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Asymmetric Welfarism about Meaning in Life

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Doctoral Thesis

The University of Edinburgh

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Declaration

I, Chad Mason Stevenson, declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Chad Mason Stevenson

Date

Abstract

This thesis is guided by the following question: what, if anything, makes a life meaningful? My answer to this question is *asymmetric welfarism about meaning in life*. According to asymmetric welfarism, the meaning of a life depends upon two factors. First, a life is conferred meaning insofar as it promotes or protects the well-being of other welfare subjects. Second, a life is made meaningless insofar as it decreases or minimises the well-being of other welfare subjects. The meaning of a life is determined by the net balance between these two factors; the more the good outweighs the bad, the more meaningful a life that is.

I argue that asymmetric welfarism is the most plausible theory about meaning in life. To do this, I show how such a view captures a variety of intuitions about meaning in life while defending it from objections. This is the business of chapters 1, 2, and 3. Specifically, chapter 1 lays the groundwork, chapter 2 advances the case in favour of asymmetric welfarism, while chapter 3 defends asymmetric welfarism from objections.

But some objections cannot be so easily overturned by a mere argument. Such objections do not just count against asymmetric welfarism, but also support competing theories. In order to overcome both, I show how such objections, and the theories they motivate, are best understood as tracking a different, but related, evaluative dimension a life can have. This is the business of chapters 4, 5, and 6. Specifically, chapter 4 argues that subjective theories are best understood as being about fulfilment, chapter 5 argues that purpose theories are best understood as being about purpose, and chapter 6 argues that differing views about the role of morality confuse morality and significance with meaning. These other evaluative dimensions which stand alongside meaning in life are fulfilment, purpose, significance, morality, and prudential value.

Lay Summary

Everyone wants to live a meaningful life. Or, at the very least, we would rather our lives not be meaningless. What then, if anything, makes a life meaningful? This thesis proposes an answer to that question: a life is meaningful insofar as others are made better off from that life having been. I call this view *asymmetric welfarism*. I think asymmetric welfarism is the most plausible theory about meaning in life and the aim of this thesis is to convince you that it is too.

But there are many answers as to what makes life meaningful; why think mine is more plausible than those? To show why we should accept asymmetric welfarism, I deploy a strategy involving three basic moves. First, I provide arguments in favour of asymmetric welfarism, showing how such a view captures our intuitions about meaningfulness in some important ways. Second, I consider objections to such a view and work to show how these pose no threat. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are dedicated to developing these first two moves.

However, sometimes an objection is so well rooted in our collective consciousness that a mere response to it will not suffice, no matter how good that response might be. In cases such as these, I make my third move, which is to explain that those objections, and the intuitions which motivate them, are best understood as tracking a different evaluative dimension a life can have. These other evaluative dimensions are closely related to, or overlap with, meaning in life. But we should recognise that these evaluative dimensions are distinct from meaning. Those other evaluative dimensions include prudential value (what is good for the person whose life it is), fulfilment, purpose, significance, and morality. Chapters 4, 5, and 6, are dedicated to developing this third and final move.

The key take away from this thesis is that asymmetric welfarism is the most plausible theory about what makes life meaningful.

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And now, here's the meaning of life... well, it's nothing very special...

Monty Python's The Meaning of Life

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Introduction

In this thesis I advance a theory about meaning in life I call *asymmetric welfarism*. On this account, determining the meaning of a life is dependent upon two factors. First, a life is made meaningful insofar as it promotes, increases, preserves, or protects the well-being of other welfare subjects. Second, a life is made meaningless insofar it decreases, minimises, or does nothing for the well-being of other welfare subjects. The meaning of a life is determined by the net balance between these two described factors. The more the good outweighs the bad the more meaningful that life is; the more the bad outweighs the good the more meaningless that life is. I argue asymmetric welfarism is the most plausible theory about meaning in life.

Broadly speaking, my strategy for advancing asymmetric welfarism is a simple one involving three basic moves. First, I outline an objection which poses a significant hurdle for asymmetric welfarism. Second, I provide a reply, or set of replies, for that objection. And third, I provide a plausible *alternative evaluative dimension* that, I argue, the objection should be understood as tracking. By providing a reply and dovetailing it with an alternative explanation, I hope to provide a rigorous case for asymmetric welfarism. In short, the aim of this thesis is to show how asymmetric welfarism is the most plausible theory about meaning in life.

This thesis proceeds as follows. In **chapter 1** I deal with preliminary topics which, collectively, serve as the foundation for the thesis. These include (i) motivating and outlining the thesis topic, (ii) how we might broach the subject matter of meaning, and (iii) an explanation and defence of my chosen methodology. I argue we have good theoretical and personal reasons for pursuing an answer as to what, if anything, makes a life meaningful. I detail two approaches often deployed within the literature for getting at the subject matter - paradigm cases and existential angst - which are used to help evaluate theories. I end by describing my chosen methodology, which is a combination of (a) finding the most plausible theory, and (b) finding a theory which best fits into our shared network of related ideas and concepts.

In **chapter 2** I outline and motivate asymmetric welfarism. I begin by describing and motivating asymmetric welfarism, and show how we have strong intuitions which favour it. I show how asymmetric welfarism accounts for both paradigm cases and existential angst and respond to objections as they arise.

In **chapter 3** I defend asymmetric welfarism against a variety of objections. These objections arise due to the seemingly counterintuitive results asymmetric welfarism is thought to produce across a variety of thought-experiments. These objections include, (i) whether animals or objects have the capacity for meaning, (ii) to what extent, if any, luck or responsibility play into a meaningful life, (iii), to what extent, if any, hard work confers meaning, (iv) the relationship

between meaning and uniqueness, and (v) whether meaning can be conferred through self-harm. I argue none of these objections work. In addition, I develop two popular objections made against ethical consequentialism - the repugnant conclusion and the utility monster - into versions which directly attack asymmetric welfarism. I argue we have good reason for rejecting all these objections.

Chapter 4 examines the relationship between subjectivity and meaningfulness. I outline what I take to be the primary motivating force behind subjectivism, what I call the anti-alienation intuition, i.e., that it is highly counterintuitive to suggest a life could be meaningful if a person is alienated from their own life. I argue a subjective condition is neither sufficient nor necessary for meaning in life. I argue subjectivism is not sufficient because it produces counterintuitive results. Attempts to curtail these counterintuitive results by producing more sophisticated versions of subjectivism fail because they not only produce counterintuitive results of their own, but also abandon the anti-alienation intuition which motivated subjectivism in the first place. I argue subjectivism is not necessary because thinking so confuses *finding* life meaningful with life *actually being* meaningful. To supplement these arguments, I contend that subjectivism is best understood as tracking a different evaluative dimension of a life: fulfilment.

Chapter 5 examines the relationship between purpose and meaningfulness. I provide two objections to purpose theories; the anti-meaning objection and the epistemic objection. I argue that purpose theories cannot account for anti-meaning, i.e., that which is disvaluable qua meaning. The epistemic objection argues that knowledge, or lack thereof, about the purpose of the life (assuming it even has one) does not serve as an input into our evaluative judgements about the meaning of a life. To supplement these arguments, I provide an invisible-hand explanation as to why we mistakenly think purpose is relevant for meaning; we identify a life as meaningful because of some feature and then decide *after* that the reason that feature came about is because it was the purpose of that life. Purpose itself is a unique evaluative dimension of a life, and should not be confused with meaning.

Chapter 6 examines the relationship between morality and meaningfulness by considering whether moral monsters, i.e., lives characterised by immoral action, can live meaningful lives. Though I contend morality is irrelevant to meaning, I also argue that moral monsters live meaningless lives. I argue that maintaining that moral monsters can live meaningful lives is to confuse significance with meaning, while thinking morality is relevant to meaning is to have confused the effect (consequences) with its cause (moral action).

1. Preliminaries

What, if anything, makes a life meaningful? Any answer to this question is a theory about meaning in life. In this thesis I develop, advance, and defend one such theory. I call it *asymmetric welfarism about meaning in life*. Roughly, asymmetric welfarism is the view that a life is meaningful insofar as other welfare subjects are made better off from that life having occurred. Conversely, a life is meaningless insofar as other welfare subjects are made worse off from that life having occurred. The overall meaningfulness of a life is determined by the net balance of the good consequences (i.e., making others better off) against the bad consequences (i.e., making others worse off) from that life having occurred. In short, the more the good outweighs the bad the more meaningful a life; the more the bad outweighs the good the more meaningless a life.

Before arguing my case for asymmetric welfarism, I want to spend this chapter addressing three preliminary questions which set the stage for the remainder of the thesis. Those questions are as follows: (i) what motivates the research question? (ii) what is the subject matter a theory of meaning attends? And (iii) how should we identify good theories from bad ones?

This chapter proceeds as follows. I begin (§1.1.) with motivating philosophical interest into meaning in life by drawing upon both theoretical grounds and our shared lived experience. By ‘theoretical’ I refer to the space meaning occupies in other areas of interest in analytic philosophy, while by ‘lived experience’ I refer to the place meaning holds in our personal lives. Next (§1.2.) I turn attention to the problem of identifying the subject matter; what are we talking about when we assess or describe a life as being meaningful or meaningless? I outline two different approaches commonly found within the literature which address this concern: paradigm cases and existential angst. The former of these being examples of lives which, intuitively, appear to be the most meaningful, while the latter considers the types of feelings, emotions or concerns we have when considering meaning.

I end (§1.3.) with an explanation of my preferred methodology, drawing upon two complimentary approaches. First, I outline Enoch’s (2011) methodology, which aims to find the most plausible theory of the given candidates. According to this methodology, for every criteria a theory competently meets a ‘plausibility point’ is awarded with the theory with the most points at the end winning. The second is the triangulation method as described by Kim (unpublished), which roughly aims to find the appropriate boundaries of some concept within the network cluster of related ideas and concepts.

1.1. Motivation

In this section, I motivate research into meaning in life by providing several reasons that indicate the importance of meaning. For user experience, I catalogue those reasons into two categories: theoretical and lived experience. Broadly speaking, theoretical reasons are those of academic or philosophical interest, while lived experience reasons arise from particular types of experiences which seem unique to the kind of creatures we are.

First and foremost, I think it safe to assume that meaning in life is worthy of philosophical inquiry in its own right. The question of what (if anything) makes life meaningful seems to bear the same sort of weight as other questions that have had, or continue to have, a great deal of philosophical attention. Asking, ‘what makes a life meaningful?’, or ‘what is the meaning of life?’, appears to have the same level of importance as, ‘what is the nature of reality?’, ‘do other minds exist?’, or ‘how should we live?’.

Of course, this is not the only reason for why investigating meaning in life is a worthwhile endeavour. We treat meaning as having normative significance, as evidenced by the curious position it holds in practical reason. When we believe that φ is meaningful, we take that as a reason, all things being equal, for φ -ing or bringing about φ . And when we believe that φ is meaningless, we take that as a reason, all things being equal, for not φ -ing or not bringing about φ .

Yet, even when things are not equal, the perceived meaningfulness of φ can still have significant normative weight, so much so that it can outweigh all other considerations. Consider a teenage graffitiist who tags the property of others. There are a number of reasons for why that teenager should not graffiti that which does not belong to them. We might cite moral reasons (e.g., it is immoral to deface another’s property without their consent), prudential reasons (graffitiing runs the risk of being caught and resulting in criminal charges), and aesthetic reasons (e.g., tag graffiti is ugly and unsightly). But even if the teenager believes all those other reasons, the simple fact they find graffitiing a meaningful endeavour can be enough of a reason itself to outweigh all the other reasons combined.

The same seems true of meaninglessness. Imagine a person who works to find caring homes for orphaned children. There are, arguably, a number of reasons for why someone should do this, including moral (e.g., helping the vulnerable find loving homes is good), prudential (e.g., employment provides financial rewards), and perhaps even aesthetic reasons (e.g., the beauty of bringing people together through love). Yet for all that, if they do not find their work meaningful then that can be reason enough for quitting, even if they believe those other reasons. So it seems

that meaning does not just provide reasons, but the sorts of reasons that have the potential to override other types.

The normative significance of meaning has not gone unnoticed within the literature. Wolf (2010), for example, rejects the canonical view that human motivation can be jointly exhausted by prudential and moral concerns precisely because such models cannot account for meaning:

These models of motivation and practical reason, however, seem to me to leave out many of the motives and reasons that shape our lives. Moreover, the reasons left out are neither peripheral or eccentric. Indeed, we might say that the reasons and motives omitted by these models are some of the most important and central ones in our lives. They are the reasons and motives that engage us in the activities that make our lives worth living; they give us a reason to go on; they make our worlds go round. They, and the activities they engender, give meaning to our lives (Wolf, 2010, p. 2).

Given both the normative significance of meaning and the interest philosophers have in reasons and rationality, it should strike us as odd that there is not more enquiry into meaning and whether we assign it the proper normative weight it deserves.

Meaning also seems to hold considerable sway in shaping our attitudes, perceptions, and values. If we think φ is meaningful, we take φ as having value and orientate our attitudes more favourably towards it, while viewing φ as meaningless will have the opposite effect. Consider, for example, an artist who dedicates their life to painting pictures of fruit bowls. If the artist finds painting fruit bowls to be meaningful, it would not surprise us if that artist also derived pleasure and enjoyment from the activity. Nor would it be surprising if we found that disparaging talk about using fruit bowls as an art subject drew ire from the artist.

Imagine that later in life the artist found painting fruit bowls meaningless; how would this change their attitude and evaluation of the activity? Intuitively, the artist would no longer gain pleasure from the activity, nor would they consider it valuable. The artist might also end up being a person who talks disparagingly about fruit bowl paintings, even going so far as attempting to talk others out of doing it themselves. And, given that painting fruit bowls has consumed much of their life, the artist might also draw the conclusion that their life, or at least their work, is meaningless too. Regardless of whether painting fruit bowls is meaningful or not, the mere *belief* about its meaning-status can be enough to change our attitudes and values.

This relationship between meaning and value appears to cut both ways. The artist may find painting fruit bowls meaningful precisely because they derive great pleasure from the activity. In addition, if the artist should gain less pleasure over time from painting fruit bowls, we might be inclined to think that it is becoming less meaningful as well. The value of φ , or the pleasure we gain from it, sometimes appears to depend upon the meaningfulness of φ , while at other times

the meaningfulness of φ appears dependent upon if we value or gain pleasure from it. Given this relationship between meaning, value, and attitudes, we should be more curious as to what meaning is and how it interfaces with these other areas.

Aside from reasons motivated by theoretical interests, meaning holds a central place in our personal and shared lived experiences, the ‘human condition’, and our mental health and well-being. We all have a strong desire for our lives to be meaningful. We search for meaning, are concerned when we cannot find it, and become deeply troubled when we think it absent (or believe it does not exist at all). The intensity of our collective desire for meaning could be enough of a motivation to investigate what, if anything, makes life meaningful, on its own.

But we should also take meaning seriously because of the relationship and impact it has upon our mental health and well-being (Cholbi, 2022). In moments of self-reflection, when a person stops and looks around themselves and forms the belief that, to their dismay, their life is void of meaning, the results can be disastrous. When people find their life meaningless it can result in depression, anxiety, and self destructive behaviour. This should come as little surprise given the above discussion about the interface between meaning, value, and rationality; if we find our lives to be meaningless, we are likely to find nothing of value or worth doing, and no reason for being. Perhaps the idea here is best crystallised by Camus, when he infamously asserted:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest - whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories - comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer (Camus, 1955, p. 1).

Here, Camus claims that responding with despair, depression, and especially suicide, is an appropriate and rational response if life is meaningless or not worth living.¹ Of course, whether or not he is right to say that suicide is a rational response if life is meaningless is another matter. But the fact people appear to implicitly share his belief gives reason for taking meaning seriously.

Empirical evidence shows a strong reverse-correlation between suicide and meaningfulness. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1959/2000) identifies both a belief in meaning and the search for it to be the key elements which allowed prisoners of World War II extermination camps to stave off suicide.² Since then, substantial empirical research has found evidence in support of a strong connection between personal well-being and meaning. Costanza, Preleti, and Pompili

¹ Camus (1955) later rallies against this, arguing that even if it were rational to commit suicide in the face of meaninglessness we should act and embrace the absurdity of life and continue trying to live meaningful lives anyway.

² Frankl’s claims appear corroborated by recent empirical research, see (Khan, Legendre, Stritzke, & Page, 2018; Kleiman & Beaver, 2013).

(2019), for example, found a strong negative correlation between meaning in life and suicide risk, depression, and hopelessness. Meaning in life, they write, “emerges as a protective factor against suicidality ... these findings have clinical repercussions on SB [suicidal behaviour] prevention in both SB assessment and psychotherapeutic interventions” (2019, p. 15).³

Finally, the importance of meaning is also evident by how it serves as both the subject or inspiration for numerous works of art and literature. There are many great works dedicated to, or inspired by, our search for meaning and other closely related topics. Works such as Munch’s *The Scream*, Gauguin’s *Where Do we Come from? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, or Magritte’s *The Son of Adam*, invoke or attempt to explore, in their own way, the meaning of life and the human condition. The artistic themes of *vanitas* and *momento mori* resonate with us because they focus upon death and, with it, what the meaning or purpose of life might be and what we are to do if there is none. Within cinema, films such as *Fight Club*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *The Truman Show*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Dead Poet’s Society*, and *Life is Beautiful*, captivate audiences, becoming classics or garnering cult followings due to their delicate craftsmanship when dealing with meaning in life and the struggle to find or keep hold of it. Literary works such as *Anna Karenina*, *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, *The Stranger*, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, and *Candide*, continue to capture our attention through their exploration of what, if anything, makes life meaningful.

1.2. Subject Matter

As we have seen, meaning in life has concerned humanity for some time. It is surprising, then, to find there is not much of a consensus as to what is being referred to when we talk about meaning. In this section, I look at two approaches for getting a grasp on meaning: (i) paradigm cases and (ii) existential angst. Such approaches allow us to both grasp the concept and judge the merits of a theory. For a theory to be counted as a theory about meaning in life, it should capture and vindicate our intuitions about what these approaches are tracking and describing. Or, alternatively, a theory should provide a convincing explanation of where those intuitions have gone awry.

