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Evers, Hendrik; van Smeden, Gerlinde

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MEANING IN LIFE: IN DEFENSE OF THE HYBRID VIEW

DAAN EVERS and GERLINDE EMMA VAN SMEDEN

ABSTRACT: According to Susan Wolf's hybrid view about meaning in life, a life is meaningful in virtue of subjective attraction to objectively valuable pursuits. Recently, several philosophers have presented counterexamples to the subjective element in Wolf's view. We argue that these examples are not clearly successful and present a modified version which is even stronger in the face of them. Finally, we offer some positive reasons for accepting a subjective condition on a meaningful life.

INTRODUCTION

Richard Taylor's (2008) discussion of the meaning of life starts with a paradigm of meaninglessness: the life of Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a hill for eternity. Taylor asked what changes in Sisyphus' life would give it meaning and answered his question controversially: if the gods changed Sisyphus' psychology so that his deepest desire was to roll the stone up the hill forever, his life would then be meaningful.

Most philosophers nowadays respond by noting that although Sisyphus' desire might make his life *seem* meaningful to him, that does not make it so:

[Taylor's] view is far too permissive, once we remember to disambiguate the notion of a life being meaningful *for* someone. Just as a food can be unhealthy for a person even if she thinks it is healthy, a life can be meaningless for someone even if she thinks it is meaningful. It may be that the Willing Sisyphus *finds* his life meaningful, but in truth it is the same old pointless drudgery. (Kauppinen 2012, 356)

Daan Evers is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Groningen. He specializes in metaethics.

Gerlinde Emma van Smeden has a BSc in psychology and a BA in philosophy from the University of Groningen. She is currently studying for an MA degree in philosophy at Groningen.

Although contemporary philosophers widely reject the idea that either desire satisfaction or feelings of fulfillment are sufficient for a meaningful life, they are divided about whether a subjective condition is nonetheless *required*. Susan Wolf (2010) famously defends a hybrid view, according to which “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (9). According to Wolf, a life is meaningful just in case the subject feels fulfilled by engaging in projects of objective worth. Sisyphus’ work would not meet the latter condition.

Although Wolf’s view is often described as the standard one, it is increasingly controversial due to the rise of pure objectivism (Kauppinen 2012,¹ Metz 2013, Smuts 2013, Bramble 2015). Pure objectivists deny that a meaningful life requires feelings of fulfillment or other positive attitudes. In this paper, we defend the hybrid view against this trend. We start in section 1 by distinguishing different kinds of subjective requirement and settle on a condition of valuing. In section 2, we consider recent objections to Wolf’s “fitting fulfillment view” and argue that they are not clearly successful. In section 3, we argue that our modified version (the “fitting valuing view”) is even more robust. Finally, in section 4, we argue that pure objectivists face problems of their own and provide some positive reasons for accepting a subjective condition on a meaningful life.

1. KINDS OF SUBJECTIVE CONDITION

Even if one rejects Taylor’s pure subjectivism, one may still think the quality of life from the inside matters to a meaningful life. However, one can take different views about the nature of the subjective requirement. One option is to make desire satisfaction central. A straightforward hybrid view in which desire satisfaction is key says that a life is more meaningful the more the subject’s desires for objectively valuable things are fulfilled. Such a view is distinct from one according to which *feelings of fulfillment* are required.² For desires can be satisfied without one’s knowledge, and it seems desires can be fulfilled even though it leaves one feeling empty (the latter may not be possible for all desires, or under all conditions). It may also be the case that having

¹ It is not entirely clear whether Kauppinen is a pure objectivist. His analysis of a meaningful life as one in which certain feelings and attitudes *would be appropriate* suggests that they need not actually be felt or had (2012, 353). However, he may believe that some of the relevant attitudes would not be appropriate unless the subject was in fact in certain subjective states.

² Such a view, in turn, is distinct from one which requires the judgement *that* one’s life is meaningful, which seems much less plausible unless such a judgement *consists in* certain positive experiences or attitudes.

pleasure is objectively valuable, even though the satisfaction of desires for pleasure may not induce feelings of fulfillment:

Riding a roller coaster, meeting a movie star, eating a hot fudge sundae, finding a great dress on sale can all give one pleasure, even intense pleasure. They are unlikely to contribute to a sense of fulfillment, however, and it would not be difficult to imagine a person who has an abundance of opportunities for such pleasures still finding something (subjectively) lacking in her life. (Wolf 2010, 14)

In general, desires can be more or less shallow and more or less central to one's self-conception. It seems reasonable to restrict the attitudes relevant to a meaningful life to those more closely connected to one's values. This may have to be restricted further: perhaps most of us value staying alive, but even if that aim is also objectively valuable, its realization hardly adds to the meaning of our lives (at least under most conditions).³ This is probably because being alive is an enabler of meaning: we first need to *have* a life in order for the question of its meaning to arise.⁴ "Passive" value states should also be excluded, such as valuing that others do not suffer hunger. It is doubtful that one's own life gains meaning from the fact that others have sufficient access to food, unless one somehow contributes to that state of affairs (see also Luper 2014).

