities. Once the books are balanced, so to speak, if the remainder is positive, one's life is meaningful, at least to some extent, and if the remainder is negative, then one's life is the opposite of meaningful or what

<sup>19</sup> I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to address the topic of prudential value.

<sup>20</sup> For an interesting investigation into the relationship between grief and meaning see Cholbi (2021).

Landau (2011, p. 317) calls ‘unworthy’ as opposed to merely the ‘not worthy’ lives of those who waste their time. I want to argue that a closer analysis of remorse shows a pitfall in this way of thinking about meaning – we cannot think of it as an account book for the negative and positive do not balance each other out as in a ledger. The reason is that the peculiar type of anti-meaning that occasions remorse does not and cannot behave like a debt that could be cancelled out. We thus have good reason to rethink the metaphors by which we conceptualize meaning in life.

As we have seen, both Gaita and Barnes observe that remorse involves the haunting or accumulative character of certain misdeeds. We have described this as occasioned by the significant, irreplaceable character of the damage suffered. The wrong has happened and cannot be erased. It is there, and it piles up over time. The anti-meaning inheres in the harm done rather than the mere *feelings* of remorse, although, we have agreed with Campbell and Nyholm that the absence of such feelings may make a person worse off with respect to meaning.

Why think that remorse poses a problem for the ledger theory of meaning in life? This can be better appreciated if we unpack a crucial underlying assumption held by ledger theorists. This view understands the meaningfulness of a life as a product or function of its positive and negative elements. To arrive at the overall meaning (or lack thereof) achieved in a life one combines the positive values and subtracts the negative ones. In virtue of conceiving of meaningfulness as a function, the ledger theory rests on what I’ll call the *Balancing Principle* – namely, the idea that a unit of meaning can offset the value of a comparable unit of anti-meaning and vice versa. Thus, following the balancing principle, a pro-meaning deed can offset the negative value of an equivalent anti-meaning misdeed. The good can neutralize the bad and restore a moral agent to something like a zero point of meaning. From here, further meaning-conducive acts can put an agent into positive territory.

The balancing principle may provide a plausible interpretation for some varieties of anti-meaning. Many of the misdeeds of life are the sort of things that can be rectified or redeemed. We can make amends or provide compensation for the harm caused. A drunken sports fan whose team just won a championship may, as part of a crazed mob celebration, damage property surrounding the stadium including, say, lighting fire to a parked car. In a sober moment, the contrite fan may make recompense for the destruction. Assuming no one was harmed by this hooliganism, the fan may swear off drinking, take to watching matches at home, spend time volunteering in the



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community, and financially compensate those whose property was damaged. While regretting the acts of criminality, the fan would not be *haunted* in the way that N was. Certain appropriate pro-social activities may effectively work to balance the former misdemeanours and fully and completely assuage our momentary hooligan's conscience.

However, as the discussion of remorse above illustrates, not all sorts of misdeeds can be treated according to this balancing logic. The key phenomenological feature of remorse that stands at odds with the ledger theory of meaning is precisely the sense of significant, irreparable damage. If the above argument is correct, there is at least one type of anti-meaning that accumulates and cannot be merely balanced in a computation of life's meaningfulness. Nothing can neutralize the wrongdoing. It simply sits there and remains. To think about meaningfulness in terms of the ledger gets the phenomenology wrong, and this signals a deeper flaw in thinking about meaning in terms of a balance of pluses and minuses.

The defender of the ledger theory might respond that Tony Webster or N may be inspired by his past wrong-doing to devote himself to the public good. Suppose that Tony upon discovering nasty contents of his letter decided to volunteer at an orphanage. Or suppose that after the death of the beggar, N is moved to found a philanthropic organization to fight homelessness and help the poor. Such a conversion may further complicate our feelings towards these characters as they change for the better amidst the wreckage of their pasts. However, my point is not that our assessment of them wouldn't change if they were inspired by their remorse to do good, but rather that we should not read the good as washing the way the bad, the way a sudden influx of cash can wipe out a debt. No neutralization happens. There is no point, X, where the achievement of good deeds wipes away the transgressions that occasion remorse, as if they never happened. Our evaluation of their lives (as well as their own evaluations of their lives) will remain complicated, despite the good that grows from the bad. I'm suggesting that we take these complicated feelings seriously when developing our account of meaning in life, and these mixed feelings speak against the ledger conception. Indeed, they are a clue to the existential phenomenon of meaning in life and suggest it doesn't follow the balancing principle and therefore doesn't operate like a ledger.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For another theory that also takes seriously the significance of complex feelings about meaningfulness cf. May (2015, pp. 118ff). His approach, by contrast, starts with the observation that we may still admire

In a recent book on God's relationship to meaning, Thaddeus Metz (2019, pp. 28, 44) has raised the question of whether discussions of meaning might be enriched if we go beyond simply talking about meaning in terms of quantity but also include notions like 'deep', 'shallow', or 'permanent' meaning. This approach suggests that there are other dimensions of meaning besides quantity that matter. This resonates with what I have been arguing about the phenomenon of remorse. Closer attention to the phenomenology of moral 'accumulation' or 'haunting' points us toward asking whether we might also think about meaning in alternative metaphors. This gives us a linguistic way of registering how misdeeds may mark a life without falling into merely the quantitative talk of the ledger model. Doing justice to the complexity of the heart requires expanding our vocabulary associated with meaning-talk in qualitative directions.<sup>22</sup>