Let us first begin with paradigm cases. Paradigm cases are those cases in which we find, intuitively, the best examples of the subject matter we are investigating. By compiling a list of paradigm cases we can find the common denominator, or denominators, between the cases which vindicate our intuitions about them (Kauppinen, 2016, p. 283). We can rapidly compile a list of lives which (if any) would arguably be the most meaningful. Those often identified as

³ Their findings appear to be corroborated in a variety of different age groups and backgrounds, such as children and adolescents (Schnell, Gerstner, & Krampe, 2018; Tan, Chen, Xia, & Hu, 2018), elderly adults (Heisel & Flett, 2016; Heisel, Neufeld, & Flett, 2016), and military personnel (Bryan et al., 2013; Sinclair, Bryan, & Bryan, 2016).

having lived a meaningful life included (but are not limited to) Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Marie Curie, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein, Vincent van Gogh, Harriet Tubman, or Ludwig van Beethoven.⁴

Additionally, our intuitions about paradigm cases of the most meaningless lives can also be informative. We seem to recognise two ways in which a life can be meaningless. The first is a life which is meaningless because it lacks meaning. The literature is rife with such examples, including (but not limited to) the person who plugs into the experience machine (Nozick, 1974, pp. 42-45), someone who counts all the grass on the same field everyday (Rawls, 1971, pp. 379-380), a person who delights in eating excrement (Smuts, 2018, p. 79), or someone who lounges about smoking pot all day (Wolf, 2010, p. 9). The second is a life that does not simply lack meaning but is antithetical to it, with paradigm cases of such lives including (but not limited to) mass murderers and war criminals such as Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, or Joseph Stalin, serial killers like Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, or Charles Manson, or sexual predators like Jeffrey Epstein, Harvey Weinstein, or Bill Cosby.⁵

Paradigm cases provide a foundation in which we can build up a theory by identifying the common denominator across those disparate lives. So, the more lives a theory of meaning accounts for the better. We judge how well a theory accounts for paradigm cases in three ways. First, a theory should provide conditions which vindicate our intuitions about paradigm cases. That is, a theory should explain both (a) what it is that makes meaningful lives meaningful, and (b) what it is that meaningless lives either lack or work against. Second, supposing the considered theory did not vindicate all our intuitions in the aforementioned ways, it is then judged by how well it resolves outlier cases. That is, a theory should provide plausible explanations for those paradigm cases it fails to account for (if any). And third, a theory of meaning should provide us with plausible ways of making sense of controversial or problematic cases.

The second approach I call existential angst. Along these lines, attempts at capturing the concept of meaningfulness are done by considering the primary concerns of existential anxiety or dread. The better a theory captures what we are concerned with during such moments the better a theory. But what, precisely, does such existential angst look like?

⁴ For example, see (Ayer, 1990; Baumann, 2015, pp. 34-35; Cahn & Vitrano, 2015, p. 8; Hauskeller, 2020, p. 26; Kauppinen, 2016, p. 282; Purves & Delon, 2018, pp. 318-319; Smuts, 2013, p. 536; Svensson, 2017, p. 48; Temkin, 2017, p. 23; Thomas, 2018a; 2019a, pp. 445-446; Wells, 2014, p. 17 & 42; Wolf, 2010, p. 11; 2016, p. 257).

⁵ Meaningless lives belonging to this second category are described as being 'anti-meaningful' or high in 'anti-matter' (Campbell & Nyholm, 2015; Landau, 2011; Metz, 2013, p. 64). I return to these types of cases in chapters 5 and 6.

Literature and film across a host of genres provides us a bounty of examples to choose from. Many of the films and books I provided above stand in testament of this. And, of course, the existentialist movement of the 19-20th century is deeply entangled in our conception of what existentialist angst is, looks like, and how we might deal with it (Buber, 1970; Camus, 1955; de Beauvoir, 1976; Dostoyevsky, 2003, 2009; Kierkegaard, 2005; Nietzsche, 2001, 2006, 2010; Sartre, 1946, 2009). Apart from the continental tradition, we find people from all walks of life across both time and space expressing the same concerns. In his autobiography, Mill displayed a deep concern with meaning in his life:

The end has ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for ... [the] destiny of mankind in general was ever in my thoughts ... I felt that the flaw in my life, must be a flaw in life itself ... unless I could see my way to some better hope than this for human happiness in general, my dejection must continue (Mill, 1924, pp. 94-102).

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan (1965) reports the comments of a young mother who expresses her own worries on ‘the problem that has no name’:

I ask myself why I am so dissatisfied. I’ve got my health, fine children, a lovely new home, enough money ... It’s as if ever since you were a little girl, there’s always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents, or college or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake up one morning and there’s nothing to look forward to (Friedan, 1965, p. 19).

The World of fiction is as rife with examples as those recorded in real lives. The lamentation of Konstanin Levin in *Anna Karenina* stands in testament:

Levin had looked at the question of life and death for the first time through those new [atheist] convictions ... he had been horrified, not so much at death as at life without the slightest knowledge of whence it came, wherefore, why, and what it was ... “Without knowing what I am and why I’m here, it is impossible for me to live. And I cannot know that, therefore I cannot live,” Levin would say to himself. ... And, happy in his family life, a healthy man, Levin was several times so close to suicide that he hid a rope lest he hang himself with it, and was afraid to go about with a rifle lest he shoot himself (Tolstoy, 1877/2001, pp. 528-530).

And last but not least, death also plays a significant role when reflecting on meaning in life. For example, Wolf writes:

A meaningful life is, first of all, one that has within it the basis for affirmative answer to the needs or longings that are characteristically described as needs for meaning. I have in mind, for example, the sort of questions people ask on their deathbeds, or simply in contemplation of their eventual deaths, about whether their lives have been (or are) worth living, whether they have had any point, and the sort of questions one

asks when considering suicide and wondering whether one has any reason to go on (Wolf, 1997, pp. 208-209).

Here, Wolf seems to be outlining the sorts of concerns a theory of meaning should be identifying. And her observations seem to fit particularly well with our existential concerns, such as how we spend our time and what impact or legacy, if any, we leave behind after we die. It does not seem wrong to say that, for all the examples I have given, those people were asking themselves whether or not their lives are, or were, meaningful. Given all the above, it seems for a theory of meaning to be considered a plausible theory it needs to capture the concerns of those in the throes of existential anxiety. If a theory provides a clearer picture of what those concerns are, the more appealing such a theory becomes.

1.3. Methodology

How are we to recognise good theories from bad ones? And of those good theories, how do we go about identifying the *best*? Perhaps I am too pessimistic, but I fear we shall not find any knock down, irrefutable proof in support of any theory about meaning in life. Indeed, it seems most philosophical and scientific research has taken a more modest approach than yesteryears, aiming instead to find what is most *plausible* rather than what is true. It seems to me that whatever theory one champions will always be plagued with fundamental problems; problems that are highly unlikely to be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone. In light of my concerns, I model my methodology as a synthesis between two different kinds: (i) plausibility and (ii) triangulation. In this section, I explain what both of these methodologies look like and how I aim to use them throughout this thesis to help build my case for asymmetric welfarism.

The first methodology I employ is that which is described and utilised by Enoch (2011): the best theory is the theory which is the most plausible candidate amongst contenders.⁶ Plausibility, it seems to me, is measured in explanatory power; the more work a theory can do in explaining the available evidence the more plausible that theory becomes. Under this model, the most plausible theory would be the theory which has the greatest explanatory power across more of the available evidence compared against competing theories. The explanatory power of a theory involves how well that theory makes sense of our intuitions across a number of data points including thought-experiments, real life cases, and our shared network of concepts and understanding.

What does the larger picture of this methodology look like? Enoch describes this plausibility method as a type of point scoring system that operates in the following manner. A theory is judged upon how well it accounts for a piece of evidence. A theory is awarded ‘plausibility

⁶ Enoch (2011, p. 15, fn. 20) notes his view is inspired by Lewis & Lewis (1970).

points' for how well it accounts for that evidence, and the better a theory accounts for it, the more plausibility points it is awarded. For any evidence not accounted for, no points are awarded. And if a theory does a particularly poor job of accounting for a piece of evidence, or fails to account for it at all, then points might be detracted. After all the evidence has been assessed in this manner, the plausibility points are tallied with the theory with the most being the winner, i.e., the most plausible theory. And because it is the most plausible theory it should be preferred over competitors.

To illuminate what such a procedure might look like, considering the following example. Suppose someone puts forth *peanut-butter consequentialism about ethics*: the morally right action is that which brings about the greatest quantity of peanut-butter. Obviously peanut-butter consequentialism is a terrible theory of ethics because it has no explanatory power. It fails to make any sense of our intuitions about any of the data points or evidence found within the domain of ethics. It does not just seem as though peanut-butter consequentialism is an implausible theory of ethics, but rather that it is impossible for it to be the right answer - to suggest otherwise is, to put it modestly, highly counterintuitive. And it seems so precisely because of just how implausible that theory is; it has no explanatory power. Since peanut-butter consequentialism has no explanatory power we take that as evidence that one would be unjustified in holding it. Of course, it still might be *logically* possible that peanut-butter consequentialism is true, but the possibility of that seems to be directly tied with how plausible it is. And given its implausibility, we intuitively recognise that we are justified in thinking the theory mistaken.

The same, I suggest, holds for theories about meaning in life. We want a theory that makes sense of the evidence as it can, and the better it does the more likely we will accept it as being correct.

The second methodology I shall use is triangulation (Kim, unpublished, pp. 17-23). The triangulation method aims to produce a clearer picture of a considered concept by reflecting upon the place and role it occupies within a network of related but distinct concepts. By thinking about the network of concepts which surrounds meaning in life, we might begin to form a clearer picture of the concept. If a theory about meaning in life captures what is unique about meaning (not just what it is, but how it differs from, say, significance) that would be counted in its favour.

What would such a methodology look like with regards to meaning in life? We can begin by forming a network of concepts by reconsidering some of the themes found in paradigm cases and existential angst. For example, when reflecting upon life and death, Wolf (2010) describes our concerns as revolving around questions about whether our lives are, or have been, 'worth

living', or had a 'purpose' or a 'reason for being', or if our lives have, or had, any 'significance'. It seems then that questions about worth, purpose, reason, and significance, are part of the conceptual network which meaning is part of.

There are, of course, other related concepts to meaning, such as prudential value and well-being (i.e., the life which is good for the one whose life it is), success, usefulness, and achievement, to name but a few. We should also wonder what relationship these concepts share with meaning in life. So a theory that can provide answers to the question about how, and in what way, related concepts connect up to meaning, the better that theory is. The appeal of a theory is, to some extent, measured by how well it fits within the jigsaw puzzle of related concepts.

Though not mentioned in name, we see examples of triangulation within the literature in, for example, Calhoun (2018) and Metz (2012, 2017). Calhoun uses triangulation to criticise objective or 'agent-independent' theories about meaning in life, claiming such theories collapse the distinction between 'significance' and 'meaning':

Similarly, it is not a wholly welcome result if 'meaningful' could be fully cashed out via some alternative evaluative concept - say, 'significant' - such that we could drop reference to meaningfulness altogether and say that all we want to say by writings essays and books about significant lives instead. Here, one might have thought that the value of having a concept of meaningfulness is that it picks out something not identical with significant (or whatever other evaluative conception is driving the analysis of meaningfulness). That is, its value lies in its doing distinctive conceptual work not performed by other, closely allied evaluative notions (Calhoun, 2018, pp. 22-23).

Metz (2017), on the other hand, seems quite comfortable with interchanging meaning with significance, though he does argue there is a difference between meaningfulness and worthwhileness (2012). If one were to agree with Metz, then we would expect triangulation to help us in the same way, by showing how such concepts are intertwined, overlap, or are identical.

Given its use within the existing literature, it seems triangulation is a useful methodology for conceptual analysis and philosophical investigation. As an example, consider how personal well-being differs from meaning. Suppose a soldier dives upon a live grenade, sacrificing his own life for the survival of his comrades. Though intuitively his death was bad for him, it remains open whether his actions, or life, were meaningful. If a theory about meaning in life can provide an explanation about how these evaluative dimensions differ or overlap, that would be a point in favour of that theory.

1.4. Concluding Remarks

This chapter set about the task of addressing three preliminary questions with the purpose of establishing firm parameters in which to operate for the remainder of the thesis. Specifically, in this chapter, I (i) established the primary concern of this thesis, (ii) provided motivation for such research, (iii) outlined the subject matter, and (iv) described my elected methodologies.

The research question - what, if anything, makes a life meaningful? - shall be the primary focus of this thesis. I showed this to be an important question for theoretical and personal reasons which connected to practical rationality, value, and features of our shared lived experience. The subject matter in which meaning in life attends seemed to be located within a network of concepts, such as lives believed to share features of being great or influential in some way or other, and in what concerns us most when we are in the throes of existential dread. I claimed that perhaps the best way forward in finding the right theory was to identify a theory which is both highly plausible (i.e., that it accounts for as many data points as possible with the least amount of drawbacks) and best fits within the network of concepts related to meaning in life.

2. Asymmetric Welfarism

At the opening of the last chapter I presented the primary question this thesis is occupied with: what, if anything, makes a life meaningful? To recall, my answer was that a life is meaningful insofar as it makes other welfare subjects better off. I called this theory asymmetric welfarism. The purpose of this chapter is to provide preliminary arguments in favour of asymmetric welfarism. My aim here is not to provide a robust argument for asymmetric welfarism per se, but rather get it off the ground; to show such a view should be taken seriously.

This chapter proceeds as follow. I begin (§2.1.) by providing a definition of asymmetric welfarism, motivations for developing such a theory, and how a welfarist theory about meaning in life resists the typical objections raised against consequentialist theories. I then (§2.2.) locate asymmetric welfarism within existing consequentialist theories about meaningfulness and explain how it is distinct from its cousins. I end (§2.3.) by providing arguments in favour of asymmetric welfarism. I do so by showing how the theory can vindicate our intuitions about paradigm cases and existential angst while addressing objections along the way.

2.1. Asymmetric Welfarism

I maintain that a life is meaningful insofar as it improves or protects the well-being of other welfare subjects. Because this theory states that well-being is the sole input for determining the meaning of a life, yet discounts the well-being of the life under consideration, I call it *asymmetric welfarism*. Specifically, I define asymmetric welfarism as follows:

- (1) A life is meaningful insofar as it increases, promotes, protects, or preserves, the well-being of other welfare subjects.
- (2) A life is meaningless insofar as it decreases, harms, minimises or does nothing to contribute towards the well-being of other welfare subjects.

And so,

- (3) The meaning of a life is measured by (1) minus (2). The more (1) outweighs (2) the more meaningful a life. The more (2) outweighs (1) the more meaningless a life.

Asymmetric welfarism is a consequentialist theory about meaning in life because, according to the theory, only outcomes (and the quantity thereof) matter for determining the meaning of a life. Given the sort of baggage which accompanies consequentialism about ethics, one might be suspicious of consequentialist theories about meaning. Before continuing, let me briefly explain

how consequentialism about meaning avoids many of the problems found in their ethical counterparts.⁷

Following Metz (2013, pp. 186-187), we can describe two distinct ways in which consequentialism about meaning differs from ethical consequentialism. First, while consequentialist theories of ethics state that agents are obligated to bring about the best outcomes, consequentialist theories about meaning are not beholden to this. That is, while ethical consequentialism states we are obligated to maximise the good, it does not seem as though anybody is obligated to maximise the meaning of their own, or anybody else's, life. Second, impartiality does not seem of central concern to meaning as it does with ethics. For example, we might ask, 'what if everyone did that?' When reflecting upon the rightness of an action. While such a question has undoubtable moral weight, when we ask that same question with regards to meaning in life it has surprisingly little purchase. Given how important impartiality is for ethical consequentialism, such impartiality appears an unnecessary commitment for consequentialist theories about meaning. Further, as Metz (2013, p. 186) also notes, "the actual effects of one's life on the world are more relevant to its significance than are counterfactual considerations about what the world would have been like had everyone acted as one did." Given his observations, it should be clear that at least some issues which give us pause about ethical consequentialism are not problems for consequentialism about meaning.

Let us now move on to the task of motivating the theory. I think there are three good reasons for adopting welfarism. First, helping others, i.e., by increasing, promoting, preserving, or protecting, their well-being, is, intuitively, a quintessential source of meaning (Baier, 2000, pp. 128-129; Dahl, 1987, pp. 5-10; Rescher, 1990, pp. 161-165; Teichman, 1993, pp. 159-160). This may be why welfarism has more widespread appeal with regards to meaning than it does for ethics or value theory in general. Second, welfarism is a plausible way of unifying widely held intuitions about impact and meaning: the more impact on the world a life has, the more meaningful that life seems to become (Dworkin, 2000, pp. 251-252). And third, welfarism does a good job of explaining why the good, the true, and the beautiful are key sources of meaning:

We admire the lives of Alexander Fleming and Mozart and Martin Luther King Jr., and we explain why we do by pointing to penicillin and *The Marriage of Figaro* and what King did for his race and country. The model of impact generalises from these examples; it holds that the ... value of a life ... is parasitic on and measured by the value of its consequences for the rest of the world (Dworkin, 2000, pp. 251-252).

When moral achievement, scientific discovery, or artistic creation appear to confer meaning upon a life, they seem to do so insofar as they positively impact the lives of others, i.e., their well-

⁷ Note here I say many but not all; I develop and address two such problems - the repugnant conclusion and the utility monster - in chapter 3.

being. In addition to this last point, welfarism also makes sense of conditions which fail to confer meaning. Reconsider the life of the serial killer, the grass counter, or the person in an experience machine. Such lives appear meaningless because they lack something vital for meaning, and one natural explanation is that these lives contribute nothing to enriching the welfare of others (or actively work against doing so).

But why think that the well-being of the person whose life it is does not count towards the meaning of their own life? Much of the motivation for adopting asymmetry lies in the reasons above. First, we saw that improving the lives of *others* is often thought to be a quintessential source of meaning. Second, it is the impact upon others that seems to be doing the work when we consider the meaning of a life. This is presumably why helping others appears to confer meaning upon a life whereas activities which are of no use to anybody, or selfish acts, do not. Eating chocolate might increase the well-being of the chocolate eater, but that does not appear to tell us much of anything about the meaning of their life.

In addition, without asymmetry a welfarist theory about meaning produces counterintuitive results in cases where the person whose life it is has their own well-being outweigh others. The following examples of *Bear* and *Mum* both highlight the problem:

... you and a friend are unexpectedly exposed to a hungry grizzly. Suppose that you and your friend's influences upon other people's well-being would be equal, that you are capable of marginally more long-term well-being than your friend, that the bear will catch at last one of you, and, to be complete, that the bear would find no difference in taste or nutrition between you and your friend. The present ... theory would say that, of the actions available, escaping would confer the most meaning on your life, even if this required throwing your friend to the bear (Metz, 2013, p. 188).

If one's own welfare were an input for determining the meaning of one's own life, it would seem the most meaningful thing to do would be to sacrifice your friend so you could escape. Yet such a result is highly counterintuitive; surely sacrificing your friend would not make your life more meaningful. This observation is magnified when we consider the second case:

In this case, a mother gives up food for her young son, where we suppose that the food would do her somewhat more good than it would him. (UTM1) [welfarism without asymmetry] entails that more meaning would accrue to the mother by eating the food herself (and staving off guilt) than by giving it to her son, since she would thereby promote more well-being (Metz, 2013, p. 188).

Metz points out in both cases that sacrificing another because your survival will accrue more overall well-being is, intuitively, diametrically opposed to meaning. Indeed, it seems more meaningful to sacrifice one's own well-being for the sake of another, even if this were to result in less overall well-being (all other things being equal).