Susan Wolf's fitting fulfillment view explains why passive value states are insufficient for meaning. According to Wolf, the subjective element necessary for a meaningful life arises from *active engagement* with something that one loves, which means that passive attachment to objectively valuable things is insufficient for meaning.

Wolf motivates her hybrid view by identifying two different human needs that seem connected to questions about meaning. First, concerns about meaning can arise from the need to feel engaged, as opposed to bored or alienated. This relates to the subjective quality of life. But, second, concerns about meaning can also arise from the need to contribute to something larger than oneself. Wolf interprets the latter as a need to contribute to something of more than merely personal value (something the value of which is not merely a function of one's own desires or concerns).

In light of this, Wolf settles on a view according to which one's life is meaningful to the extent that one feels fulfilled by active engagement with something of objective (i.e., more than merely personal) value. Feelings of

³ It may also be possible to deny that staying alive is properly a *value* for most people at most points in their life.

⁴ Another possibility is that it is (ordinarily) too easy to realize the aim of staying alive. But this is less persuasive: even if it is relatively easy to keep one's child alive, making sure it does might add to the meaning of one's life.

fulfillment would arise when “one is doing what one loves, or when one is engaging in activities by which one is gripped or excited” (2010, 14). We think Wolf’s view is close to being right, but will argue that she puts too much emphasis on feelings of fulfillment as opposed to their source: the active pursuit of valued projects. As we will see in the next section, emphasizing feelings as opposed to valuing makes her view hostage to an empirical issue that is hard to settle: whether actively realizing one’s values necessarily gives rise to feelings of fulfillment. It also invites questions about the relative weight of such feelings versus neutral or negative ones, especially if feelings of fulfillment are difficult to sustain. One may not always feel fulfilled even by pursuing what one loves. If so, one either has to place disproportionate value on such feelings when they occur, or significantly lower one’s estimate of the meaningfulness of lives devoted to highly valued (and objectively valuable) projects.

For these reasons, we think it more promising to say that meaning arises when subjective *valuing* meets objective *valuableness*: what suffices for meaning is not that the subject feels fulfilled or realizes her desires, nor that she realizes objectively valuable things, but that she engages in projects that she subjectively values and that are objectively valuable. It is possible that this often leads to feelings of fulfillment, but they are not essential.

What might the state of valuing be? This is not quite clear. It is probably not the same as desiring, since one can value an event in the past without desiring it. Conversely, one can desire something without valuing it (drugs, perhaps). Valuing also seems distinct from loving, except in a loose sense. One can value that one’s house has a proper foundation, without loving that fact. Blackburn (1998, chap. 1, sec. 3) thinks that someone’s values are stable (nonfleeting) dispositions to various emotions and behaviors. This seems plausible and will suffice for now. We will say a bit more about valuing in section 3.

Before turning to criticisms of Wolf’s view, it may be useful to distinguish between theories of meaning as theories about life’s meaningfulness on the whole and its meaningfulness at a time.⁵ However, we are inclined to think that the meaningfulness of a life at a time should be a function of the meaningfulness of larger stretches of that life. For example, even if Wolf’s view is plausible, it would be strange to say that the life of a passionate philosopher is meaningless at this particular moment just because she is currently bored by the paper she is reading. It does not seem strange to say that her life lacked meaning at a time in virtue of its location in a larger interval during which she structurally suffered from indifference.

⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for forcing us to think about this issue.

In the next section, we will first consider whether recent criticisms undermine Wolf's *fitting fulfillment* view and argue that it is unclear. Then, we will show that our *fitting valuing* version fares even better in the face of the objections.