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(and therefore find meaningful) lives that are immoral despite their moral failings – his example is Lance Armstrong. On his view, moral wrongdoing does not straightforwardly weigh against these admirable elements, which for him involves certain 'narrative values' (2015, ch. 3). This leads him to distinguish judgments of meaning from those of morality and treat them as 'two scales' (2015, pp. 120) – with the added caveat that 'deeply evil' lives don't qualify for meaning at all (2015, p. 125). While I agree with May's attention to the significance of felt ambivalence and resistance to theoretically induced 'closure' (2015, p. 122) and 'artificial simplicity' (2015, p. 124), I disagree the general direction of his account, including, notably, his separation of meaning from morality.

<sup>22</sup> The idea that the meaningfulness of our lives can be complicated by our pasts has been explored in Wallace (2013) and May (2017). May, for instance, has described the meaningfulness of our lives in light of our rejected alternative life-paths as a necessarily 'tainted phenomena' (p. 57). Similarly, R. Jay Wallace has characterized the complexity of the meaningfulness of our lives in terms of a 'deep ambivalence' (169ff), 'profound ambivalence' (p. 198), or 'anxiety about meaning' (p. 257). While my view shares with May and Wallace the theme that meaning can be complicated by the past in a way that produces a sense of 'taint' or 'ambivalence', the focus is importantly different. I'm arguing that the anti-matter betokened by remorse concerns the way the *actuality* of how significant, irreparable damage haunts our lives. By contrast, May (2017) is concerned with alternative *possible* pasts can haunt our lives. Wallace's (2013) analysis is mostly focused on what he calls the 'affirmation dynamic' (e.g., pp. 5, 77, 97), the idea that regrettable past events or deeds count as *necessary* historical conditions for meaning-giving projects. Yet he also briefly observes a more kindred phenomenon to the view of remorse I've distilled from Gaita (2000) and Barnes (2012). He points to 'people who have rich personal relationships and attachments in

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How then should we think about meaning, if not as a ledger? Instead of images of ‘balancing’ or ‘weighing’, we may follow the lead of Gaita and Barnes use of language such as ‘haunting’, ‘blighting’, or ‘accumulation’. We need metaphors of persistence that capture how remorse reveals a species of anti-meaning that lingers and how it leaves a sense of complication. Alternatively, we might adopt the metaphor of ‘staining’. Rather than a ledger where the good and bad can be equalized, life’s past operates more like a painter’s canvas that retains colour; the marks of the past, both good and bad, accumulate. Just as pride or a sense of satisfaction may be a reminder of past good deeds, remorse is a reminder of past misdeeds.<sup>23</sup> Both can exist side-by-side in the complicated maelstrom of human feelings. Certain sorts of anti-meaning are better captured by the metaphor of *staining* rather than of a *negative balance*. Try as we may to wipe away the wrong, the blemish remains.

In theorizing about meaning in life, certain abstract models are tempting. What I have called the ledger theory has the allure of cleaning up our thinking about what makes life meaningful and what takes away from it. It simplifies our lives allowing us to arrive at an overall judgment of life’s meaningfulness. Yet I’m suggesting that we may do well to avoid foisting this abstraction upon our lived experience of meaning. Closer attention to the phenomenology of remorse speaks against this way of thinking about meaning. Remorse serves as a clue and reminder that life doesn’t balance like the books. Our deeds and misdeeds are not, as it were, simple gains and losses. I’m suggesting there is a danger in applying a false model that doesn’t account for this aspect of our lives.

### 6. Conclusion

It is tempting to think about meaning in life as a matter of more or less, where the good and bad of life get balanced like an accountant’s

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the private sphere but whose professional life is dominated by ruthless and destructive ambition. Such persons might find it hard to conclude honestly that an on-balance attitude of affirmation is called for in regard to the lives that they have led, taking into account not only their personal attachments but also the devastating effects on others of the way in which they have conducted their professional affairs. The only realistic attitude to adopt toward the lives they have lived would then be one of profound ambivalence’ (2013, p. 198).

<sup>23</sup> On the relevance of pride or admiration to theories of meaningfulness see Metz (2013, pp. 31–32) and Kauppinen (2012, pp. 353–55).

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books. This view, which I have called the ledger theory of meaning, finds a presence not only in recent academic literature but also, I suspect, sometimes in ordinary intuitions. It rests on a principle of balancing, that good can wipe out bad and vice versa. Closer attention to the phenomenology of remorse, however, shows that this cannot be an acceptable model of thinking about meaning in life. The experience of remorse reveals that at least some missteps – namely, those that involve significant, irreparable damage – cast a haunting presence over life that cannot be erased. While exceptional gains may cancel out bad debts, the spectres of some of our misdeeds cannot be so easily dispelled. What I have argued is not meant to rule out the possibility of atonement. Such an inquiry would require an analysis that goes beyond this current paper. However, if the argument in this essay is correct, we can appreciate what is at stake and what motivates the desire for redemption.<sup>24</sup>

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The author declares none.

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<sup>24</sup> Thanks to Gregory Jones-Katz and two anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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