The above fits well with the observation already made about the interface between personal well-being and meaning during the discussion of the soldier jumping on a live grenade in chapter 1. While such an action is clearly prudentially bad for the soldier, such an act appears to be meaningful. The soldier case coupled with Metz's examples provides us with enough evidence to motivate the requirement of asymmetry to be attached to a welfarist theory about meaning in life.

Finally, when we reflect upon the meaning of a life, our concern is concentrated upon something else other than the person whose life it is. Our focus seems to be upon something which we deem 'greater' than the self and how the considered life fits into this larger picture. When people reflect upon (i) how much of a difference they made, (ii) how valuable their contribution is, was, or will be (assuming they made any at all), (iii) who will remember them when they die, or (iv) thoughts about their legacy, such questions seem to turn upon whether their lives had any impact, or made any contribution to others, rather than themselves.

Asymmetric welfarism can be seen as being born out of the following two reflections: (i) the sort of impact or contribution we are concerned with when considering the meaning of a life is how it will impact upon others (and to what extent), and (ii) that when thinking about whether a life is meaningful, we do not consider the well-being of the life in question but rather the impact that life has, or had, on the well-being of other welfare subjects. The first lends itself to motivating a welfarist view about meaning in life, while the second motivates the adoption of asymmetry.

2.2. Within the Literature

As stated above, asymmetric welfarism is a consequentialist theory about meaning in life. Asymmetric welfarism is hardly the only consequentialist theory found within in the literature, so we should take stock of the company it keeps and consider in what way, if any, asymmetric welfarism differs. As we shall see, asymmetric welfarism differs from a variety of views currently available in the literature. Below, I outline six consequentialist views - (1) Bramble's (2015) *consequentialism about meaning in life* (CML), (2) Smuts's (2013; 2018, pp. 75-99) *good cause account of the Meaning of Life* (GCA), (3) Thomas's (2018a) disjunctive theory, (4) Peter Singer's (1993, pp. 314-335; 1995, pp. 230-280) altruistic consequentialism, (5) Irving Singer's (2009, pp. 101-148) Significance consequentialism, and (6) Railton's (1984, pp. 134-171) plural consequentialism - and explain how asymmetric welfarism differs from each.

Let us begin with Bramble's consequentialism about meaning in life, or CML for short. Bramble (2015, p. 446) writes that CML is the view that: "(1) one's life is meaningful at time t just in case one's surviving at t would be good in some way (either subjectively or objectively), and (2)

one's life was meaningful *considered as a whole* just in case the world was (or will be) made better in some way for one's having existed".

Here is how asymmetric welfarism differs from CML. First, CML need not be welfarist. Though Bramble (2015, p. 458) himself assumes welfarism about value (i.e., that some thing can be good only by being good for some being), he notes that CML neither entails nor relies upon welfarism. For asymmetric welfarism, welfarism is built into the very theory.⁸ Second, CML and asymmetric welfarism disagree as to what goods can confer meaning. Bramble draws a distinction between subjective and objective good, with subjectively good things being defined as, "things whose values depends on one's own contingent interests in them" (2015, p. 447), and with objective value being defined as welfare (2015, p. 458). Since Bramble defines (1) of CML as the good being produced as either subjective or objective, on his view, a life can be sufficiently meaningful if one's surviving at time t would be subjectively good, i.e., it would be sufficient to make one's life meaningful if one's surviving produced things whose value depends upon one's own contingent interests in them. Asymmetric welfarism rejects this claim.

We can bring this distinction between CML and asymmetric welfarism into focus when considering Bramble's shipwrecked botanist example (2015, p. 457). In this example, Bramble describes a botanist shipwrecked alone on a desert island with all their botanist wares, but is overjoyed because they are now free to pursue their ambition of studying exotic desert island flora. Bramble points out that the botanist's life ceases to hold 'objective value', i.e., impacts welfare, precisely at the time they are shipwrecked. However, Bramble finds it tempting to think the botanist's life is far more meaningful now they are shipwrecked than it was when they were part of society. His reason for thinking so is because the botanist now brings about something subjectively good, i.e., studying flora which is an activity whose value depends upon the contingent interests of the botanist. Though CML would accept the botanist's life as meaningful, asymmetric welfarism would reject that verdict.

Third, CML appears incompatible with asymmetry. In his conclusion, Bramble (2015, p. 459) writes that almost every human life is meaningful because "(1) for the vast majority of us, continuing to exist at any given time would result in our becoming better off in some way in our life considered as a whole," and "(2) most of us will make, during the course of our lives, at least one person besides ourselves better off in some way". While (2) is obviously in step with asymmetry, (1) is not; on CML our own well-being appears to be an input into the meaning of our lives, which is a claim that asymmetric welfarism squarely rejects.

⁸ I should note here too that, unlike Bramble, I am not a welfarist about value. I maintain a pluralist account of values and goods. My view is that well-being is one of many values, but is the sole concern of meaningfulness. We should also note, like CML, asymmetric welfarism neither entails nor relies upon welfarism about value (i.e., that welfare is the only intrinsic good).

Asymmetric welfarism is distinct from CML in three key respects. First, asymmetric welfarism is explicitly welfarist while CML need not be. Second, while CML maintains that meaning can be conferred upon a life by bringing about things whose value is contingent upon one's own interests in them, asymmetric welfarism does not. And third, that CML includes the welfare of the person whose life it is, while asymmetric welfarism explicitly rejects this.

This brings us to Smuts's (2018) position, the good cause account of the meaning of life (GCA). According to GCA, "one's life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good" (Smuts, 2018, p. 75). As Smuts presents it, GCA is quite thin, but can be clarified when reflecting upon Smuts' writing. There are two points in need of clarification: first, what counts as a 'cause', and second, what is 'the good'? To the former, Smuts (2018, p. 94) notes that GCA would likely require a highly restricted notion of cause. His reasons for thinking so is because he believes doing otherwise would result in counterintuitive results. For example, the fictional character of Joe Chill is causally responsible for Batman punching Joker; had Joe Chill not murdered Bruce Wayne's parents in Crime Alley then Bruce Wayne would not have become Batman. But it would be strange to think that Joe Chill's murdering of the Waynes caused Joker to be punched; that former fact does not seem relevant.

With regards to the latter, Smuts appears to understand 'the good' which confers meaning upon a life in very broad terms. First, Smuts (2018, pp. 83-84) does not discriminate between a good being intrinsically or instrumentally valuable in order to confer meaning. Second, Smuts understands the relevant good which confers meaning in a pluralist fashion, mentioning moral value, prudential value, achievement value as possible or actual candidates.⁹ It seems then, according to GCA, that so long as one causes any good, that is enough to confer meaning upon their life.

GCA differs from asymmetric welfarism for two obvious reasons: GCA rejects welfarism and asymmetry. GCA is in clear disagreement with asymmetric welfarism as to what kinds of goods can confer meaning upon a life. As we saw above, according to GCA there are a plurality of goods which confer meaning upon a life, for asymmetric welfarism it is only others' well-being.

⁹ Moral value: "Although the person causes a lot of good, his actions are also morally hideous, and the moral value of his actions is one value that might count towards meaningfulness" (Smuts, 2018, p. 88).

Prudential value: "Regardless of whether the GCA factors in the moral worth of one's actions, here we would want to say that the incompetent person accidentally lived a meaningful life. After all, he helped save the lives of millions!" (Smuts, 2018, p. 88).

Achievement value: "Most plausibly, it would have less achievement value. We do not need a theory of achievement value to see that this is the case. This is a core datum that any plausible theory must respect. Since the good cause account factors in achievement value, it handles the case of the immortal with amnesia" (Smuts, 2018, p. 91), "the results cannot redound to our honour, since they lack achievement value" (2018, p. 92), and, "Nor does it imply that a causally good life high in moral worth and achievement value is meaningless if the person is dissatisfied" (2018, p. 94).

Relatedly, GCA is incompatible with asymmetry, the goods on GCA's account need not be good for anyone or be good only for the person whose life it is. This is perhaps most evident when considering achievement value: there is no reason for thinking an achievement is good for others nor even good for the person whose life it is. Suppose reading all the books in the library had achievement value and one succeeded in doing so. According to GCA the person who achieved reading all those books would have brought about achievement value and thus conferred meaning upon their life, according to asymmetric welfarism, however, no meaning has accrued.

The third theory we shall look at is what Thomas (2018a) calls the disjunctive theory of meaning. According to this disjunctive theory, consequences are a vital input into one kind of meaning a life can have (but not all kinds). For Thomas, there are at least two ways in which a life can be meaningful:¹⁰

When we call a life 'meaningful', there are actually (at least) two different features we may be talking about, one constituted solely by significance, the other solely by purposefulness. Therefore, one can have the sort of life we call meaningful if it is either significant or filled with purposeful activity (or both), but neither one is strictly necessary for the description 'meaningful' to be correctly applied (Thomas, 2018a, p. 268).

A life is conferred significance-meaning, or S-Meaning, insofar as it contributes to or constitutes great value, while purpose-meaning, or P-Meaning, is conferred upon a life insofar as the person whose life it is intentionally pursues some goal (Thomas, 2018a, p. 277). Thomas is sympathetic to both Bramble and Smuts, agreeing with them that the consequences a life brings about, such as good outcomes, can be a contributor to a life's meaning, even if the person did not intend to bring about those outcomes; Thomas's proposal of S-Meaning is the culmination of such sympathies. However, unlike Bramble and Smuts, Thomas believes that is not the only

¹⁰ "In fact, I think there may be other kinds of meaningfulness that are invoked by discussions of life's meaningfulness as well, but for simplicity here I will only talk about the kinds of meaningfulness constituted by significance and purposefulness" (Thomas, 2018a, p. 278).

way to bring about meaning in a life, which we can see represented in his argument for P-Meaning.¹¹

Asymmetric welfarism differs with Thomas's disjunctive theory on three points, not so unlike those already described above. First, while we agree that consequences are an input into meaningfulness, I maintain that it is only consequences which do so, while Thomas argues there are at least two inputs (the other being purpose). Second, we disagree as to what type of consequences confer meaning; for asymmetric welfarism it is only the well-being of other welfare subjects, while for the disjunctive theory it is 'great value', whatever that might be. And third, like the others, the disjunctive theory rejects asymmetry. Though I think Thomas would be sympathetic towards asymmetry, his view does not necessitate it as many of us, "mistakenly think that meaningfulness cannot attach to something's existence without *benefiting* that thing, and they assume this because, in the majority of human cases, having a meaningful life does seem to benefit us, whether this is simply because we appreciate it or because they think, less plausibly, they [sic] meaningfulness is an objective good" (Thomas, 2018a, p. 289). All Thomas is saying here is that benefitting one's own life is not necessary for one's life to be conferred meaning, but it can be sufficient.

Metz notes a theory such as asymmetric welfarism can be "naturally read into" remarks and ideas already described by Peter Singer (1993, pp. 314-335; 1995, pp. 230-280), Irving Singer (2009, pp. 101-148), and Peter Railton (1984, pp. 164-171). I think Metz is only partially correct here, but none of them have put forth the articulation of consequentialism which I offer and advance in this thesis. To see why, we should consider each in turn.

In the final chapters of *How Are We to Live?*, Peter Singer argues that, if we desire our lives to be meaningful, we must orientate our attention and efforts towards things "worth doing" (1995,

¹¹ It is not clear to me how we should understand the structure of Thomas's disjunctive theory or the relations between its proposed parts. There seem to me three ways in which we could understand his disjunctive theory. First, we could understand the 'meaning' of S-Meaning and P-Meaning as utterly distinct and incommensurate. Such an interpretation suggests meaning is polyvalent, which is a recently argued for view advanced by Mawson (2016) (I return to Mawson's view in Appendix §B.C.). Second, we could understand meaning as a kind of list theory, such that significance and purpose are kinds of meaning which, though incommensurate, add to one's overall meaningfulness. Or third, we could understand S-Meaning and P-Meaning kinds of meaning which are commensurate and subsumed under a type of 'super' meaning. All three of these interpretations can be read into Thomas's disjunctive theory, and so far as I can tell none of them conflict with the arguments he provides in that same work.

While Thomas (2018a, p. 278) (2018, p. 278) recognises that "it is possible to envision someone taking a person's levels of P-Meaning and S-Meaning together to find out that life's 'overall' level of meaningfulness", he points out he does not aim to defend that particular position. This might make us think Thomas's view is the first or third. However, Thomas writes several things which are incompatible with such a reading, and lean more into the second interpretation. (a) Thomas writes that purposefulness and significance "each constitute distinct varieties of meaningfulness" (2018a, p. 277), and (b) that recognising S-Meaning and P-Meaning is to acknowledge that meaningfulness "is not a single concept" (2018a, p. 278).

p. 250). What counts as worth doing? According to Singer, it is that which can be described as a ‘transcendent cause’:

The need for commitment to a cause larger than the self, if we are to find genuine self-esteem, and to be all we can be ... this suggests that some causes are more suitable than others for putting meaning into our lives (P. Singer, 1995, pp. 255-256).¹²

Singer holds that one’s best bet for making one’s life meaningful is living the ethical life, i.e., dedicating one’s life to eliminating pain and suffering, wherever one finds it.

The picture Singer paints of what constitutes a meaningful life differs from asymmetric welfarism for several reasons. Note that Singer holds that, “to live a meaningful life a certain amount of morality is sufficient and this is usually the most preferable way for leading a meaningful life” (Kipke & Rütter, 2019, p. 236). Singer (1995, p. 259) concedes that there are other ways in which a life can be conferred meaning, which is evidenced by the final sentence of *How Are We to Live?*: “Living an ethical life enables us to identify ourselves with the grandest cause of all, and that to do so is the best way open to us of making our lives meaningful”.

There are two important points here. First, Singer identifies ‘eliminating pain and suffering, wherever one finds it’ as the ethically correct thing to do. I, however, have made no such claims. Rather, all I claim in this thesis is that it confers meaning upon one’s life to improve and protect the well-being of other welfare subjects, but I have not claimed that to be what one ought to do from a moral point of view. Indeed, the moral worth of the elimination of such pain and suffering is not relevant to meaning, so far as asymmetric welfarism goes, and neither does asymmetric welfarism depend upon a welfarist conception of ethics. Second, Singer accepts a pluralist approach towards meaningfulness, a position which I have already shown to be incompatible with asymmetric welfarism. For him, though eliminating pain and suffering is perhaps the best way of making one’s life meaningful, it is not the only way; that is clearly not the position of asymmetric welfarism.

We can now turn to our fifth theory under consideration, that offered by Irving Singer. Metz (2013, p. 188) approximates Irving Singer’s theory about meaning in life to something akin to

¹² Though Singer rallies against the idea that value depends entirely upon our own subjective desires, he rejects the notion that such transcendent causes are objectively valuable. He writes:

I have been arguing against the view that value depends entirely on my own subjective desires. Yet I am not defending the objectivity of ethics in the traditional sense. Ethical truths are not written into the fabric of the universe: to that extent the subjectivist is correct. If there were no beings with desires or preferences of any kind, nothing would be of value and ethics would lack all content. On the other hand, once there are beings with desires, there are values that are not only the subjective values of each individual being (P. Singer, 1995, p. 275).

asymmetric welfarism. I think this is somewhat a misrepresentation of Singer's views. For I. Singer (2009, pp. 101-148), meaningfulness is conferred upon a life when that person engages with activities they care about:

A meaningful life, whether Socrates' or a fool's, is a continuous process that includes purposive goals as well as consummations related to them. A person's behaviour becomes meaningful by virtue of the ends that matter to him, whatever they may be ... A meaningful life consists of purpose activities that are satisfying either in themselves or in their culminating consummations, which are then followed by new purposes with new consummations relevant to them, and so forth throughout one's existence ... A life without compelling purposes, or one in which they are systematically thwarted and consummations totally denied, would not be meaningful existence (I. Singer, 2009, pp. 104-107).

For Singer, this appears to be just a *brute fact* about how the concept of meaningfulness works. So why would Metz read a consequentialist theory about meaning into Singer? Because of another concept which plays a vital role in Singer's work on the matter: *significance*. Though Metz takes 'meaning' and 'significance' to be equivalent, Singer does not:

A significant life ... requires dedication to ends that we choose because they exceed the goal of personal well-being. We attain and feel our significance in the world when we create, and act for, ideals that may originate in self-interest but ultimately benefit others ... the greater the benefit to the greater number of lives, the greater the significance of our own. In this respect, significance does not depend upon fame, power, wealth, or social standing. It depends on the value one provides - directly or indirectly - to those who can thereby make their lives happier or more meaningful or even more significant (I. Singer, 2009, pp. 115-117).

Singer understands meaning and significance as connected but distinct; for Singer, a life can be meaningful while being utterly insignificant, and vice versa. He helps elucidate his understanding by appealing to several cases, such as the baseball pitcher:

The baseball player who pitches a no-hitter will have accomplished something meaningful, but it is a significant achievement only to the extent that his skill warrants the approbation of people who know the game and delight in seeing it played perfectly. The pitcher does not merely wish to trounce his opponents. He wants to do so in the context of an activity, the sport of baseball, that enriches life for all its fans and players. The more that an art form or communal enterprise fulfills such ideals, the more significant it becomes. Its significance consists in the wealth of meaning that it makes available to human beings and thus, in that degree, to life itself. By adding to this fund of meaningfulness, individuals attain their own significance (I. Singer, 2009, p. 139).

At first glance, it may look as though Singer is establishing asymmetric welfarism, at least as far as significance goes (clearly not for meaningfulness, strictly speaking).¹³ However, I think this is a mistake. Singer (2009, p. 132) states throughout that, for a life to be significant, that life would need to be, “an innovative one that is devoted to the preservation and perfecting of life itself”. There are two complications here. First, what does it mean for a life to be innovative and/or creative? Second, what does he mean by preserving and perfecting life? Answering both of these questions will show us why Singer’s view is not asymmetric welfarism.

Answering the first question appears straightforward: Singer simply means that the way in which one makes one’s life significant must be through activities and achievements which speak to our creativity. Answering the second question is more complicated. According to Singer (2009, p. 143), there are two requirements for preserving and perfecting life, the first of which “involves allegiance to the potentialities within us that constitute our nature as individuals”. So far as I understand him, Singer means to say that we, as individuals, need to come to accept our nature (what we might call ‘self-love’) and the very real limitations imposed upon us by it if we are to improve upon it. Singer, unfortunately, does not mention the second requirement, but I think we can reasonably suspect it to be ‘to love the love in everything’, or as Singer (1996, p. 145) understands it: “that all things that live love themselves inasmuch as they do what they do as a means of preserving and perfecting their own being”:

If we love the love in everything, we recognise that all of life is searching for its own meaning and we act accordingly. By enabling others to make their lives more meaningful, we make our own significant. To the degree that we realize this faculty in ourselves, our lives and our experiences truly matter, as much as anything can ... once we digest this truth, we may learn how to live with our limitations and to cultivate a love that fulfills our nature. To that extent, we not only endure our precarious condition: we complete and partly surmount it (I. Singer, 2009, pp. 146-147).