2. COUNTEREXAMPLES TO THE FITTING FULFILLMENT VIEW

Wolf's view that feelings of fulfillment are necessary for a meaningful life has recently been challenged (Metz 2013, Smuts 2013, Bramble 2015). The challenges mostly take the form of (alleged) counterexamples. One of these is the case of George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*. Ben Bramble describes it as follows:

When George discovers he has been framed for fraud and is soon to be arrested, he is so despondent that he goes to the town bridge to throw himself off it. He is saved by Clarence, his guardian angel, who takes him on a tour of Bedford Falls (now "Pottersville," after the nefarious Mr. Potter) as it would have been had he, George, never existed. Everyone is much worse off. His mother is a bitter landlady. His friends (the local bartender and policeman) are ungenerous, unhappy people. The local pharmacist, whom George had prevented from accidentally poisoning a child, is in prison. George's younger brother, having not been saved from drowning by George when they were children, did not go on to become a war hero, and so did not himself save countless lives. Worst of all, George's beloved Mary is a dejected spinster. Seeing all this restores George's will to live, and he is returned to reality, whereupon he dashes home to be reunited with his family. (2015, 9–10)

The example is intended to persuade us that one need not feel fulfilled in order to have a meaningful life. What George's guardian angel allegedly showed him was that his life was meaningful though he did not feel fulfilled. Bramble's diagnosis is that it suffices for a meaningful life that the world is better off because of one's existence. Aaron Smuts (2013) appeals to the same example in order to show that Wolf's account is wrong:

If George had not been shaken out of his mistaken evaluation, if his guardian angel had not given him a glimpse of Pottersville, George's life would still have been meaningful. He would not have realized it. In fact, he probably would have killed himself. Indeed, he would have died without a sense of fulfillment. But this would not make his life meaningless; it was high in meaning either way. (2013, 546–47)

Bramble's and Smuts' reasoning is as follows: when we ask what Clarence was trying to get George to realize, a natural answer is the meaningfulness of his life. Clarence does this by pointing to George's contributions to the lives of others, and not at all by pointing to feelings of fulfillment or his inner life

more generally. If that strategy is natural, it suggests that a life can be meaningful even if it lacks fulfillment.

However, whether Clarence was indeed trying to show that George's life was meaningful is not clear. Perhaps he was trying to show that George's life was valuable in respects he did not previously notice in order to persuade him to go on. But persuading a person to go on need not be a matter of persuading him that life was meaningful even prior to a sense of engagement or fulfillment. As Frans Svensson notes:

it is not characteristically the case that once one gets out of a depressive episode one realizes that one's life was in fact meaningful all along, even though it might be the case that while depressed one was actually able to fulfil most of one's duties at work, to help friends and family members with various tasks, to take part in social gatherings, or whatever . . . (unpublished manuscript)

In other words, Clarence's revelations may help to set George on a course to meaningful participation.

One may also ask why Clarence's appeal to the effects of George's life on his environment should be a natural approach. That may well depend on the assumption that George did at least *care* about his job and the people in his life, which could reflect the idea that a life spent doing things one is indifferent to is hardly meaningful.

But perhaps the foregoing does not quite address the objection. Even granting that George cared about many things in his life, he clearly harbored false beliefs about the difference he made with respect to them. For this reason, he may have lacked feelings of fulfillment. Some may be tempted to say that a life spent in successful pursuit of valuable projects that one also deeply cares about is meaningful regardless of such feelings or beliefs about success.⁶

There are two cases to consider: one in which the subject falsely believes to be unsuccessful, and one in which the subject is unsure or lacks beliefs. Let us start with the first case. Either the subject with false beliefs acquires some feelings of fulfillment from the *attempt* to achieve what she cares for, or she does not. If she does, then Wolf could insist that her life was not completely meaningless, and the example does not clearly undermine her view. On the other hand, if the subject lacks feelings of fulfillment from trying to achieve her goals, Wolf may question whether she really values the projects she is committed to. Is it really possible to lack all satisfaction from trying to achieve something that one values very much?

⁶ Our fitting valuing version of the hybrid view entails that this is right, which means that the current reading of *It's A Wonderful Life* is not a problem for it. We will return to the issue in section 3.

One may also ask *why* the subject has systematically false beliefs about her success. One option is that she is systematically deceived. That, however, seems to have an impact on the meaning of her life negatively and compromises the force of the example. Another option is that the subject lacks various cognitive capacities which allow her to acquire reliable beliefs. But that, too, appears to compromise the force of the example. Being subject to a systematic disconnect between one's activities and beliefs about one's activities seems like a state that diminishes the quality, and plausibly the meaning, of one's life.