I interpret Singer’s theory as consequentialist but with side-constraints; one must work towards accepting and perfecting one’s own nature as best one can and one must do so through in a particular way, i.e., by linking up one’s own values, and activities dedicated to those values, to a community who share those same values. We can see the aforementioned illustrated in the above example of the baseball pitcher; the consequences of the pitcher’s activities (preserving and perfecting life) only confer significance upon their life if those consequences stand in the right sort of relationship with other persons.

¹³ Singer (2009, p. 140) does, after all, state that significance is, “morally justified only in relation to utilitarian principles about the greatest happiness of the greatest number of human beings and - wherever possible - all other forms of life”.

In light of the above, Singer's view is clearly not asymmetric welfarism. First, Singer holds a radical subjectivist view about meaning in life. Second, while Singer holds a consequentialist view about significance, those relevant consequences need to come about a certain way, namely, by connecting one's subjectivist interests/values to a community who share those values through innovative and creative achievements.

Let us now end with our sixth and last view as offered by Peter Railton (1984, pp. 134-171). Railton maintains a plural consequentialist theory about meaning in life, which can be understood as follows: a project and/or relationship contributes meaning to a life insofar as said project and/or relationship (i) promotes non-hedonist, intrinsic non-moral values, such as "happiness, knowledge, purposeful activity, autonomy, solidarity, respect, and beauty" (1984, p. 149), and (ii) is valuable and morally defensible to a community.

With regards to (i), Railton appears to reject subjectivism in light of Nozick's experience machine thought experiment, writing that, "we see the point of our lives as bound up with the world and other people in ways not captured by subjectivism, and our sense of loss in contemplating a life tied to an experience machine, quite literally alienated from the surrounding world, suggests where subjectivism has gone astray" (1984, p. 149). Railton agrees with Nozick that what makes life meaningful or worthwhile is engaging with particular types of non-hedonist values (such as beauty and relationships) and fostering the type of character that can realise such ends.

However, it is not just *any* project or relationship which can do it for us. This brings us to (ii): that the projects or relationships must be valuable and morally defensible within a community. To support this, Railton consider the case of Juan, the model husband. When pressed by a friend as to why Juan spends so much energy caring about his wife when he could use his resources to make much needier people better off, Railton has Juan reply in the following manner:

Look, it's a better world when people can have a relationship like ours - and nobody could if everyone were always asking themselves who's got the most need. It's not easy to make things work in this world, and one of the best things that happens to people is to have a close relationship like ours. You'd make things worse in hurry if you broke up those close relationships for the sake of some higher goal. Anyhow, I know that you can't always put family first. The world isn't such a wonderful place that it's OK just to retreat into your own little circle. But still, you need that little circle. People get burned out, or lose touch, if they try to save the world by themselves. The ones who can stick with it and do a good job of making things better are usually the ones who can make that fit into a life that does not make them miserable. I haven't met any real saints lately, and I don't trust people who think they are saints (Railton, 1984, p. 150).

The lesson Railton draws from the above is that questioning one's life from the moral point of view can strengthen our experience of "that powerful sense of purpose and meaning that comes from seeing oneself as part of something larger and more enduring than oneself or one's intimate circle" (1984, p. 151). Railton strengthens this observation by drawing an analogy between meaning in life and meaning in language, pointing out that meaning in language is dependent upon a social setting and historical practices; the meaning of a word is dependent upon how the community uses and understands it. From here, Railton proposes that meaning in life works in much the same fashion: "the options among which one chooses must already have some meaning independent of one's decisions ... a system of available, shared meanings would seem to be a precondition for sustaining the meaningfulness of individual lives in familiar sorts of social arrangements" (1984, pp. 167-169).

Asymmetric welfarism differs from Railton's plural consequentialism in the following manner. First, and most obvious, is that asymmetric welfarism is a monist account of meaning, whereas Railton's is pluralist. Second, on my view the end must be of prudential benefit to someone else, whereas on Railton's view, it need not necessarily be so. To illustrate, suppose someone created a beautiful work of art. On Railton's view creating a beautiful artwork would confer meaning because it produced at least one relevant end (e.g., beauty) even if nobody experienced it, whereas on mine it would only confer meaning if that artwork made someone else's life go well (whether experiencing beauty is a basic prudential good, or lead to some prudential good). And third, asymmetric welfarism does not take into consideration the shared values of a community.

Given all the above, we now have a clear view of how asymmetric welfarism differs from existing consequentialist theories about meaning in life within the literature. While on the surface such a view appears to already exist within the literature, such an appearance is mistaken. Asymmetric welfarism is uniquely distinct from existing views because of several factors. First, it is a monist theory about the good in which meaningfulness is concerned with. There is, according to it, just one good - well-being of other welfare subjects - which meaning in life is meted out in. Second, asymmetric welfarism is a monist theory about meaningfulness in general, i.e., that there is only one type of meaning in life. In other words, there is only one way in which one's life can be meaningful, rather than being meaningful in a plurality of ways (such as significance, purpose, etc.). Third, asymmetric welfarism is asymmetric; i.e., the well-being of the person whose life it is does not compute into the calculation of the meaningfulness of that life. Improving one's own well-being confers no meaning upon that life. And fourth, asymmetric welfarism is not concerned with how or in what way a life makes others better off, just so long as it does.

2.3. Arguments in Favour

In this section I provide arguments in favour of asymmetric welfarism. Those arguments include how asymmetric welfarism makes sense of paradigm cases and existential angst, and I address several objections along the way. As a caveat, however, I admit there are parts of paradigm cases and existential angst which are not so easily reconciled with asymmetric welfarism. In light of that, I flag these problems and direct the reader to where else in this thesis I flesh out a proper response to the relevant objection. To reiterate, my aim here is not to provide a robust argument but rather get asymmetric welfarism off the ground.

2.3.1. Paradigm Cases

To recall, paradigm cases were those cases in which we find exemplars of the most meaningful and meaningless lives. A point in favour of asymmetric welfarism is that it provides grounds of unifying these cases. Asymmetric welfarism explains what meaningful lives have in common and what meaningless lives lack. When we reflect upon the lives of Gandhi, Mandela, Curie, King, Einstein, etc., one way of unifying them is by noting that the projects and activities of their lives improved the well-being of many welfare subjects to a significant degree. Conversely, the reason we list the grass counter, a life in an experience machine, a Hitler or a Bundy, etc., as meaningless is because the projects and activities of those lives either caused significant levels of harm to others, or simply did nothing for nobody. Since asymmetric welfarism vindicates our intuitions about paradigm cases it should be awarded a plausibility point.

One might question why we should think that improving or protecting the well-being of others should be the *only way* in which a life can be made meaningful. After all, Marie Curie or Albert Einstein's life seems meaningful not because of their impact on well-being, but rather because of the contributions they made to their particular fields. When we think of their lives, or the lives of people such as Bach, Hume, or Tolkien, increasing the well-being of others is not the first thing that comes to mind when we evaluate the meaning of their lives. Instead, we seem more concerned with how they contributed to, or changed, their given discipline or other sorts of features of their lives.

How might asymmetric welfarism handle this? My response is that, while their contributions might be valuable for their own sake (or along some other evaluative dimension), the extent in which they are meaningful (or confer meaning upon a life) is only to the extent in which those contributions have a positive impact on the well-being of others. Reason being, I argue, is because we fail to consider both what constitutes well-being and how welfare changes occur downstream from a contribution.

Let us take something like knowledge. Knowledge, or some epistemic good like it, is often taken to be a type which plays a role in well-being (Finnis, 2011, pp. 59-80). One might take knowledge to be a basic prudential good (objective-list theory), or something which often leads to happiness or pleasure (hedonism), or something we desire (desire/preference theory) or something which helps us perfect our nature or that knowledge is a kind of achievement (perfectionism).¹⁴ The work and discoveries of a Curie or an Einstein are highly likely to be tokens of knowledge. Given that, theories of well-being have some story to tell as to why learning of their discoveries improves our well-being: knowledge either is or leads to a basic prudential good.

Further still, we measure the significance of their discoveries by how they inform/reform our understanding of the world and how we might build upon their findings. Their discoveries help us identify mistakes in our understanding of the world and allow us to expand our knowledge. I take it that identifying epistemic mistakes and extending our knowledge from the discoveries of those before us are also tokens of knowledge. So, again, a theory of well-being has a story to tell us about why such things like scientific discovery increase our well-being. So even if we restrict their contributions and the meaning thereof to only their respective discipline, we find that it is still well-being which is, ultimately, doing the leg work with regards to the meaningfulness of their lives.

That said, one might just reject or deny the claim that a contribution or impact of any kind is needed to confer meaning to a life. Consider the lives of Bach, Copernicus, or Frida Kahlo. Most often we ascribe the meaningfulness of their lives as being due to their achievements or discoveries, with no thought about their impact, whether it be upon the welfare of others or even the relevant domain (music for Bach, science for Copernicus, and art for Kahlo). So an appeal to impact or contribution seems unmotivated and unwarranted.

While it is tempting to think the meaning of a life is conferred by the projects themselves, I believe this line of thought is mistaken. We can pull apart the value of some project and the meaning it might confer upon a life by making comparative judgements between lives which, I shall argue, betray the current objection. Consider the following case:

Mozart & Bozart: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a successful and highly influential musician whose works defined the classical period of European music and brought pleasure and aesthetic experiences to people not just in his

¹⁴ For objective list theory, see (Arneson, 1999; Finnis, 2011; Fletcher, 2013; Hooker, 2015; Rice, 2013). For hedonism, see (Bentham & Lafleur, 1948; Crisp, 2006; Feldman, 2004; Mill, 1910/1999). For desire-satisfaction, see (Brandt, 1979; Griffin, 1986; Heathwood, 2006). For perfectionism, see (Aristotle, 2000; Bradford, 2016; Hurka, 1993; Kraut, 2007; LeBar, 2013).

own time, but well past his death. Intuitively, Mozart lived an incredibly meaningful life.

Imagine however if Mozart had an unknown contemporary: Jaeger Hans Bozart. The life story of Bozart is identical to Mozart in almost every way, being also a child prodigy, master composer and performer. By pure coincidence, all of Bozart's compositions are note-for-note identical to Mozart's own, even though neither learned of the other or their works. The primary way in which Bozart's life differs from Mozart's is this: nobody ever had, nor ever will, experience the musical compositions or performances of Jaeger Hans Bozart. In Bozart's own lifetime and after his death, his compositions are condemned to the flames and his name lost to history. His contemporary Mozart, however, is lauded as one of the greatest composers and pianists in human history.

How do we judge the meaningfulness of Bozart's life? If we hold the position that Mozart's life is a paradigm case of a meaningful life because of his musical compositions, then it seems we are equally committed to Bozart's life being equally meaningful. After all, their musical compositions are identical.

Yet it seems wrong to say that Bozart lived a life equally as meaningful as that of Mozart. My intuition is that Bozart's life was meaningless; his life was not made any more meaningful by the simple fact he created beautiful, Mozart-like quality music. But that does not mean Bozart's life was not worth living or valueless. Indeed, it seems his life was made better for having created music. But I think his life was made richer along some other evaluative dimension other than meaning.

I submit what best explains our comparative judgement between Mozart and Bozart is impact upon others: Mozart had impact while Bozart did not. The works of Mozart are artistic contributions that have brought about a great deal of pleasurable aesthetic experience and influenced the development of European music. Lacking these features is what makes Bozart's life different from his more successful (and real) counterpart. Given that artistic creation and achievement are found in both lives, but not impact, and that we judge the meaningfulness of their lives differently, I suggest the most plausible explanation of our judgement is because one has impact while the other don't.

My judgement of the Bozart case, however, might not be universal. No doubt some might judge the life of Bozart as meaningful (perhaps even as meaningful as Mozart), with their reason

being that Bozart lived a meaningful life because it was meaningful *to him* (Calhoun, 2018; Chastain, 2021; Frankfurt, 1982; Rosati, 2013; Sartre, 1946).

My response here is that meaningful ‘to’ or ‘for’ someone tells us nothing about whether something is actually meaningful (Bramble, 2015). An alternative explanation can be offered, namely, that Bozart’s life does well along a different evaluative dimension other than meaningfulness. For example, we might think his life a prudentially good one, or that it was fulfilling. I have already noted the difference between a prudentially good life and a meaningful life so I will not belabour that point here. As for his life being fulfilling, I dedicate chapter 4 towards arguing and detailing such an evaluative dimension of a life. In short, however, I contend that meaning for, or to, someone is a different evaluative dimension from meaning; to say something is meaningful to or for someone is really to say it is fulfilling.

But one might think Bozart lived a meaningful life for other reasons, e.g., because of the sorts of projects he engaged in. This second reason is harder to root out because there are varying reasons for why someone might think so. One might hold the view that Bozart lived a meaningful life because by creating music he engaged with objective value, or creativity (R. Taylor, 1987), or that creating music is an achievement (Luper, 2014), or because creating music feeds into some overarching narrative of Bozart’s life (Rosati, 2013), or it is an activity that warrants praise (Kauppinen, 2012), etc.

It would be too much a task to address each piecemeal. Instead, what I present is an argument which, I hope, undercuts or undermines the judgement completely, regardless of the reasons for why one would have it. That is, if the achievement, or objective value, or creative project, etc., does not engage with the well-being of other welfare subjects, it is not meaningful. It may have merits for some other reason (e.g., aesthetics, an achievement, etc.), but it will not confer meaning unless it impacts upon the well-being of others. Consider the following:

Arctic Scientist: a research scientist has dedicated their life to gathering data in the Arctic. They have been recording data and writing up their findings for decades, sending their findings via transmissions back to their home base in their country. However, unbeknownst to the research scientist, their transmitter was damaged by a severe storm on the first day and has not been transmitting anything. All of the data and findings have been sent into the ether and lost to the winds.

Did the scientist live a meaningful life? It seems to me that even if we cash out the researcher’s discoveries in any of the aforementioned ways (e.g., achievements, creative, worthy of pride and admiration, etc.) our judgement is that their life is not meaningful. For while we

may admit their work is valuable, that value does not, by itself, seem enough to confer meaning. The appearance of meaningfulness through the aforementioned reasons (creativity, narrative, etc.) is stripped away when we realise they have had no positive impact upon others. The discoveries were for naught; they did nothing for nobody.

In both Arctic Scientist and Bozart we see an individual engaged with projects and activities which are thought to be meaningful, whether that be for their own merits (e.g., objective intrinsic value), or they led to some sort of final value (e.g., achievement), or because of agent-dependent reasons (e.g., the person chose their projects). Yet, even though in both cases each individual engaged with their chosen activity with their heart and soul, the ultimate outcome of those activities failed to engage with anyone else. That these projects did not engage with anybody seems to be the very thing which robs the activity/project of meaning, and so confers no meaning upon the life in question. And if Arctic scientist lived a meaningless life then it seems we have good reason to surrender any intuition we might have that Bozart live a meaningful life (for those who held that position).

One final point here is to consider how the Arctic scientist would respond had they found out all the transmissions they sent were not received. Suppose, upon returning home the scientist learned all their transmissions had failed and so all the discoveries, data, and research was lost. What would their response be? Would they treat their efforts and life work as meaningful, or would they instead lament the fact that their efforts were in vain, toiling and sacrificing for nothing? I think their response and judgement of their own life would be the latter. The scientist recognises that for their efforts to be meaningful they must amount to something; they must impact upon others.

Again, to be clear, I am not saying artistic projects or scientific discoveries are worthless or have no value, whether objectively or otherwise. While I disagree with Luper (2014) as to what meaning is, I think he is right in pointing out that just because something is meaningless does not automatically make it worthless or valueless. All I am saying here - and all I need to say - is that whether such projects and activities confer meaning upon a life appears directly tied to how much of a positive impact those things have upon the well-being of other welfare subjects.

In closing, I have argued here that asymmetric welfarism gives a highly plausible explanation as to what unifies paradigm cases of meaningful lives and what is missing from paradigm cases of meaningless lives. I have addressed objections which turn upon rejecting monism about value with regards to meaning, and the need for impact upon others. And so, given all the above, I submit we have good reason to award a plausibility point to asymmetric welfarism with regards to paradigm cases.

2.3.2. Existential Angst

The second approach was existential angst. Here, ‘meaning’ seems an appropriate (if not quintessential) word for understanding the concepts and problems people grapple with in light of their own mortality and position in the universe. It seems for a theory about meaning in life to be a live candidate, it must vindicate our intuitions about what it is people are dealing with when they experience existential anxiety or dread.

While I shall argue asymmetric welfarism accounts for significant parts of existential angst, I admit it does not explain all of the associated phenomena. For that which is not accounted for here, I aim to provide a diagnosis over the coming chapters which, I argue, dovetails neatly with asymmetric welfarism. Roughly, that diagnosis is this: the meaning of our lives is not the sole focus of existential angst. Instead, existential dread is concerned with a multitude of evaluative dimensions and issues which are closely related but not identical to meaning. That said, my aim here is to explain how asymmetric welfarism accounts for some of the more prominent phenomena found in existential angst. For those phenomena in which asymmetric welfarism does not account for, I direct the reader to the relevant chapter in which I properly address those issues.

One widely held concern that throws people into existential woe is whether there is a ‘big picture’ and, if so, where or how their life fits within it. Another way of putting our concern is whether we think our lives contribute to or make a difference in the world or the universe (broadly understood). Related existential concerns to this also include whether anybody would notice or care if we died, or if we might be easily replaced, or that the world would be the same or even better off without us.

Asymmetric welfarism provides an account of what it is we are concerned about. First, an explanation of the big picture is provided: the thing that is bigger than the individual is the welfare of many others, whether it be understood as human history, the community, or the global village. Second, being concerned as to whether one has made a difference seems to be directly tied into our place within that community or global village (e.g., what contributions did we make, what relationships did we forge, and what sort of mark did we leave). And third, the worries we have about whether we matter are tied to whether we matter to other persons (i.e., welfare subjects), whether it be persons within our direct social circle or the wider community, regardless of whether that community exists outside our own geographic or temporal location.

I have already argued how one way of motivating asymmetric welfarism came from the observation that improving the lives of others is considered a quintessential source of meaning. This is why, presumably, we admire the lives of a Martin Luther King Jr. or an Alexander

Fleming or a Ruth Bader Ginsberg; their lives made others better off in substantial ways not just in their own time, but for generations thereafter (and if over time their life makes others worse off we question the meaningfulness of their lives).

Note here how the above described existential concern dovetails with one of the motivations for asymmetric welfarism. In terms of meaningfulness, we (most likely) consider our own lives to pale in comparison to a Marie Curie or a Frederick Douglass and, because of that, develop or inflame our existential concerns. Such a point seems to fit with the observation that when people judge their life as not contributing enough, they take that as a reason for thinking their life does not mean much (if it were to be meaningful at all). Given asymmetric welfarism provides an account of this primary concern of our shared existential anxiety, and that such an account also fits with the theories motivations, I submit this should count as a point in favour towards its plausibility.

One objection to the above concerns itself with the duration of an impact. Specifically, that unless a life has long-term or eternal impact, then said life is meaningless or, in virtue of ceasing to have an impact, becomes meaningless. I take this worry to be considerably alarming given the widespread belief that for a life to be meaningful the efforts of that life must continue on in perpetuity. That the efforts and achievements of a life eventually perish does, so the thought goes, register a life - if not all life - as a futile and therefore meaningless endeavour:¹⁵

A myriad of men are born; they labor and sweat and struggle for bread; they squabble and scold and fight; ... they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence; where they achieved nothing ... where they have left no sign that have existed - a world which will lament them a day and forget them forever. Then another myriad take their place and copies all they did ... and vanishes as they vanished ... to follow the same arid path through the same desert and accomplish what the first myriad and all the myriads that came after it accomplished - nothing! (Twain, 2010, p. 28).

Twain's thoughts on the matter are hardly idiosyncratic. Given that life will eventually be extinguished, it would follow that no life is meaningful because, in the end, all artefacts and

¹⁵ "Furthermore, although getting what we want is good, it is even better - and here Kauppinen echoes Wolf and Metz - if *what we want is good* (i.e., worthy of being wanted), and the better what we want is, the better our lives are. It is even better still if what we want will *last*, and the longer it lasts the better our lives are" (Hauskeller, 2020, pp. 12-13).

edifices will be destroyed, and eventually there will be no creatures to remember anything of the past.¹⁶

My response to this objection is that the appearance of meaning as being dependent upon long lasting, if not eternal, conditions is mistaken. Though it may be true that the longer an effect lasts the more meaning is added to a life, I think it is a mistake to think that the meaning of a life is eroded, or was meaningless the whole time, simply because it ceases to have an impact in the future. Consider the following case:

Kidney Transplant: Robyn is a young child in need of a kidney transplant. If they don't receive a healthy kidney from a donor, they will die. You have two healthy kidneys and are a perfect match for Robyn. Donating your healthy kidney will save Robyn's life. However, given that Robyn is a living creature they will, at some future time, die. Further still, as best as you're aware, all who know Robyn will also die and their existence will, eventually, be forgotten.

Would it be meaningless to donate a healthy kidney to save Robyn? The answer, I submit, is 'no'. Donating a kidney to them and thus saving their life seems quite meaningful. And it seems to me the life of the person who donated that kidney would become more meaningful in virtue of their sacrifice. But consider two important facts. First, Robyn will eventually die (as all living things do). Second, all memory of Robyn will eventually cease when all those who knew them will also pass away. But do these facts render donating a kidney meaningless? Does the donor's life seem as meaningless as if they had not donated their kidney? The answer to these questions seems to also be 'no'; saving Robyn's life is still a meaningful thing to do - the donor's life is made more meaningful because of it, regardless of the inevitable.

One might attempt to parry my response by agreeing that a life can be meaningful, but only for a time. The idea here being that a life is meaningful only insofar as it is relevant; once a life ceases to have an impact on the living then that life is rendered meaningless. It seems to me, however, more likely that lives simply stop having meaning added to them, rather than lives ceasing to be meaningful altogether. Reconsider the kidney transplant case but across three different worlds. Suppose in world *A* Robyn lived a full life and died of natural causes in old age.

¹⁶ This problem is similar to an idea Nozick (1981, pp. 594-618) developed, that "for a finite condition to be meaningful, it must obtain its meaning from another condition that has meaning" (Metz, 2021). Since all things are finite, we end up with an infinite regress where nothing is meaningful. The only way something could be meaningful, so the thought goes, is if the regress ends at something which is infinite or unlimited, e.g., God. Cf. (Bennett-Hunter, 2014; Mawson, 2016; Swinburne, 2016; Waghorn, 2014).

The response to the above is to note how paradigm cases such as Einstein, Plato, or Ruth Bader Ginsburg still seem meaningful even if this meaning regress did not end at some meaningful condition, i.e., some infinite, unlimited thing (Landau, 2017; Wielenberg, 2005, pp. 31-37). As Metz (2021) notes, even those inclined to agree with the problem still find the upshots counterintuitive and difficult to reject (Audi, 2005; Mawson, 2016; Quinn, 2000; C. Williams, 2020).

In world *B*, Robyn passes away due to a tragic car accident which occurred in their teenage years. In world *C*, Robyn achieves immortality and is able to stop the heat death of the universe, thus preserving creation and so life. How would we judge the meaning of the donor's life (the person who donated the kidney to save Robyn) in each world?

Intuitively, in all three worlds donating a kidney to Robyn is meaningful. However, it seems to become considerably more meaningful in *C* because the effects were longer lasting. But the fact *C* appears the most meaningful does not undercut the meaningfulness of saving Robyn in life *A* or even *B*. To be sure, *A* and *B* are not as meaningful as *C*, but they are still meaningful. It does not cross our minds that *A* and *B* are reduced to being equally meaningless. We have a clear idea of which of the two is more meaningful than the other regardless of the inevitable. Even in light of *C*, *A* and *B* still appear meaningful, just to varying degrees. And what explains this, it seems, is how much well-being accrues in Robyn's life, or how much of the well-being of other welfare subjects Robyn is in turn responsible for.

But even if the objection were to hold true - that all life is eventually rendered meaningless - asymmetric welfarism provides an explanation for that too; lives will eventually stop contributing towards or doing anything for the well-being of other welfare subjects. So asymmetric welfarism has the tools to explain why we think some lives are meaningful for a time, even if all lives are rendered meaningless: eventually lives stop defending or improving the welfare of others.

The second objection might result from a belief that I have given a mischaracterisation of our existential concerns, i.e., not all of our existential worries are focused upon 'the big picture'. As we saw earlier, our existential angst is also tied up in what we should be spending our time on and what ultimately matters to us (Calhoun, 2018; Frankfurt, 1982; Wolf, 2010). This is problematic for asymmetric welfarism because not only does the theory ignore these types of concerns, it thinks them irrelevant. If asymmetric welfarism cannot account for such data points it runs the serious risk of failing to account for existential angst.

My reply, to reiterate at the start of this subsection, is to deny that existential angst is concerned solely with the meaning of our lives. I believe our existential fears are concerned with a number of related but separate problems about how our life stands in relation to a variety of values. We also worry about whether our lives are fulfilling, worthwhile, significant, have a purpose, etc. These dimensions in which we evaluate a life are collectively thought to be about meaning, and numerous competing theories about meaning in life have been developed which take each dimension to be identical to meaning. However, as I shall argue in later chapters, these are distinct evaluative dimensions and not identical to meaning, though they may overlap in considerable ways (for subjectivism and fulfilment, see chapter 4, for purpose see chapter 5, and for significance and morality see chapter 6). This strategy is born out of the triangulation

methodology; that a theory should provide a path forward in clarifying and articulating the differences and connections between closely related concepts, giving us a neater conceptual network than we already possess.

Given asymmetric welfarism provides a way of grounding our intuitions and judgements with regards to our existential anxiety, a plausibility point should be awarded. I have considered objections as to why we might think asymmetric welfarism fails to properly capture other related existential intuitions and I have shown how those objections do not undermine my position. I submit, given the above, we should count this as a point in favour of asymmetric welfarism.

2.4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I outlined and argued for asymmetric welfarism about meaning in life. To reiterate, asymmetric welfarism states a life is meaningful insofar as the considered life improves, promotes, protects, or preserves, the well-being of other welfare subjects. I dedicated this chapter to providing arguments in support of the plausibility of asymmetric welfarism. Specifically, I argued asymmetric welfarism fits comfortably with several core aspects of our shared understanding of meaning, including some pre-theoretical intuitions and the approaches employed to grasp the concept of meaning in life.

I argued asymmetric welfarism vindicates our intuitions about paradigm cases. This was because the lives which are intuitively the most meaningful are those lives which improved or protected the well-being of many other welfare subjects (while the most meaningless lives did the opposite, or had no positive impact on the well-being of other welfare subjects). Asymmetric welfarism also vindicated one of the primary concerns of existential angst: our concern about our place within the 'bigger picture', and whether our life has any significant impact upon the world. In light of these arguments, I believe asymmetric welfarism has enough initial plausibility to get off the ground.

3. Problems

In the previous chapter I outlined asymmetric welfarism about meaning in life and presented a case in its favour. Whilst I addressed some objections which naturally arose from those reasons provided, there are (unsurprisingly) stand alone objections too. These objections often point out that asymmetric welfarism either (a) produces counterintuitive results across a variety of cases, or (b) that it fails to capture or account for crucial aspects of our shared pre-theoretical understanding of meaning. The purpose of this chapter is to defend asymmetric welfarism from these objections.

This chapter proceeds by examining eight objections to asymmetric welfarism. I begin (§3.1.) by examining the accusation that asymmetric welfarism fails to capture the appropriate scope of entities which can be the bearers of a meaningful life. I provide several arguments advancing the view that both animals and even inanimate objects can have meaningful existences. Next, I consider two cases - the lucky idiot (§3.2.) and the incompetent villain (§3.3.) - which are thought to illustrate the importance of intentions and how luck undermines meaning. In response, I argue there are cases which show we have strong intuitions which run counter to these examples and that we would be biting a significantly larger bullet if we took the objectors side than my own.

After (§3.4.), I consider the results machine and whether shortcuts or quick fixes undermine meaning. I argue this objection confuses an element of morality - just deserts - with what qualifies for meaning in life. I then (§3.5.) consider whether a life need be unique to be meaningful. I reject uniqueness, arguing that all one need be is causally responsible for the relevant state-of-affairs. I then (§3.6.) move to the objection of self-harm for the pleasure of others. I argue this objection presupposes a theory of well-being which is contentious, but that we also in fact take self-sacrifice to be a source of meaning.

I end by developing two classic problems for welfare maximisation - the repugnant conclusion (§3.7.) and the utility monster (§3.8.) - into objections against asymmetric welfarism. I argue the repugnant conclusion fails because it is entirely unclear what we mean by a life being 'barely' worthwhile. Under particular instantiations, the thought experiment and the purported intuitions it elicits are not as sturdy or clearcut as supposed. I argue the utility monster is misguided because, if we examine our judgements and actions, we both prefer and applaud utility monsters, or what I call 'utility angels', in our practical lives.

3.1. The Scope Criteria

In ethics, we expect a moral theory to capture the correct range of entities which have moral status or are moral agents. Similarly, we expect a theory about meaning in life to capture the appropriate scope of entities that have the capacity for living a meaningful life. Examining our intuitions about which entities, if any, can or cannot be the bearers of a meaningful life is often thought to be a good starting point for producing a theory about meaning in life. It is widely held that the only entities with the capacity for meaning can be creatures like us: human beings or persons. The upshot of such a view is that neither animals, non-persons, nor inanimate objects, have the capacity for having a meaningful life or existence. After all, when reflecting upon which lives are most meaningful it is not just any life, but *human life*, which we entertain.

The distinction between humans and animals has often thought to serve as an important and informative point. Luper (2014) takes it as a strength if a theory excludes animals. Metz (2013, p. 37) begins his own investigation by making clear he believes the distinction between humans and animals provides deep philosophical insight into finding the correct theory of meaning; that meaning can only be “exhibited by a human person”. On similar lines, Fischer (1993, p. 69) takes the division to explain why we think human death is a tragedy while animal death is not. Finally, Smuts (2013, p. 558) recognises that a theory which would allow a non-human animal to live a meaningful life would have that count as evidence against it.¹⁷

So what is it that makes animals and humans importantly different? The answer provided is that agency is a necessary requirement for some entity to have the capacity for meaning. What agency amounts to remains unsettled, ranging from straightforward reflective endorsement or caring about something (Frankfurt, 1982), to more complex structures such as goal setting and achievement (Luper, 2014). Given that finding the correct or appropriate scope of entities is considered a highly desirable trait in a theory, call it the *scope criteria*.

The scope criteria serves as an objection to asymmetric welfarism in the following manner. For a theory to be a live candidate it must capture the appropriate scope of entities which have the capacity for meaning. Intuitively, we hold that persons or human beings are the only entities which have the capacity for meaning. If a theory were to produce the result that an animal or inanimate object could have a meaningful life, then that theory has failed to meet the scope criteria. Asymmetric welfarism appears to fail the criteria. Consider the following:

Grumpy Cat: One day the owner of a cat takes a funny photo of their pet - one in which the cat looks particularly displeased - and uploads it to a popular website. The photo is an instant hit and spreads cross the internet and social

¹⁷ It should be noted, however, that Smuts ultimately accepts that animals can live meaningful lives.

media platforms, turning the animal into an internet celebrity. Millions of people take great joy in the photo of the cat, which they affectionately name, 'Grumpy Cat'. Even after the cat passes away, their popularity holds: their Facebook profile has 8.3 million likes, their Instagram and Twitter profiles have 2.6 and 1.5 million followers respectively, while their YouTube channel is just shy of 300 thousand subscribers.

Given asymmetric welfarism states a life is meaningful to the extent it improves the welfare of others - and assuming joy leads to or is a basic prudential good - it seems asymmetric welfarism is committed to the position that Grumpy Cat lived a meaningful life. And depending upon the additive quantity accrued, it may have been a very meaningful life to boot. Since a cat is not a human being or person it seems asymmetric welfarism fails the scope criteria.

Note here that the argument, as I understand it, is deployed to provide motivation for adopting agent-centric theories about meaning in life. That is, it is not that we start with thinking agency is necessary but, rather, that by reflecting upon (i) the concept of meaning, (ii) the types of entities which exist, and (iii) our pre-theoretical judgements about how meaning relates to entities, we draw the conclusion that agency must be necessary for meaning. In this way, proponents of the objection aim to avoid begging the question; they try and start from a theory-neutral position. What seems to make or break the objection is whether or not there is widespread agreement amongst us that animals and objects lack the capacity for meaning. Since so much hangs upon whether there is widespread agreement, if it were to turn out otherwise then the objection would have lost much of its force.

Let me be clear about my response to this objection. I do not reject the scope criteria per se; a theory ought to capture, as best it can, the candidates of some phenomena. What I am arguing, however, is that the scope supposed by and large is mistaken because it is too narrow; animals and even inanimate objects can have meaningful lives or existences. If the argument I advance here works then theories of meaning should still capture the scope criteria, but the scope must be broadened to include animals and objects.

I argue for my position in two ways. First, I argue there are many cases in which we deem animals and objects as having or had meaningful lives or existences. The evidence I offer is the observation that our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours towards such lives are similar, if not identical, to how we act towards and think about human lives. Second, the traditional view (i.e., that animals and objects cannot have the capacity for meaning) produces worse counterintuitive upshots than my own position, as the traditional view commits us to saying all animals and objects are utterly, and without qualification, meaningless.

3.1.1. Animals and Meaning

I am not convinced there is a widespread intuition that animals cannot have meaningful lives. Given recent developments within the literature, it appears I am not alone. Thomas (2018a), for example, rightly notes there are other lives which seem to occupy the same sort of conceptual space as paradigm cases. That is, there appear to be animal lives which are relevantly similar to paradigm cases:

What would we say about the life of Smoky the dog, who was found abandoned in a foxhole in the New Guinea jungle during World War II, and accompanied Corporal William Wynne through 12 combat missions over two years, earning eight battle Stars and surviving 150 air raids and even a typhoon. Smoky slept in Wynne's tent, shared his rations, and served as a therapy animal of sorts, but her greatest achievement came when she helped in the construction of a crucial airfield for allied forces by running a telegraph wire through a 70-foot-long pipe, solving a problem that would have otherwise required a three-day dig that would have put hundreds of men in danger of enemy bombings (Thomas, 2018a, pp. 256-266).

There are two points to be made when considering the above case. First, even though one might reject Smoky's life as being meaningful, I doubt such a judgement is widespread; a non-trivial percentage of people would, I think, be willing to grant that Smoky's life was, at the very least, somewhat meaningful. Second, suppose we were never told of Smoky's species; how would we judge her life then? I imagine there would be considerable agreement as to the *prima facie* meaningfulness of her life, but that we would not withdraw our judgement simply in virtue of learning that she was a dog. That Smoky turned out to be a dog would simply be a surprising fact that this meaningful life belonged to a non-human.

Smoky is not the only animal to have lived such a life. Consider the lives of other war animals, or animals which were involved in sports, art, research, and science. The list of such animals is more extensive than perhaps we realise: Laika the cosmonaut, Phar Lap, Washoe, Dolly the cloned sheep, Greyfriar's Bobby, Cher Ami, G.I. Joe, and Simpson's Donkey are but a few.¹⁸ The lives of such animals share many features similar to the human paradigm cases mentioned earlier. And as with those human cases, our attitudes, behaviours, and actions towards these animals are quite similar. We create statues, films, and books about these animals and the lives they lived. We treat them with adoration. We write them into our history books. They capture our imagination.

¹⁸ Laika was the first animal in space and proved living creatures could survive outside our planets atmosphere. Phar Lap was a racehorse in Australia which helped the nation pull through the early years of the Great Depression. Washoe was the first chimp to learn and successfully communicate with American sign language. Dolly the sheep was the first ever successful clone. Greyfriar's Bobby spent fourteen years guarding the grave of their previous master, and serves as a symbol of dedication and love. Cher Ami and G.I. Joe were messenger pigeons who saved hundreds of Allied lives during World War I and II respectively. Simpson's Donkey saved the lives of dozens of soldiers in Gallipoli during World War I.

We are taught about them in school. We award them medals and accolades. In some cases, they change our perspective about ourselves as a species and our place within the universe.¹⁹ They sometimes take on quasi-mythical qualities.

In light of the above, there appears to be no pre-theoretical reason for thinking we should discount the lives of animals when thinking about what, if anything, makes a life meaningful. Nor does there appear a reason for ignoring such cases. Instead, what we have is strong evidence for the opposite conclusion: many of us think animals can, and in some cases do, live meaningful lives; they have the capacity for meaning.

What I have argued for here is that we judge some animal lives as meaningful. Or, at the very least, we would not judge their lives as meaningless, i.e., devoid of any meaning. These animal lives share similar features with the paradigm cases listed earlier. Judging their lives as meaningful is not idiosyncratic as our collective behaviour and attitudes towards such animals shows.

We also seem to judge an animal life meaningless for the same reasons we might judge a human life to be. The life of a battery chicken, for example, does not appear to be just prudentially bad for that chicken, but also meaningless. And the reason it appears meaningless, I suggest, is not because chicken life is meaningless as a rule, but rather because that particular chicken's life lacks, or is robbed of, meaning. Furthermore, the life of a battery chicken certainly seems more meaningless than the life of the family chicken kept in the backyard. We can compare the lives of animals and decide which is more meaningful than the other. If all animal life were meaningless, we simply couldn't make such comparative judgements.

Yet for all that one might still insist we share an intuition that animals cannot live meaningful lives. If so, my last recourse is to point out that such a claim is an empirical one and so it can be tested. While I provide no empirical data to support my own position, I would ask the objector to visit the local park and ask dog owners whether they think their beloved pet lives a meaningless life or not. While they may not say their dog's life is as meaningful as their own, they will still admit their dog lives a meaningful life to some extent - even if it is the life of a dog (Hauskeller, 2020).