What we need, then, is an example in which the subject is neither subject to deception, nor cognitively impaired in some systematic way. Perhaps such an example can be found. But we need further qualifications. There is something problematic about someone who spends large periods of her life engaged in activities she believes herself to be very bad at. Doing that may lack objective value and reduce the meaning of her life significantly, perhaps to the point where it outweighs the positive value of her achievements. This is not to say that the value of the outcomes cannot be very high. The question is whether the contribution it makes to the meaningfulness of her life is great enough to offset the negative value of stubbornly trying to do what she believes herself to be very bad at.

The second case is one in which the person simply lacks beliefs about her success at pursuing objectively valuable goals she cares about: perhaps she is unsure. Again we face a choice: either the person acquires some feelings of fulfillment from the attempt to achieve her goals, or not. If she does, then Wolf could insist that her life was not completely meaningless and the example does not clearly undermine her view. If she does not, then she may question her commitment to the goals. Is it really possible to lack all feelings of fulfillment from pursuing what one deeply cares about? This seems most plausible if one does not even *hope* to be successful. But if one lacks hope yet spends one's life trying to achieve something anyway, its meaning is in doubt.

Let us leave the case of George, then. Bramble (2015) provides a different case against the hybrid view as well. The idea is that there would have been something to say to Einstein had he suffered from a crisis of meaning.⁷

⁷ Bramble asks whether we would find Einstein's life any less a paradigm of meaningfulness if he "thought about mathematics only to silence voices in his head that were preventing him from getting to sleep at night, and . . . had no passion for anything in his life, let alone solving those blasted math problems" (2015, 8). Although it might be unclear whether his life was entirely devoid of meaning, we do rather suspect it would not be among the *paradigms* of meaningful ones under these conditions (part of the clear-cut cases that need to be accommodated).

Similarly, there would have been something to say to Sisyphus, should his rock rolling have had beneficial consequences:

Suppose this Sisyphus, in the grip of a crisis of meaning, were about to throw himself off the mountain, but we had one last chance to communicate with him. Here's what I would say: "Wait, Sisyphus! Don't do it! You don't realize it, but your rock rolling is averting a great deal of suffering. It's scaring off vultures that would otherwise attack nearby villagers and spread disease." This seems like a perfectly appropriate thing to say, and its clear implication is that his life has meaning—meaning that he hasn't been aware of. In telling him about the vultures, I'd be helping him to discover some meaning that his life already has.

But if Wolf were right that passion is necessary for meaning, then there would be no positive news to give to Sisyphus. If he were to look to the heavens and cry, "O ye gods, what reason have I to live?" we ought to remain silent. He has no passion for anything he is doing, and so, on Wolf's view, no reason to go on living. This it seems to me, is highly implausible. (2015, 3)

Despite what Bramble says, the fact that it would be appropriate to point to valuable consequences of Sisyphus' labor does not clearly imply that his life had meaning all along. The appeal might be appropriate because there is moral value in continuing his work. Or the appeal might be appropriate because it highlights features of his life that he might yet care about. For not all reasons that exist are reasons that we have. If Sisyphus does not care about the effects that we reveal, we have not given *him* a reason to live, though there may well be such reasons. Whether reasons should also resonate with an individual is precisely what is at stake in the debate about the hybrid theory and its objectivist competitors.⁸

So it is not clear that the foregoing examples are successful against Wolf's hybrid view. The same goes for a different one by Thaddeus Metz (2013). Metz rejects the necessity of feelings of fulfillment because one can imagine "someone who volunteers to be bored so that others do not suffer boredom" (183). Metz also thinks we can imagine that this person lacks positive attitudes toward her condition. This seems unobvious to us. Although someone who volunteers to be bored so that others do not suffer boredom may hate *being bored*, she can hardly hate *the prevention of boredom*. Volunteering to be bored would be unintelligible unless there was something about it she considered worthwhile. And she had better consider it to be *very* important. For the example is not nearly as convincing if she temporarily felt it would be nice to

⁸ We think this response suffices for a *defense* of the hybrid view against the objection, especially when combined with the desiderata for a theory of meaning that we motivate in section 4. Our response does not by itself give objectivists strong reason to abandon their view.

do. So now we have to consider whether someone who volunteers to be bored because she is committed to the value of preventing boredom lacks feelings of fulfillment in her life. That is unobvious, if such feelings can result not just from doing something one loves doing, but also from knowing that one contributes to something of great personal value. This seems quite possible to us.