This leads me to my second argument: holding the view that animals cannot live meaningful lives results in the position that all animal life is meaningless. That is, if it were true that animals could not live meaningful lives then it is entailed that all animal life is, by definition and without qualification, meaningless. To be clear, the upshot cannot be that animal life is less meaningful than human life. If it were, that would commit us to the position that animal life is capable of

¹⁹ For example, Washoe, David Greybeard, and Echo the Elephant. Also the nameless birds of the Galapagos which Darwin studied, inspiring him to form his theory of evolution.

being meaningful, just that it cannot be as meaningful as human life. And that, quite clearly, is not the traditional position held; tradition is far stronger than that. On face value, I take this upshot to be highly counterintuitive and certainly more so than the position I am defending.

One objection could be that, just because animal life has no meaning, it does not follow that their lives are meaningless. Something can fail to be meaningful without being meaningless, such as the number 4. Take into consideration a rock and whether it can be careful; it seems a rock cannot be careful, but that does not mean the rock is careless. It just turns out that rocks are not the sorts of things which can be either. So if we hold that animals cannot have meaningful lives or existences, all that means is that they have no meaning and not that they have meaningless lives.

I do not think this objection works because to say a life is meaningless can be to say that it has no meaning, and not just that it lacks meaningfulness. First, consider the following expressions: (a) if a life is not meaningful then that life has no meaning, but (b) just because that life has no meaning, that does not make it a meaningless life. Now, (a) seems correct and uncontroversial, but (b) seems obviously mistaken. This is highlighted when considering (c) if that life has no meaning then that life is meaningless. To say a life is not meaningful is to say that life has no meaning, and if a life has no meaning then that is the same thing as saying it is a meaningless life.

We should also be wary of the ‘care’ counterexample because we can find other parallels which do not fall into this trap, such as colour or taste. For example, take the number 4: the number 4 is not colourful and has no colour, so it seems the number 4 is colourless. The number 4 also has no taste, and so the number 4 is tasteless. Meaninglessness, I suggest, works more like ‘colourless’ or ‘tasteless’, rather than like ‘careless’. To further the point, consider how people react in the throes of existential angst when they view their lives as having no meaning; if a person looks about the universe and comes to believe their life is not, or worse still cannot, be meaningful - not just that their life lacks meaning but is incapable of having it - they describe their life as meaningless. So this objection fails to gain any traction upon us.

Alternatively, one might try and soften the blow, as Luper (2014, p. 198) does, by pointing out that just because all animal life is meaningless does not ipso facto make all animal life valueless. While I am sympathetic to that view, I do not think this move softens the blow enough, nor does it explain our use of the word ‘meaningless’ with regards to the circumstances of animal death. Consider two slaughterhouses, *A* and *B*:

Slaughterhouse A: pigs, lambs, cows, and chickens are killed and processed, their remains used for a variety of purposes, such as meat and clothing.

Slaughterhouse B: pigs, lambs, cows, and chickens are killed, their carcasses thrown immediately into an incinerator. No part of the animal is used.

If animal life were meaningless, then both cases would be equally meaningless. Indeed, there would be no way for animal life to be more meaningless than another. Yet given *A* and *B*, that seems mistaken; *B* is significantly more meaningless than *A*. I do not think I am alone in thinking so. We might say, for example, that at least the animals in *A* were used for something good and not senselessly wasted. This seems right, given that we undoubtedly describe those of *B* as being ‘senseless’, ‘pointless’, and ‘meaningless’ - all of which appear to be appropriate uses of the concept of meaning, pre-theoretically speaking. Further, such judgements seem to hold regardless of one’s opinion about the ethical status of animals and whether we are justified in using them for our own ends. The fact we intuitively recognise the animals killed in *B* are having their lives rendered more meaningless than *A* suggests we have clear notion that those lives *could have been* meaningful. Even livestock animals have the capacity for meaning; they can live meaningful lives if given the chance.

The above points compliment other observations within the literature. Hauskeller (2020) notes that both James (1895) and Frankl (1959/2000) recognise that the life of an animal can be meaningful, even if that life is prudentially awful for them:

Consider a poor dog whom they are vivisectioning in a laboratory. He lies strapped on a board and shrieking at its executioners, and to his own dark consciousness is literally in a sort of hell. He cannot see a single redeeming ray in the whole business; and yet all these diabolical-seeming events are controlled by human intentions which, if his poor benighted mind could be made to catch a glimpse of them, all that is heroic in him would religiously acquiesce ... Lying on his back on the board there he may be performing a function incalculably higher than any that prosperous canine life admits of (James, 1895, p. 20).

In like minded fashion, when reflecting upon whether there could be any meaning to human suffering (even when we are unable to grasp it) Frankl (1959/2000, p. 121) writes the suffering of, “an ape which was being used to develop poliomyelitis serum, and for this reason punctured again and again”, would be meaningful even if the ape cannot understand the suffering inflicted upon them (Hauskeller, 2020, p. 18). And this reasoning seems to be along the same lines as used by those who justify their work in, say, the cattle industry: that the animals they raise - and the cattle ranchers themselves - live meaningful lives precisely because the carcasses of the cattle are used to feed and clothe people.

One might object that the James’s dog example serves only to underscore the value of agency. James seems to be noting that it is only if the animal were capable of intentional awareness then it would acquiesce to its vivisection but, as it does not, it merely performs a function like a tool.

But this is not the only way in which we might understand or capture James's observation. It could be the case that the dog's life is already meaningful even if it is unaware or incapable or being made aware of this fact. That is, if only the dog were aware of how meaningful their existence was then it would acquiesce - it would take the meaningfulness of its life as a reason for acquiescing. To give this idea traction, consider a variation of the Sisyphus case which involves three additions:

- "Unbeknownst to Sisyphus, his stone-rolling scares away vultures who would otherwise attack a nearby community and spread terror and disease" (Wolf, 2010, p. 21),
- Sisyphus, in a moment of existential crisis about the meaning of his life, is preparing to end it by throwing himself off the cliff, and
- Just before he's about to commit the act, we have one chance to say something to stop him from jumping.

What could we say, or appeal to, to change his mind about jumping? In such a situation, Bramble (2015, p. 447) writes his own response: "Wait, Sisyphus! Don't do it! You don't realise it, but your rock rolling is averting a great deal of suffering. It's scaring off the vultures that would otherwise attack nearby villagers and spread disease". Bramble's response seems both appropriate and addresses Sisyphus's concerns, even if he is unmoved by it. The reason Bramble provides Sisyphus directly addresses the concern he has, namely, whether his life is meaningful or not; Sisyphus's life does have meaning, he is just unaware of it. All Bramble is doing is reporting to Sisyphus the relevant facts about his existence, and it is those facts, and not his attitudes towards them, which are doing the work.

Let me be clear about what I am, and am not, saying with regards to the slaughterhouse examples. I am not saying the animal lives in \mathcal{A} are meaningful or, if they are, how meaningful they might be. Nor am I saying that if those animal lives in \mathcal{A} were meaningful that we are therefore justified or permitted to treat animals in such ways. What I am saying is that there is a widespread belief that an animal's life can be meaningful and meaningless to varying degrees. For the present argument, that is all I need show.

So, given the reverence some animal lives are bestowed (e.g., Smoky the dog), or the special place they hold in our hearts (e.g., the household pet), it seems that, if anything, a theory about meaning in life should be explaining why some animals lives are (i) celebrated, (ii) entrenched in the public consciousness, and (iii) why we describe an animal's life as being more or less meaningful or meaningless. And the most straightforward explanation is, I submit, admitting

animals have the capacity for meaning. Such an explanation is compatible with asymmetric welfarism.

One reservation about accepting such a position could be that it opens up the possibility that an animal could live as meaningful a life as a person, perhaps even more so. Such an upshot might strike us as counterintuitive. However, I do not think this counts as a reason for rejecting my position, but instead serves as a reason for accepting it.

First, compare the life of the beloved family pet against the life of a person plugged into an experience machine: whose life is more meaningful? Note the question here is neither malformed nor incoherent; we can make sense of the question being asked and there seems to be an answer to it. To me at least, it does not seem likely we will answer that both lives are equally meaningful or meaningless. I am inclined to think the beloved family pet lives a more meaningful life than a human being in an experience machine. But even if one were to disagree, the point here is rather that it is not counterintuitive to suggest an animal life (in this case, a family pet) can be more meaningful, even when compared to a human life.

Second, that we feel disgust, envy, frustration, or anger towards even the suggestion that an animal could have a more meaningful life than our own does not provide us any insight into whether animals have a capacity for meaning. Though we may feel something unjust has occurred - that an animal *should not* live a more meaningful life than a person - it is unclear why we should harbour such feelings if we thought animals lacked the capacity for meaning. This argument runs parallel to how we might feel about the suggestion that immoral or evil lives are more meaningful than our own; though we may feel angry and a sense of injustice about it, it does not rule out, by itself, that such lives are meaningful. What we need is an independent argument showing why we should rule out animal lives as having the capacity for meaning - something we do not currently have.

3.1.2. Objects

One might concede that at least some animals can live a meaningful life. One could provide an agent-dependent condition which would allow for some animals to live meaningful lives, while others cannot. For example, Purves and Delon (2018) argue that while intentional action is still necessary for meaning, there are particular types of animals which are capable of intentionality and so can potentially live meaningful lives.

One might wonder why we should need to cling to agency. Without agency then the scope of entities with the capacity for meaning is too broad. One type of entity thought to not have the capacity for meaning are *objects*, such as tin cans, bottles, socks, and any other non-living thing. Asymmetric welfarism allows for objects to have meaningful existences because (i) the view

states meaning is conferred by being causally responsible for improving or protecting the welfare of others, and (ii) objects can be causally responsible. Yet the idea that an object could have a meaningful existence, so the thought goes, is highly counterintuitive (and the idea an object could have a more meaningful existence than a person, further still). If an object is causally responsible for improving or protecting the welfare of others then asymmetric welfarism is committed to saying that it's existence has become somewhat more meaningful - and surely this is mistaken.²⁰

To give this idea traction, consider the episode of the *The Simpsons*, "Deep Space Homer". In this episode, Homer Simpson is launched into space as a publicity stunt by NASA to increase their T.V. ratings (failure to draw in ratings will result in reduction of funding). While in orbit the door handle of the space ship is torn off due to Homer's reckless actions, making re-entry deadly and seemingly impossible. Having been heavily criticised by a fellow (and professional) astronaut for dooming the crew, Homer assaults his critic with an inanimate carbon rod. During the altercation, Homer accidentally jams said rod into the door latch, thus locking the door and making re-entry possible again. Against the odds, the crew survives re-entry and lands safely on Earth. As the media circus surrounds the ship, Buzz Aldrin (a crew member) exclaims his thanks to Homer and his ingenuity with jury-rigging the door shut with the rod. However, the media focuses solely upon the inanimate carbon rod, hailing it the hero of the incident. The episode concludes with the rod appearing on the cover of TIME magazine (the cover entitled, 'In Rod We Trust') while the Simpson family watch a ticker tape parade being thrown for the rod (which is sitting in the back of a convertible).

The joke, of course, is placing meaning upon the rod itself is a serious error; an inanimate object cannot be a bearer of meaning because it falls outside the scope of such value

²⁰ One might object that talk of 'existence' is sufficient enough of a change from 'life' such as what we mean by 'meaning' with regards to the latter is different from that of the former. In other words, 'meaning of life' and 'meaning of existence' are two different questions which most likely require two distinctly different answers. To compare, consider the following questions: 'what is the quickness of Jones' wit?' And, 'what is the quickness of Jones' greyhound?' - given the different objects, i.e., wit and greyhound, our understanding of quickness will be commensurately different. We might reasonably suspect, then, that our understanding of 'meaning' may be different between 'life' and 'existence'.

But it is not obvious, in the relevant case, that there has been any change to our misunderstanding of meaningfulness when considering 'life' or 'existence'. Consider the following:

- Jones' wit and greyhound are quick.
- The word 'habitat' and Jones' life are meaningful
- The word 'habitat' and Jones' life have meaning

In these cases, it seems that claims about meaning are changing the subject depending upon the object in question. In these cases, meaning does not seem commensurate nor comparable. But consider the following:

- Jones' life and the habitat's existence are meaningful.

This last case, however, does not intuitively appear to be changing the subject; our understanding of meaning appears commensurate here.

assessments. An object cannot be praised nor is it even worthy of praise. Saying the rod's 'actions' were meaningful, so much so that it deserves to be heralded a hero, is absurd. If this is right, then it appears the reason why objects (like the inanimate carbon rod) cannot have meaningful existences is because they lack the capacity to have meaning which, so the thought goes, we can draw up to a lack of agency. Objects by definition cannot have agency; that is why they are objects and not subjects.

However compelling this initial position might be, I suggest such appearances are nothing but a chimera. Non-living entities, like objects, do have a capacity for meaning. The reason being because we can extend the previous observations of paradigm cases and animals to that of objects. We already recognise that an object can have a meaningful existence, and that some indeed do. The meaningfulness of an object's existence can be, like human or animal life, graded on a scale as being more or less meaningful or meaningless.

Consider Rosebud, the beloved and treasured childhood sled of Charles Foster Kane, the titular character in the film, *Citizen Kane*. We see throughout the film - set at different times in Kane's life - his relationship with Rosebud and of what significance that sled was to him. In his youth and in rebellion to his parent's decision to give him away to Mr. Thatcher, Kane hits him with Rosebud. Later in life, immediately after his second wife leaves him, Kane destroys her old room, his rage being brought to a sudden standstill when he spots a snow globe with the title, 'Rosebud', while at the end of his life his final word was 'Rosebud'. It does not seem a misuse of the word when describing the existence of the sled as meaningful. And it seems we can say Rosebud had a meaningful existence because of how it stood in relationship to a welfare subject, in this case, Charles Foster Kane.

A sled in a fictitious film, however, is not needed to make the point. I do not think I am mistaken in believing all of us will have some object or other which means something to us, or to a community, etc. Consider the childhood teddy bear, the musician's instrument, a teenager's first car, a pacemaker, a diabetic's insulin, or a COVID-19 vaccination. Saying these objects have meaningless existences simply because they lack agency seems obviously mistaken; it seems more intuitive to say their existences are, in fact, meaningful.

One might object that the above objects only seem meaningful because they hold a sentimental value which is, in virtue of being sentimental, only meaningful because of the feelings of a specific individual. For example, my childhood plush penguin is meaningful to me because it is mine, yet for anybody else that object has no meaning. But consider the first flag planted on the moon, or the first Gutenberg Bible, the Declaration of Independence, the American Constitution, or a copy of the Quran. Such objects are considered meaningful and not

just because they hold some specific sentimental value for a particular person or group - they are held to be meaningful because of the significant impact they have upon us.

The fact an object can be meaningful to a person does not undermine my argument. All lives are meaningful to others because, according to asymmetric welfarism, they must be; that is just how meaning works. My life is meaningful to some extent because of its positive impact upon the welfare of other welfare subjects; I stand in a special relationship to them that improves their well-being. That is why my life is meaningful. The reason the musician's instrument is meaningful to them is because that object improves their well-being in some way or other. Within the context of their life, that object is very meaningful because it has played a specifically large causal role in the improvement or protection of their well-being. Objects can have meaningful existences. And it seems we admit and act as though some already do. We ascribe meaning to them because of how they impact us or other welfare subjects; their existences become more meaningful the more they make welfare subjects better off.

To conclude, it is widely held that a theory should account for what types of entities have the capacity for meaning. And it is also widely held humans or persons are the only such entities with the capacity for meaning, thus excluding animals and objects. A theory which allows for animals or objects to have a meaningful existence should be discounted, so the argument goes. While I agreed that the scope criteria must be met by a theory, I disagreed about scope being limited to just humans or persons. I have pointed out we have strong intuitions favouring the view that animals and objects have the capacity for meaning, for there are a number of cases in real life and in fiction which we describe, pre-theoretically, as meaningful. I defended my argument from several objections, and so it is competing theories which must vindicate our intuitions about animals and objects.

3.2. The lucky idiot

Brogaard & Smith (2005) assert for a life, action, or event, to be meaningful it must be (i) the product of the agent's abilities, (ii) in alignment with dispositions, and (iii) a product of their free will. A rough way of putting it is that, whatever is meaningful must be primarily attributed to the agent; the agent must be responsible for the results or outcomes. One example of an agent who is not appropriately responsible is what I shall call *the lucky idiot*. The lucky idiot is a person who, despite their shortcomings, ends up causing good outcomes. Fiction is rife with examples. Homer Simpson from *The Simpsons* and Maxwell Smart from *Get Smart* are two characters who, while bearing no ill will, manage to succeed not because of their own skill, but through sheer dumb luck.²¹

²¹ Other examples include Bullwinkle J. Moose from *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, Inspector Gadget from *Inspector Gadget*, Mr. Magoo from *Mr. Magoo*, and Scooby-doo and Shaggy from the *Scooby-Doo* franchise.

Another example of a lucky idiot, who is used throughout Brogaard & Smith (2005), is the titular character of the film, *Forrest Gump*. Forrest is a man with a learning disability who, despite his condition and the many social barriers which are erected because of it, has an impactful and decorated life. For example, he is direct inspiration for Elvis Presley's (in)famous dance moves, becomes an All-Star football player, a Vietnam war-hero, a ping-pong tennis champion, instigated the Watergate scandal, founded a multi-million dollar shrimp company, married his childhood sweetheart and had a child with her. These are just some of the events which occur during his life, all of which he is causally responsible for. However, he is only responsible for a few (if any) of them in the robust, agency-centric way described above.

While a fictitious example, we may still ask ourselves whether a life like Forrest Gump can be meaningful. According to Brogaard & Smith the answer is clearly 'no':

The Forest [sic] Gump figure, whose actions affect the world positively but who is not responsible for his achievements, does not, by our lights, lead a meaningful life. This raises the question of how the factor of responsibility contributes to the meaning of a life. One can be responsible in this sense for a result simply by being a cause of the result, just as a short circuit can be a cause of a fire. Even if Forest [sic] Gump is the cause of the positive outcomes of his actions, he is still not responsible for his actions in the sense that is relevant here (Brogaard & Smith, 2005, pp. 447-448).

As we can see, the lesson they draw from examples such as Forrest Gump is that for a life to be meaningful the agent whose life it is must be more than merely causally responsible for those outcomes. The agent must be responsible in the right sort of way, i.e., through their agency. Note here that much like the discussion on the scope criteria, the intuition that Forrest Gump lived a meaningless life is thought to be a pre-theoretical intuition which serves to motivate the adoption of agency as a necessary condition for meaning in life.

Yet when I reflect upon whether Forrest Gump lived a meaningful life or not, I simply do not share their intuition. Indeed, it seems obvious to me that he did live a meaningful life, regardless of his luck, capabilities, or intentions. I would go so far as to invoke cases like Forrest Gump to elicit the intuition, contra Brogaard & Smith, that responsibility and intention are not necessary conditions for a life, action, or event, to be meaningful. But a mere disagreement about our intuitive judgements is not enough; what else can I offer?

First, I think Brogaard & Smith are partially correct; I think people do have an intuition that for a life to be meaningful it must be planned and successfully executed. This would go some way for explaining why there is both widespread pity for persons with disabilities and the fear of becoming one: people with mental disabilities, society thinks, do not nor cannot live meaningful lives because they lack the capacity for meaning. However, this intuition is naive and easily

overturned. As I shall argue, *Forrest Gump* actually served as a counter-example to this naive intuition which people readily admit.

The film *Forrest Gump* was so successful and memorable, I think, precisely because it subverted this naive intuition. The film plays upon our expectations of what sort of life a person like Forrest Gump can live (indeed, much of the pathos of the film comes from such subversion). Before we see the film, we might have thought a life like that of Forrest Gump could not be meaningful (let alone good for the person whose life it is); that is why we pity him being ‘afflicted’ with his disabilities. But after we finish the film we learn something important: a person like Forrest Gump can live a meaningful life even though they are not responsible in the agent-relevant ways we *mistakenly thought* were required. The film, I submit, serves as a counter-example.

One might object that I have mistaken the lesson of the film. Rather, *Forrest Gump* is an example of how a life can be accidentally good for the person whose life it is, i.e., a life high in well-being. If so, we can still say a meaningful life necessarily requires agency, whereas a prudentially good life does not. It might be more accurate to say the lesson we learn is that a person with disabilities can live a good life, but not a meaningful one (because one need not be responsible for personal well-being, but must be for meaningfulness).

But such an objection is surely mistaken. Certainly, the film does show us how a person with disabilities can live a rich and fulfilling life (even if by accident). But that does not mean a meaningful life cannot function the same way, i.e., by being a product of accident or happenstance. After all, upon watching *Forrest Gump*, people do not say, ‘Forrest Gump lived a good life - it’s such a shame his life was meaningless!’ Rather, they exclaim, ‘Forrest Gump lived a good and meaningful life’.

Characters like Maxwell Smart or Homer Simpson are situated in approximately the same space as Forrest Gump, in that both of their lives are accidentally meaningful. Their lives are meaningful even though the states-of-affairs brought about by their existence are not primarily creditable to their agency. It is rarely the case the states-of-affairs they are causally responsible for are the result of their intentions or plans - that is the joke.

We should also consider the counterintuitive upshots which result from the view that luck vitiates meaning in life. As I pointed out above, one reason pity for persons with disabilities is widespread is because they lack the capability to make their lives meaningful. That is, persons with disabilities lack the capacity to meet some (or all) of the three conditions I listed at the very start of this section. This is why, presumably, *Forrest Gump* is used by Brogaard & Smith to make their argument.

But what follows from this view is that no person with a mental disability can live a meaningful life or, at best, their chances of doing so are significantly diminished due to their disability. This would mean, by definition, that the life of a person with a disability is a meaningless life or has a very high chance of being so. Is this an upshot which we are comfortable with? I would hope not.

Further still, the view still seems to render the wrong judgements across other cases, such as when a person is clearly competent yet luck intervened. Consider, for example, Sir Alexander Fleming. We believe Sir Fleming's life was meaningful because he discovered penicillin; a discovery which, without doubt, has been vital for the improvement and protection of our well-being. Yet it is well known that his discovery was one of pure accident. Sir Fleming was not looking for anything like penicillin and accidentally left out a petri dish by an open window.²² If luck undermines meaning, we would have to say his discovery of penicillin conferred no meaning to his life as he was not responsible in the 'right' or 'appropriate' way. Indeed, his discovery would be meaningless. Yet such a bullet, I think, is much harder to bite than accepting that luck is compatible with meaning.

3.3. The incompetent villain

Perhaps we can defend the role of intentions in meaning in life another way. Surely, the thought goes, that states-of-affairs brought about only confer meaning upon a life if the agent in question intended, or was motivated, to bring about those outcomes. Consider the following:

Dr. Mischief: The super-villain, Dr. Mischief, infiltrates a water reservoir and poisons the water supply with the express intention of dooming the city. However the superhero, Commander Fistfight, confronts Dr. Mischief and informs him that his nefarious plot has not only failed, but produced many positive outcomes. First, the city's pipe infrastructure was revealed to be outdated and in need of repairs; had this gone unnoticed, the population would have become sick. Second, because Dr. Mischief so easily infiltrated the security system, an investigation found that funds specifically for security had been embezzled by government officials; so Dr. Mischief inadvertently helped weed out government corruption. And third, the poison released by Dr. Mischief proved to be the antidote to a horrific virus which plagued the city, thus saving the population. In frustration, Dr. Mischief shoots Commander Fistfight with a laser gun only to be immediately told the shot fixed hero's bad shoulder (Cho, 2017).

²² <https://www.sciencehistory.org/historical-profile/alexander-fleming>

In the above example, we see that (i) Dr. Mischief was motivated to do harm, (ii) fully intended to do harm, and (iii) acted with the express purpose of realising their goal of causing harm. Yet through sheer incompetence and bad luck (or good luck, depending upon how you look at it), Dr. Mischief brought about outcomes which were the exact opposite of what he wanted. Would we say Dr. Mischief's actions made his life more meaningful than it otherwise would have been simply in virtue of producing good outcomes?

Asymmetric welfarism appears committed to giving an affirmative answer to the above question since, on this view, being causally responsible for the outcomes is all that matters. But surely, so the objection goes, that's the wrong answer. After all, Dr. Mischief had the express intention of causing great harm; their intentions did not 'match' the outcomes. The lesson to be drawn is that for a life to be meaningful the agent's motivations must be of an appropriate kind. Given asymmetric welfarism gives a counterintuitive result for cases such as Dr. Mischief, the view must be mistaken.

My response is that a life can be *accidentally* meaningful (Smuts, 2018, p. 88). How might such an argument help? Consider six different configurations of intentions and outcomes:

- (A) intended to do good and caused good.
- (B) intended to do bad and caused bad.
- (C) intended to do good but caused bad.
- (D) intended to do bad but caused good.
- (E) no intention to do good or bad but caused good.
- (F) no intention to do good or bad but caused bad.

How would we classify the meaningfulness of such lives? It seems to me (A) lived a meaningful life while (B) did not. What about (C)? That life does appear to be meaningless, but arguably to no fault of the person whose life it was. We might say, for example, that (C) was meaningless but only because bad luck or incompetence came between intentions and results; (C) was accidentally meaningless. Suggesting a life could be meaningless by accident doesn't appear to be conceptually confused or controversial.

If my judgements are correct, then (D) is an outlier. But given we grant a life can be accidentally meaningless, why can we also not grant that a life can be accidentally meaningful? We seem happy to judge lives such as (E) as meaningful and (F) as meaningless, even when there is an absence of intention or motivation. And, surely, the meaning-status of both (E) and (F) is accidental, given that the results of (E) and (F) do not have any motivations or intentions to

match up with. So if we are comfortable with luck and happenstance playing a deciding role in the meaning status of (C), (E), and (F), it seems we have less reason to think cases like (D) cannot be determined by luck.

To support the above, I offer two pieces of evidence. First, when we reflect upon or debate about which lives are the most meaningful, the motivation or intentions of the person whose life it is rarely, if ever, come to mind. All we seem to consider is what sort of consequences resulted from that life having occurred. Such an observation fits neatly with the intuitive judgements of the six cases I have provided above.

Second, we do not adjust our judgement about how meaningful (or meaningless) a life is upon learning of one's intentions or motivations. Suppose, for example, we discovered the secret diary of Nelson Mandela, where he confessed in earnest that all of his efforts were done to feed his narcissistic ego and bring about Black African racial superiority. If such an event were to occur, how would that change our judgement about the meaning of his life? Certainly such revelations would prove shocking. We would also most likely not judge him to be a particularly good or upstanding moral agent, nor would we continue to praise and laud his work. But even so, would learning of his intentions render his life meaningless? That is, would all the good outcomes and consequences which he was casually responsible for be made null and void? Would his life, in light of this information, be meaningless? It seems to me the answer is 'no', though other types of evaluations would suffer (e.g., moral evaluations), his life would be no less meaningful.

3.4. The Results Machine

Another argument which can be mustered against asymmetric welfarism is the *result machine* (Nozick, 1974, pp. 44-45). Though mentioned only very briefly by Nozick, the thought-experiment has been expanded upon within the literature. The example is simply this: "consider then the result machine, which produces in the world any result you would produce and injects your vector input into any joint activity" (Nozick, 1974, p. 44). The result machine can be invoked to highlight that there appears to be more to meaning in life than mere outcomes. Specifically, the result machine reveals the counterintuitive notion that a life of just hitting a button can be equally meaningful as someone who puts great effort into their projects, even if the outcome of both is equal. For example, Metz explains:

Even if it were the case that one ought to get the machine running, one's life would not be maximally meaningful for having done so. Instead, a fully meaningful life, insofar as it involves the promotion of objective value, requires effortful or hands on activity (Metz, 2013, p. 194).

Metz reinforces this observation by providing his own thought-experiment which I shall refer to as *Oxfam Cheque*. In this thought-experiment, Metz asks us to make a comparative judgement between merely cutting a cheque to Oxfam and someone who works in the community Oxfam hopes to help. Supposing both actions (cutting a cheque and working in the village) produce the same consequences, which life is more meaningful? Metz (2013, p. 195) claims, “merely cutting a check to Oxfam, donating funds that one was lucky to inherit, would not be as meaningful as labouring in the poor community that Oxfam seeks to benefit, supposing the latter produced only marginally fewer objectively good long-term outcomes than the former.” Metz notes that theories which exclude agency - such as asymmetric welfarism - cannot account for the above comparative judgement since, according to those views, “the nature of the means by which the objective value is brought about does not matter” (2013, p. 194).

But why should we think that just because something is easy that it should not confer meaning? Consider the (less morally charged) example of the ability difference between Mozart and Beethoven. Mozart was a child prodigy who composed everyday. From what we know of Mozart, his ability to write music came so easily that he rarely, if ever, made changes to his compositions. For Mozart, composing music was as easy as hitting a button (or in the case of a piano, a key). Beethoven, on the other hand, struggled with producing music. We can observe from the original copies of his compositions that he worked on them ceaselessly, constantly erasing and changing them until they were perfect. Does the fact Beethoven’s efforts were significantly more difficult than Mozart’s mean Beethoven’s life was more meaningful? It does not seem so, and it certainly does not seem like something being more difficult confers meaning upon a life.

But if we were to answer yes, we would commit ourselves to the view that making things more difficult for ourselves will make our lives more meaningful. Such a result strikes me as counterintuitive. Consider Ella Fitzgerald and Florence Foster Jenkins. Fitzgerald’s voice is considered to be on the finest examples of jazz singing and something which came quite easy for her. Jenkins, on the other hand, not only struggled to sing, but her voice was so horrendous that to call what she did ‘singing’ almost seems like an insult to the craft itself. Yet even to produce what Jenkins did was both incredibly difficult for her and required great personal sacrifice. But does the fact that singing was easy for Fitzgerald yet difficult for Jenkins make Jenkins’ life even comparably close to as meaningful as Fitzgerald’s? Here, I think the answer is clearly ‘no’.

To end, I offer a diagnosis of the result machine, and our intuitive judgements about them, by way of justice and desert. We have strong intuitions about how rewards and punishments should be measured to what one deserves. In terms of meaningfulness, we greatly desire that a person who exerts time, energy, and ‘hands on’ work have their efforts be made meaningful, whereas a

person who does not exert such efforts does not deserve it. Such a position sheds light upon how our intuition about the result machine or Oxfam cheque comes about: the idea that a life could be made meaningful just by writing a cheque or hitting a button strikes us as *unfair* - their life should not be meaningful because they did not *earn* that meaning through their labour.

We think a person who merely presses a button or cuts a cheque does not deserve their efforts to be counted as meaningful, even if it results in the same outcome as the person who works and toils. But is there any reason to think meaning in life works in such a fashion, to be dolled out in virtue of what one deserves? Is meaning something which is earned proportionately to labour expended? There is, I submit, no reason for thinking so. And it would seem reflecting upon the comparative cases of Beethoven and Mozart, and Fitzgerald and Jenkins, we should instead think otherwise.

3.5. Uniqueness

Wolf (2011, p. 50) describes how there are two senses in which something can be good: 'ordinary' and 'robust'. Something is good in the ordinary sense if it would have been done by someone else, and something is good in the robust sense if it would not have been done by someone else. To clarify, imagine you and a friend pass a child drowning in shallow water. If you rescued the child, you would have done something good but if you had not your friend would have. Bramble (2015, p. 450) points out that there is a sense in which you did not do anything good because the world would not have been worse off. Your saving of the child is only good in the 'ordinary' sense. But if no one else could or would, then your saving of the child would be good in the 'robust' sense.

One thought is that only 'robust' goods can confer meaning upon a life. By being good in the robust sense, what we seem to mean is that it is *unique* to that life. What this amounts to, roughly, is that had that person never existed, then that good, event, or action would have never happened either. For a life to be meaningful it must be special in the sense that it is one of a kind. For our lives to be meaningful, they must be irreplaceable.

The lives of many of the paradigm cases I described earlier - Mozart, Curie, Van Gogh, Gandhi, etc., - seem to be meaningful, or at least have meaning added to them, because we think their lives unique. That they have a style or character utterly distinct from others; had they never existed, the fruits of their life would never have been born. This is perhaps part of the reason why they capture our attention. Had it been the case that just about anyone could have done what they did then their lives does not seem so special, unique, or meaningful after all.

We can also see this intuition about uniqueness play a role in a theory developed by Taylor. Taylor (1987) argues that *creativity* is needed for a life to be meaningful. Taylor understands

creativity as bringing something into existence which is genuinely new, and that this creative project which purportedly confers meaning to a life “must be something of his own, the product of his own creative mind, of his own, conception, something which, but for his own creative thought and imagination, would never have existed at all” (1987, p. 300). As we can see, Taylor’s view is underlined by the importance of uniqueness; that whatever makes a life meaningful must be new, novel, and that, had that person not existed the events/achievements/creation would never have been.²³ Taylor is not alone here. Thomas (2018b, pp. 103-110) observes a fear one might have of immortality is due to the fact it opens up the possibility that, given enough time, all people will do all things, thus leaving no clear distinction between individuals.²⁴

A particularly powerful example of our understanding about the relationship between uniqueness and meaning is played out in the Christmas classic, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. In this film the protagonist - George Bailey - is considering suicide because he thinks his life is meaningless. George’s guardian angel, Clarence, shows George what the world would have been like had George never existed. Upon seeing that everybody would be significantly worse off had he not been, George has a profound change of heart and runs home to his family and friends. What seems to explain George’s change of heart is his realisation that the goods he causes are uniquely attributable to his existence; had he never existed, those goods would never have been. Consider, however, an altered version of the film in which Clarence showed George that had he never existed, some other individual named Bob would have taken his place and reproduced all of the goods George did. Upon learning this, would George still have a change of heart and return home? It does not seem intuitively obvious that George would reconsider returning home, as he would now see that his life served no unique purpose in the world, and he might take that a reason for thinking his life meaningless.

But should we trust this intuition about uniqueness? I think we have good reason not to. First, it is not clear to me why possible worlds should have any bearing upon whether our lives are meaningful or not.²⁵ Consider again the drowning child example. Suppose you and your friend see a small child drowning in a very shallow pond. It seems saving them would not just be morally right, but also confer meaning upon one’s life. But, as the example goes, your friend could have also saved that child just as easily as you; had you not saved the child your friend would have. Does the fact that in some possible world your friend saved the child had you not

²³ Taylor’s (1987) view involves more moving parts than this, such as the importance of human history, but I have brushed over these details as they are not necessary for the objection being examined here. For further discussion see (Hauskeller, 2020).

²⁴ For further discussion and/or defence of uniqueness/irreplaceability, see (Kauppinen, 2012; Martela, 2017; Noonan, 2013).

²⁵ That said, Smuts (2013, p. 554) does offer an argument involving possible worlds to argue against uniqueness and irreplaceability.

cheapen the meaning of your action? I do not see how. Even if we knew our friend would save the child if we were not there, that fact would not dissuade us from rescuing the child. We would not stand idly by watching the child drown while reasoning that, ‘saving them would be meaningless because someone else will do it, so what’s the point?’. While it might be true that someone else would have saved the child the fact remains that they did not and *you did*.

3.6. Self Harm

One objection we could level at asymmetric welfarism is that, by not discriminating as to *when* improving the welfare of others confers meaning to a life, it produces counterintuitive upshots. Metz argues something like this by providing two powerful counter-examples to asymmetric welfarism, *Humiliation* and *Prostitution*:

For a counterexample, consider Humiliation, a case in which a person lets others denigrate him for the fun of it. He associates with people who make him the butt of racist or otherwise derogatory jokes, where there is no urgent reason to be in their company. Here, a fellow makes others happier than they would have been without him, which (UTM2) [asymmetric welfarism] says confers some meaning on his life, but his life seems no more meaningful for this. For another example, consider Prostitution. Selling sex for money could bring pleasure to many people, but, contra (UTM2), would arguably fail to confer significance on a life, at least when done merely to support an expensive cocaine habit (Metz, 2013, pp. 189-190).

The point seems to be that the methods or reasons as to how or why benefits are produced can vitiate meaning. But why, exactly? Metz speculates that “one possibility is that immorality, conceived in non-utilitarian terms, pollutes the benefits produced. Immoral types of welfare such as sadistic or racist pleasure do not seem to count. And immoral ways of producing (what might be the right type of) welfare - for example, by treating oneself like a commodity - fail to confer meaning on a life” (2013, p. 190).

How might I respond? We should note the context of which the objections are raised. In his discussion, Metz focuses solely upon variations of utilitarian theories about meaning in life. While utilitarianism is welfarist, it is a very specific conception of well-being, namely, hedonism about well-being: that pleasure/enjoyment/happiness is the only thing ultimately good for a welfare subject (and that pain/suffering is the only thing ultimately bad for a welfare subject) (Crisp, 2006; Feldman, 2004).

Remember, however, that asymmetric welfarism remains silent about which theory of well-being is correct. The self harm objection can be sidestepped by pointing out that not all theories of well-being state that pleasure or happiness is what makes a life go best (for the person whose life it is), and so the objection speaks more to particular conceptions of well-being, rather than

asymmetric welfarism as a theory about meaning in life, per se. Indeed, popular theories of well-being, such as objective list theories and perfectionism, have stories to tell as to why the particular pleasure being brought about in both counter-examples fails to make the beneficiaries life go better. For example, causing others to indulge in vices might be bad for them because it corrupts their nature or stops them from reaching their end, or it produces in them prudential bads which outweigh any prudential goods that may, or may not, occur.

Even if asymmetric welfarism were to admit both cases would be counted as meaningful, that does not mean we would have reason to do them. Our own prudential and moral concerns give us reason to not perform such actions and there are arguably better ways we could increase the meaning of our lives without sacrificing our prudential or moral worth.