It would not be reasonable to reply that we can simply *stipulate* that the subject will lack feelings of fulfillment, since it may not be a coherent stipulation. In order to settle this matter definitively, one would have to delve deeper into the psychology of value. However, one could tweak the scenario as follows: suppose someone volunteers to be bored in such a way that once she is put in her bored condition, she will have forgotten why it obtains and loses her attachment to its value. Might her life not be meaningful despite this?

Notice first that the meaningfulness of such a life might still be explained by a view that requires feelings of fulfillment. The subject may have had those just before she made her choice (to take on her boredom), knowing the difference she was about to make. This would require a view about the relative weighting of feelings of fulfillment and extended periods of boredom. This is not obviously impossible, but proponents of a subjective requirement can also insist that intuitions about the case are unstable. It is unclear what to make of a life of boredom whose subject is largely ignorant of the reason and lacks the ability to change it.⁹

So this example by Metz does not clearly sink the hybrid view. But he provides another reason to reject it: according to Metz, one's life can also acquire meaning by taking negative attitudes toward things that merit them. This would show that Wolf's "passion requirement" is false: one need not be involved in something one loves doing. The latter may be strictly true. Metz's example of someone who suffers in order to prevent suffering in others may suffice for this purpose. But it does not clearly show that feelings of fulfillment are not required for a meaningful life, so long as these can also result from the knowledge of contributing to something that one values.

What to make of cases where one takes negative attitudes toward objects that merit them? There are at least two cases to consider. The first is that of someone who passively hates various things, such as a person who spends her life on the sofa watching documentaries about genocide. This seems clearly insufficient, and Metz would agree. Passivity does not suffice for meaning on almost any view.¹⁰ The second case is that of someone who actively pursues

⁹ The latter must be assumed in the second scenario, because else the subject would simply start doing something else.

¹⁰ This is one reason why a life spent in the experience machine will not count as meaningful. Another is that the objective value of the experiences had in the machine may not suffice for a meaningful life on the whole.

the prevention of (say) suffering because she is convinced of its disvalue. With respect to this latter example, it seems reasonable to maintain that disvaluing something entails valuing its absence. If so, proponents of the fitting fulfillment view could speculate that actively pursuing something that one values will not leave one unfulfilled.

3. COUNTEREXAMPLES TO THE FITTING VALUING VIEW

So, none of the alleged counterexamples to Wolf's view is clearly successful. However, our defense contains speculative elements with respect to moral psychology. We have relied on the idea that the state of valuing is necessarily related to feelings of fulfillment under certain conditions. This may perhaps be questioned. It is certainly not the case that doing something one values *always* induces feelings of fulfillment. This point is illustrated by an example of Bramble's:

The Master Economist. Alice spends her days managing the economy, something only she (given her talents) can do. She finds it utter drudgery, but knows she must continue because of all the good she is doing. (2015, 4)

It is at least unclear to what extent Alice has feelings of fulfillment (although she may have some when contemplating the value of her work). However, if these feelings are relatively fleeting, one would have to put a lot of weight on them in order to judge her life meaningful on the whole. After all, most of her life is spent in utter boredom.¹¹ The implication that her life is meaningless can be avoided by shifting the emphasis from feelings of fulfillment to what gives rise to them: the active pursuit of projects that one values. This *fitting valuing view*, according to which meaning arises when subjective valuing meets objective value, is even better suited to deal with the previous objections, as we will argue presently.¹²

However, separating feelings of fulfillment from their source in the values held by agents invites the question why a subjective element should still be required.¹³ If one can have a meaningful life even though one is bored most of the time (like Alice), why wouldn't it suffice to contribute to objectively valuable things? That is a fair question, and it brings us back to our initial discussion of the nature of valuing.

¹¹ At least on the assumption that being engaged in something that one considers drudgery diminishes the meaning of one's life.

¹² We will not revisit Bramble's case of Sisyphus whose rock rolling has beneficial consequences unbeknownst to him, since our response to that example does not essentially depend on the nature of the subjective requirement in a hybrid view.

¹³ We are grateful to two anonymous referees for this journal for bringing this up.

We said that one's values do not coincide with one's desires. They are stable dispositions to various feelings and behaviors. That is not a sufficient condition either, however: an addict may have a stable disposition to crave and search for drugs, although using drugs need not be one of her values. We would like to suggest that our values (or at least those central to meaning in life) are those stable dispositions that we wholeheartedly endorse. Wholeheartedness can be understood in terms of the absence of tension and undecidedness, along the lines of Frankfurt (1988, chap. 12). But we need a further qualification: one can recognize the value of something (the existence of charities, perhaps, or biodiversity) without wanting to structure one's life around its promotion or protection. We would like to suggest that the kinds of values that primarily matter to meaning in life are wholehearted commitments of the agent to pursuing various aims. Not everything one judges to be valuable constitutes a value of the agent's in our sense. Let us call the latter kind of value an *agential value*.

We think the considerations in favor of a subjective requirement primarily point to a condition of pursuing agential values: values one is happy to structure one's life around. Wolf points to the fact that a life of boredom and alienation appears to be inconsistent with meaning, and one common form of advice is to "find one's passion" when in the grip of existential doubts (2010, 11). It might seem that boredom immediately rules out Alice's having a meaningful life. However, boredom is most plausibly a threat to meaning if it results from a lack of commitment to one's pursuits. Insofar as Alice is wholeheartedly committed to managing the economy—if she has embraced it as one of her agential values—her life may well seem meaningful (even to those with subjectivist sympathies). But if Alice merely recognizes the importance of the economy without being wholeheartedly committed to its management, her condition is more troubling.

Wolf does, of course, say that "a person's life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some thing or things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or, as I earlier put it, if she loves something—as opposed to being bored by or alienated from most or all that she does" (2010, 9). Some of these requirements simply seem too strong. We do not need to be (more or less stably) gripped or excited by our pursuits. Wolf may well agree, given that she offers us a list: caring deeply about something need not induce excitement, and the relevance of boredom is clearly as a sign of alienation. So it seems to us that the pursuit of one's agential values fits comfortably with Wolf's original motivation for a subjective requirement for meaning. Such pursuit may induce feelings of fulfillment, but what primarily matters is not those feelings themselves, but what gives rise to them. This shift in emphasis allows the hybrid view to answer some of the previous objections more convincingly.

The first objection was based on George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*. George did not feel fulfilled by his life, but the angel showed him that he made a positive difference nonetheless. This example was supposed to persuade us that feelings of fulfillment are not necessary for a meaningful life. However, when we identify the subjective requirement as *active engagement with projects that one values*, much of the strength of the example disappears. For part of its force depends on George's subsequent realization that he did achieve some things he already cared about.¹⁴ If he did not care about most things he was pursuing in his life, we would be more reluctant to say that it was meaningful (although we may be happy to say it was valuable in other ways). But if we suppose that George already valued many of the things he was actively involved in (like maintaining a good relationship with his mother or saving his younger brother from drowning), his case is not a counterexample to the view that requires active pursuit of valued projects.

Of course, some of the positive differences George made were beyond his intentional control: George was hardly actively involved in his brother's status as a war hero. But it seems implausible that valuable, but unintended, consequences could suffice for a meaningful life. If they did, grasses could have meaningful existences, as well as forces and dimensions (we will return to this in section 4). It would also allow one's life to become meaningful in virtue of unforeseen events in the distant future, like the birth of a good person whose existence indirectly depends on one's own. That seems too inclusive and would make the assessment of the overall meaning of people's lives practically impossible.

We considered an alternative reading of the example with George Bailey. On that reading, George did care about many of the things he was involved with, but was either ignorant of the difference he made with respect to them or falsely believed to be completely unsuccessful. Notice that this also fails as a counterexample to the claim that it is necessary for a meaningful life that one is actively involved in projects that one values. For we have stipulated that George did care about (or valued) many of the things he was involved with in his life.

It's A Wonderful Life does raise the following issue: to what extent does the meaning of one's life depend merely on *activities* of value? Two questions are

¹⁴ One might think the example shows that active engagement in valued projects is too restrictive as a requirement on meaning. Perhaps one's life can also acquire meaning through the relations in which one stands to other people. If one makes a person very happy just by being there or going for a walk with them, we might be reluctant to describe this as a matter of actively pursuing valued projects. However, we see no reason not to understand this abstract phrase so as to encompass activities like spending time with people. Our view does rule out that one's own life can become meaningful merely by loving someone and being loved, where this is a matter of attitudes and not at all of action. But action (in the broadest possible sense) prompted by such attitudes will count toward the meaning of one's life.

relevant here: first, could one-off acts of kindness not contribute to the meaning of one's life, and, second, does the value of certain activities not depend on the value of their (hoped for) consequences? Both points are fair, but compatible with the fitting valuing view. The first is accommodated by understanding "activity" broadly: it encompasses not just practicing the cello, say, but also one-off acts of kindness.¹⁵ It does seem plausible, however, that meaning is primarily a function of the active pursuit of one's agential values. With respect to the second point, it is important to remember that the fitting valuing view also takes into account the objective value of a person's projects. That value may sometimes depend on consequences. For example, if a charity is completely ineffective, a life spent working for it may not be fully meaningful. Whether such a life lacks meaning altogether depends not just on other aspects of that life, but also on the question whether it was reasonable for the subject to *believe* the work would be effective. For the distinction between the value of an activity from the limited epistemic perspective of an agent and its value in light of all the facts is not the same as the distinction between the subjective or objective *nature* of its value. The fitting valuing view can allow that it is, to some extent, objectively valuable to engage in something of which it is reasonable to believe that it will be effective, even if it will not.

Thaddeus Metz (2013) objects to the necessity of fulfillment on the basis of his thought experiment of a person who volunteers to be bored so that others will not suffer boredom. In response, we pointed out that anyone who does this must value the prevention of boredom. And we speculated that this person might experience feelings of fulfillment from knowing that her action has this positive result. But even if this is false, the example does not work against the fitting valuing view, according to which life is meaningful in virtue of actively pursuing objectively valuable projects that one cares about.

So it seems the fitting valuing view is even less vulnerable to the examples offered against Wolf's subjective requirement. However, we also think that if they did pose a problem, it would be hasty to reject a subjective element on their basis. For intuitions about meaning may pull in different directions. Insofar as a coherent view is to be had at all, we may have to prioritize some at the expense of others. In the next section, we will argue that some very central and widely shared intuitions can boost a hybrid view's justification.

4. MOTIVATING THE SUBJECTIVE CONDITION

According to pure objectivist views, lives can be meaningful merely in virtue of promoting (or respecting) independent value. Take Aaron Smuts' "Good

¹⁵ So long as one does wholeheartedly endorse such actions.

Cause Account of the Meaning of Life” (2013); Smuts claims that one’s life is meaningful to the extent that one promotes the good (which he conceives of as metaphysically objective or mind-independent). Unlike Wolf, Smuts thinks that if Sisyphus’ rock rolling scared away vultures that would otherwise kill the inhabitants of a nearby village, his life would be meaningful. This would be so whether or not the effect was intended or even known.

Smuts’ view has odd consequences. The claim that life is meaningful merely in virtue of promoting independent value entails that stones, rivers, and forces can have meaningful existences. All these things can contribute to valuable things, like providing sustenance to animals (rivers) or enabling anything complex at all to exist (forces). A reasonable theory about the meaning of life should explain why it seems natural to ascribe meaning to *lives* in particular, and unnatural to ascribe it to the existence of inanimate objects or forces. (By this we do not mean that rivers and forces do not have value, but only that the kind of value that constitutes meaning does not seem applicable to them.)

It is also natural to judge that the life of a person who consciously strives to achieve certain things (and has a certain amount of success) is more meaningful than that of someone who is unconscious throughout her life, although she happens to promote the same amount of value. This is hard to explain if all that matters is promotion of the good. Intentional agency appears at least to *enhance* meaning, and intentional agency in turn appears to require *consciousness*.

If one accepts the idea that rivers and stones cannot have meaningful existences, or that meaning is a property of lives, one is pushed towards a view according to which meaning is not just tied to lives, but to *conscious* lives in particular. For it is unclear what the difference is between a rock and a permanently unconscious human being that could give the latter a meaningful existence, but not the former.

The foregoing suggests two desiderata for a plausible theory of meaning: first, it should explain why it seems natural to apply the concept to lives instead of inanimate objects. Second, it should explain why meaning appears to be enhanced by conscious goal-setting and achieving. Notice that these desiderata are clearly respected by a hybrid view that ties meaning to the active pursuit of valued aims (as both Wolf’s view and our own do). Since one cannot have goals nor actively pursue them without being alive, the view respects the first desideratum. Since the active pursuit of valued aims plausibly requires consciousness, the view also makes good sense of the second one.

Also note how natural it is to relate the concept of meaning to the concept of *purpose*, which is what motivates some philosophers to connect meaning to the setting of goals, either by ourselves (Luper 2014) or a supernatural being

(Cottingham 2005). A hybrid view of the kind described by us makes sense of this third desideratum, as it requires that the subject be engaged in pursuing value.

A fourth desideratum is suggested by Susan Wolf. According to her, a meaningful life should appeal to the person living it (2010, 21). This is one of her much neglected reasons for introducing a subjective condition in the first place. Perhaps it is too strong to call it a desideratum, but we have seen that even an objectivist like Bramble thinks there is some relation between explaining why a life is meaningful and giving reasons to live.¹⁶ Even if one rejects this claim as a desideratum, it does suggest something to explain. For many people who long for meaning do not simply long for doing good, but also for a kind of *connectedness* to the good they do. A hybrid view provides a natural explanation of this phenomenon, unlike objectivist views.

Of course, Wolf's idea faces the objection that it seems possible to discover that one's life was meaningful at an earlier time when one did not feel fulfilled. Bramble and Smuts push this objection by appeal to *It's A Wonderful Life*. We have already argued that this example is not as troubling for the hybrid view as these philosophers think, and that our own view is not touched by it. But even if these responses fail, we are not forced to reject a subjective condition for that reason. Why should the apparent possibility of discovering that one's life was meaningful before one (ever) felt fulfilled or valued anything count more heavily against the necessity of a subjective component than the apparent fact that yearning for meaning involves yearning for connectedness? One could reasonably argue that connectedness wins, since there is a clear ordinary sense in which things can be meaningful *to someone*, but no clear ordinary sense in which things can be meaningful, but not to anyone.

Furthermore, the idea that meaningfulness does not involve a subjective component itself has counterintuitive implications. This is so even if we reject Smuts' ultrademocratic consequentialism according to which forces and dimensions can have meaningful "lifespans." Imagine a world whose only inhabitants live in a continuous state of emotional neutrality. Nobody cares about anything at all, whether it be knowledge or beauty or what have you. Further suppose that its inhabitants nonetheless acquire lots of nontrivial knowledge and create lots of things of beauty. Unfortunately, none of what

¹⁶ Although, Bramble also makes a distinction between self-interested reasons to live and reasons that show that life is worth living in a sense relevant to meaning (2015, 9). However, we can make a further distinction in the latter class of reasons between reasons to live *that exist* and reasons to live *that one has* or *that resonate with one*. We are not convinced that concerns about meaning in life are answered by appeal to something the subject can be entirely indifferent to.

they do will ever be enjoyed by anyone. Pure objectivists may have to allow that such people can live very meaningful lives in virtue of producing all that (wasted) value. But that is far from clear.¹⁷

One thing the example might suggest is that having a meaningful life requires that *someone at some time* cares about some of the things that one is doing. It need not mean that *the agent* needs to care herself. In other words, the thought experiment may suggest one particular value that should be on the list of good consequences a meaningful life should be instrumental in producing: the value of improving people's lives (a view like this is suggested by Bramble 2015).

However, one may wonder in what *sense* people's lives would be improved by allowing them to enjoy or value knowledge or beautiful things. A pure objectivist cannot say that introducing caring and enjoyment improves people's lives by *making them meaningful*. For that would be to agree with us that a subjective component is necessary. What objectivists must say is that people who value and enjoy things of objective value have greater *welfare* than people who do not. It could then be claimed that a person's life can be meaningful in virtue of promoting other people's welfare, whether or not that person values or enjoys doing so herself.

Now, it is true that one can say this, but we are not forced to do so. It is equally reasonable to hold that a life spent producing things one does not care about lacks meaning. In fact, this seems more reasonable in light of the considerations in this section: a view that requires a subjective element respects the need for engagement, explains why meaning is connected to purpose and is naturally ascribed to conscious lives.

CONCLUSION

Several contemporary philosophers reject Susan Wolf's hybrid view about the meaning of life, according to which it involves feelings of fulfillment as a result of active engagement with projects of objective worth. We have argued that extant counterexamples are not clearly successful, that pure objectivist views face challenges of their own and struggle to explain core desiderata for a theory of meaning. These results strengthen the case for what used to be the standard view. However, we have also argued that the best version of the hybrid view requires that the subject be engaged in projects she values, not that she feels fulfilled. For it is unclear to what extent doing what one values

¹⁷ Whether they do have to allow this depends on their substantive axiology. For example, if pure objectivists think knowledge and beauty are intrinsically valuable only insofar as they are enjoyed, they avoid the problem. The final three paragraphs of this section bear on that issue.

inevitably causes feelings of fulfillment. This fitting valuing view is even more robust in the face of contemporary objections to a hybrid theory about the meaning in life.¹⁸

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