3.7. Repugnant Conclusion and Citizen Z

Asymmetric welfarism states the meaning of a life is determined by how much of a positive contribution it has, or had, on the well-being of others. This makes asymmetric welfarism an additive view; when calculating the meaning of a life, the only factor which matters is added up into an overall score, with that score reflecting how meaningful that life is. In light of this, one might object to asymmetric welfarism because it produces counterintuitive results in the face of what sort of world would make a life most meaningful if one were responsible for bring that world about.²⁶ In other words, one might leverage the repugnant conclusion objection (Parfit, 1987, pp. 381-390) against asymmetric welfarism.

Before explaining how the repugnant conclusion is a problem for asymmetric welfarism, I should first spell out what it is with regards to ethical consequentialism and population ethics:

The Repugnant Conclusion: For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living (Parfit, 1987, p. 388).

The precise details of how Parfit arrived at the repugnant conclusion are not necessary for the problem at hand.²⁷ For my purposes, all we need understand is the following. Additive views, such as ethical consequentialism, take the sum total of good to be the only input when considering what we ought to do. For example, assuming all things equal, if one had to make the choice between saving five people and letting one die, an additive view would insist that we should save the five because five is a greater number than one.

²⁶ I thank Michael Cholbi for raising this concern.

²⁷ For explicit details, see (Arrhenius & Tännsjö, 2017).

Now, suppose there are two worlds - world A and world Z - and on world A there are ten billion people who live exceptionally worthwhile lives while on world Z there are one trillion and one people whose lives are barely worth living. That is, each person on world Z lives a life which just passes the threshold such that their life is better than had they never been. For simplicity, let us quantify well-being and stipulate the threshold of a life *barely* worth living is one well-being unit while an *exceptionally* worthwhile life is one-hundred welfare units.²⁸ If a life has zero well-being or below, then that life isn't worth living. Given these stipulations, we can imagine the math about world A and world Z to look something like this:

$$\text{World A: } 10,000,000,000 \times 100 = 1,000,000,000,000$$

$$\text{World Z: } 1,000,000,000,001 \times 1 = 1,000,000,000,001$$

Given that one trillion and one is a greater number than one trillion, additive views seem committed to the position that world Z is better than world A . So, for a theory like ethical consequentialism, the conclusion to be drawn is that world Z - a world with far more people all living barely worthwhile lives - is the world we ought to bring about of the two. But surely, so the thought goes, such a conclusion is repugnant; world A is clearly the better world of the two.

With the basics of the repugnant conclusion outlined, let us now consider how it might be marshalled against asymmetric welfarism. Recall that asymmetric welfarism is both consequentialist and additive; the meaningfulness of a life is directly correlated to the sum total of the right type of consequences caused by that life having been. And the type of consequences the theory is concerned with is the well-being of other welfare subjects; a life that makes a hundred people better off is more meaningful than a life that makes ten people better off, all things being equal.

The problem, then, is thus: a life that is causally responsible for creating world Z would be a more meaningful life than a person who was causally responsible for creating world A . The reason for this is because world Z has more welfare units which, to recall, is the only factor which matters for asymmetric welfarism. Given that we judge bringing about world Z a worse ethical choice than bringing about world A , it should no doubt strike us as equally repugnant that a life would be made more meaningful by bringing about world Z over world A . Yet asymmetric welfarism appears to be committed to this counterintuitive conclusion.

An objector can press their advantage by considering the above results in light of both paradigm cases and existential angst. To begin, consider the following:

²⁸ I am assuming for the sake of argument that the value of a life can be quantified or calculated. Such an assumption is controversial, with a clear example of such an argument surrounding the shape of a life problem. See, for example, (Dorsey, 2015; Fletcher, 2016, pp. 132-144).

Citizen Z: Citizen *Z* wishes to live a very meaningful life. Suppose citizen *Z* is causally responsible for world *Z*, a world which has the sum total of one trillion and one welfare units which is (for the sake of the argument) a significantly large quantity.

How does the life of citizen *Z* compare to those previously described paradigm cases? Is citizen *Z* a paradigm case, in the ranks of those such as Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, or Marie Curie? I suspect widespread consensus to be that citizen *Z* is not within their ranks. The suggestion that citizen *Z* could, or should, be a paradigm case is equally counterintuitive. Stranger still, it seems citizen *Z* could make their life the most meaningful life simply by adding enough barely worthwhile lives on world *Z* such that they eclipse any other life. Citizen *Z* would be the *apex case*, i.e., the most meaningful life. And if we found it counterintuitive that asymmetric welfarism would allow for citizen *Z* to be a paradigm case, it surely follows that the idea citizen *Z* could be the apex case is an abhorrent conclusion. Indeed, such a life does not even register to us pre-theoretically when asked to produce a list of paradigm cases.

Citizen *Z* also produces ugly results in light of existential angst. Intuitively, just creating lives barely worth living seems to be the sort of thing that triggers existential angst, rather than serving as a cure for it. A life which merely pumps out lives barely worth living seems to be the epitome of a meaningless life, akin to Sisyphus being damned to roll the same boulder up a hill for all eternity. The mindless repetition triggers the concern that something more is needed for a life to be imbued with meaning.

Citizen *Z* does not appear to us as a meaningful life - it does not even register to us pre-theoretically that citizen *Z* is, or should be, a paradigm case - or even that citizen *Z* is the type of life a theory about meaning should account for. Any theory which produces the result that citizen *Z* is a meaningful life has, it seems, a strike against it. Adding insult to injury, citizen *Z* is the sort of life which triggers existential angst rather than serving as a cure for it. If a theory were to hold up a life as meaningful which intuitively triggers existential dread, that is surely a strike against it too.

These are serious charges - what reply can I offer? One might try and concede the above but attempt to evade the problems. For example, while the repugnant conclusion and citizen *Z* both raise significant *moral* problems for asymmetric welfarism, these are not problems with asymmetric welfarism per se because there is no a priori reason to expect that any improvements

in the meaningfulness of a life will also be morally defensible, which the above discussions seem to assume without argument.²⁹

But this reply fails to appreciate the force of the arguments. The point of citizen Z is not whether their actions are morally permissible. The point, rather, is whether a life like citizen Z is, or even can be, meaningful. Even if we agreed with the described concessionary strategy - that there is no a priori reason to expect improvements in meaning to also be morally defensible - the point made still stands: regardless of the moral worth of their actions, citizen Z would have lived the most meaningful life according to asymmetric welfarism. It is that fact which is counterintuitive and not whether such a life is morally defensible.

The only plausible way forward I can see is a debunking strategy; to debunk the intuition that makes the repugnant conclusion so unpalatable. I shall argue much of what we find repugnant about the repugnant conclusion rides on our preconceptions of what counts as a 'barely worthwhile' life. Our negative reaction to the thought-experiment (and the variation I have developed) has more to do with some special feature of a particular instance or conception of the barely worthwhile life, rather than with the idea of world Z being worse than world A. After all, the idea which is supposed to underscore our judgement is that world A is *always* better than world Z; being causally responsible for world A should make one's life more meaningful than being causally responsible for world Z. But if there are instantiations of the thought-experiment which we do not find repugnant - perhaps permissible or even desirable - then we have grounds to question why we should think the initial judgement and case should carry the weight it does (Tännsjö, 2020).

The difficulty in determining what constitutes a barely worthwhile life undermines the repugnant conclusion in two ways. First, the life we imagine as barely worthwhile might not be so; our preconceived notions of a barely worthwhile life might fall under the threshold (e.g., zero), and so would not be worthwhile at all. Second, a barely worthwhile life might actually be better than we think. If the former is correct then the intuition and judgement is illegitimate as we would be violating the parameters of the thought experiment, i.e., we would be imagining a world in which no lives were worthwhile and confusing that with lives barely worthwhile. If the latter, then we might not find world Z as repugnant after all. And if citizen Z were to create that world Z their life might be meaningful after all. I shall argue for each of these points in turn.

I think we confuse barely worthwhile lives with lives not worth living. I think it likely that when people imagine a barely worthwhile life they are actually imagining a life that is not

²⁹ This sort of strategy was deployed by both Michael Cholbi and Guy Fletcher in conversation. This reply also presupposes a particular type of relationship between morality and meaningfulness which one might otherwise reject. I examine such a relationship in chapter 6.

worthwhile. We think of lives that do not cross the threshold and mistakenly call them barely worthwhile. If so, then it is unsurprising why we find the repugnant conclusion so repugnant, as we would be comparing a world with a significant score of welfare units (world *A*) to a world that has a significantly negative score (world *Z*).

Let me be clear about the type of life I think most people imagine when they think about the barely worthwhile life:

The abject poverty life: Aaron lives a life of abject and extreme poverty. His world is war stricken, starving, and lonely. Perhaps over the course of his life he is afforded a glimpse of happiness. But overall his life is unstable, volatile, and is a constant struggle just to survive. His is a bleak, dull, and grey existence.

If the abject poverty life or something similar is our initial conception of the barely worthwhile life, it is easy to see why we would find world *Z* deplorable. Even so, the question remains: is the abject poverty life identical to the barely worthwhile life? It is hardly obvious. There appears good reason to think otherwise: the abject poverty life does not seem to get over the threshold of welfare units needed to qualify as a worthwhile life. If that is right, then the type of life we have in mind for the initial thought-experiment is the wrong type of life. Even if we stipulate that the abject poverty life comes to an aggregate score of just minus one welfare units, world *Z* would still be incredibly undesirable:

World A: $10,000,000,000 \times 100 = 1,000,000,000,000$

World Z: $1,000,000,000,001 \times -1 = -1,000,000,000,001$

As we can see, even the slightest misidentification of what constitutes a barely worthwhile life can have dire consequences. It is unclear whether the abject poverty life is identical to the barely worthwhile life, for it seems just as plausible that such a life is not worth living. What is required, I suggest, is some independent argument to show that the abject poverty life is worth living, even if only barely; it cannot be ruled a priori either way.

The barely worthwhile life may look considerably better than we assume. What if, for example, a barely worthwhile life looked more like a typical suburban life?

The humdrum life: Bushra is born into a middle-class family in the suburbs. She achieves above average marks in school and is not particularly popular or unpopular. She receives her bachelor degree from a mid-tier university and gains employment earning a decent, middle-class wage. She might marry and/or have children. She suffers setback, tragedy, and loss but recovers and

marches on. Her children, assuming she had any, go and live middle-class lives themselves. When she passes on, her body is cremated and her ashes are scattered in her favourite spot by any grieving loved ones. She leaves behind one property (maybe) and some cherished belongings which are eventually sold or disposed of. Within a generation or two, she is forgotten.

At least within the cultural context I have placed the thought-experiment in, Bashra's life is mundane, unexceptional, and nothing out the ordinary. The highs and lows of her life are much the same as any other, though the order, degrees, and specifics of events may differ. But suppose that after performing the calculation, each configuration of the humdrum life comes to precisely one welfare unit. So in this instantiation, the humdrum life is equivalent to the barely worth living life.

Supposing world Z could comfortably sustain a population of one trillion and one people living the humdrum life, is it so repugnant to bring about such a world? Is it repugnant to bring about this world Z over its counterpart world A (whatever that might look like)? And, supposing it is, is it as repugnant as the initial thought-experiment? Does Citizen Z 's life seem less meaningful for creating world Z in this case?

My initial response to the above questions was once a very soft 'no'. But I must admit, however, that the longer I have reflected upon these questions the firmer that 'no' has become. I recognise it is still counterintuitive to say citizen Z is a paradigm case of a meaningful life (let alone the apex case). But creating a world such as humdrum world Z - whether on purpose or by accident - now appears to confer meaning upon the life of citizen Z . Put another way, the person who creates humdrum world Z does not appear to have lived a paradigmatically meaningless life, nor does it seem to trigger the risk of existential anxiety. I find, at least in the humdrum instantiation, the repugnant conclusion does not hold. A life which is barely worth living is still, after all, a life worth living.

It is not the repugnant conclusion itself which elicits the relevant judgements, but rather how we understand what constitutes a 'barely worthwhile' life. The type of life people think of (e.g., the abject poverty life) is likely not a barely worthwhile and so undercuts the force of the initial argument. If others agree with my assessment, then we should be skeptical as to whether the original thought-experiment has anything informative to show us.

3.8. Utility Monster and Utility Servant

The final objection I shall consider in this chapter is also tied to the additive nature of asymmetric welfarism: the utility monster (Nozick, 1974, p. 41). In light of utilitarianism about ethics, Nozick writes:

Utilitarian theory is embarrassed by the possibility of utility monsters who get enormously greater gains in utility from any sacrifice of others than these others lose. For, unacceptably, the theory seems to require that we all be sacrificed in the monster's maw, in order to increase total utility (Nozick, 1974, p. 41)

Putting aside his colourful language, the idea seems to be something like this. A utility monster is any individual whose resource-to-welfare conversion rate is superior to the average person; they are more sensitive to welfare losses and gains than the norm. Let us stipulate the utility monster has a resource-to-welfare conversion rate five times greater than average, so while an average person produces one welfare unit for every resource unit spent on them, the utility monster produces five welfare units.³⁰ Likewise, while the average person produces one unit of ill-being, the utility monster produces five units of ill-being in identical circumstances.³¹

With the above in mind, suppose we had one average person, one utility monster, and five resources units: how should we allocate those resources? If our only aim is maximising welfare (i.e., the greatest additive sum total of well-being available), the answer is to expend all five resource units on the utility monster. In doing so we get twenty-five welfare units and five ill-being units, which is the best result compared to any other available distribution. Surface impressions might lead us to think the result unproblematic, but the issue is exacerbated when we add more average persons. Suppose the same stipulations but instead with five average people and one utility monster. Even in this case, we are still required to expend all resource units on the utility monster because doing so will maximise well-being; five resources units spent on a utility monster still garners greater utility than any other distribution.

We can fashion the utility monster problem into an objection to asymmetric welfarism in the following manner:

The utility servant: suppose there were a person who desires to make their life maximally meaningful. As a finite being, the utility servant has finite resources (e.g., time, energy, money, etc.) and so must carefully choose how to allocate those resources to ensure they maximise the sum total of welfare they can cause. Suppose there were a utility monster whose resource-to-welfare conversion rate was greater than the average person. So great, in fact, that the sum total of welfare units this utility monster could produce will eclipse the

³⁰ By resource unit, I mean anything which would be needed to help generate welfare, for example, time and money. I use the term resource unit to simplify the discussion.

³¹ Or has their welfare reduced by one unit. Whether it is a minimisation of well-being or incurring ill-being (which may or may not minimise well-being) is beyond the scope of this thesis. For further discussion see (Bradford, 2021; Kagan, 2014; Rice, 2019).

total amount of welfare units which would otherwise be accrued from helping the starving population of a war torn country.

The utility servant knows that expending their resources on the utility monster will garner a greater sum total of welfare than helping a starving population. Asymmetric welfarism produces two counterintuitive upshots when considering the utility servant. First, the utility servant would indeed live an incredibly meaningful life if they were to serve the utility monster. Second, the utility servant's life would be more meaningful doing so than had they helped the starving population. These results undoubtedly count against asymmetric welfarism.

This utility servant also causes problems in light of paradigm cases and existential angst. Like citizen Z, the utility servant does not appear to belong within the ranks of other paradigm cases we think about and suggesting their life could be the apex case is highly counterintuitive. Additionally, the utility servant is the sort of life which is existentially disturbing; blindly sacrificing others into the utility monster's maw, and the suggestion doing so could make one's life meaningful, is distressing. Dystopian fiction in which the masses are sacrificed for the benefit of a small and powerful elite (whether literally or metaphorically) is dystopian (and horrifying) precisely because it rests upon the strong intuition about how meaningless such a world would be.

How might one reply to such charges? One could first attempt to deny that a utility monster is conceptually possible, let alone actual (Parfit, 1987, p. 389). By denying the existence of such a being we could avoid the utility servant dedicating their life to such a creature. This reply, I fear, does not work. While it might be true that utility monsters are impossible, it does seem possible (even likely) that certain people have higher resource-to-welfare conversion rates than others, even if only marginally so.

I do not think it is controversial to claim that some people make better use of their resources than others. There are those who spend their time, money, or energy (i.e., resources) upon activities which enhance their well-being, while others squander it, or at the very least make suboptimal decisions. We also recognise that even if we give the identical resources to individuals that they might still end up with different welfare levels. Popular expressions such as, 'youth is wasted on the young' and, 'seize the day', both point out how our finite resource units might be squandered if not properly utilised; this, I think, speaks to our awareness of the aforementioned claims.

To be clear, even if that resource-to-welfare conversion rate were only 0.01% more than the average person, that difference will be enough to cause counterintuitive upshots for additive views such as asymmetric welfarism. The reason being, of course, is that even the smallest

difference will produce a discrepancy between outcomes. For example, consider an increase of 0.01 over, say, a thousand resource units. The result will still be a greater sum total of welfare than had those resources been distributed evenly across a host of average people:

Average person: $1000 \times 1 = 1000$

Utility monster: $1000 \times 1.01 = 1010$

Even if a utility *monster* cannot exist, the spirit of the problem remains; there can still be utility *imps*, i.e., persons who have an ever-so-slightly better resource-to-welfare conversion rate than the average person. So the very fact that not all people have an identical resource-to-welfare conversion rate is enough to cause significant trouble for additive views, including asymmetric welfarism.

A second response could be to deploy a concessionary strategy. One might agree the utility monster raises significant moral problems for asymmetric welfarism, but these are not problems with the theory as there is no a priori reason to expect an improvement in the meaningfulness of a life to also be morally defensible. One would require an argument to support such a connection, not to merely presume it so. But again, this response fails to appreciate the argument. The point made is not whether the utility servant is morally permitted to act in the relevant way, but rather whether their life would be meaningful if they did. Again, even if we agreed with this concessionary strategy, the point remains: regardless of the moral worth of their actions, the utility servant would have lived an incredibly meaningful life according to asymmetric welfarism. It is that fact which is counterintuitive, not whether such a life is morally permitted.

It seems what is required is a debunking strategy; a reason for questioning, if not outright rejecting, the utility monster objection against asymmetric welfarism. The argument I am about to develop attempts to undercut the intuition supporting the utility monster by pointing out that expending resources on utility ‘monsters’ or ‘imps’ at the expense of others is not as counterintuitive as supposed. In light of some judgements we make about resource allocation, it seems many of us believe that it is meaningful to dedicate resources to utility monsters or imps. Further still, it is not just that we are okay with utility monsters or imps existing, but that we actually like, love, admire and even aspire to be them. We might call such persons *utility angels*: persons who we give a positive approval of by virtue of their higher resource-to-welfare conversion rate. And to sacrifice the welfare of others for the utility angel is thought to be meaningful; perhaps a utility servant which serves a utility angel does live a meaningful life.

Though we may profess that feeding all resources to the utility monster is an abhorrent notion, there is good reason to think our actions are guided by a diametrically opposed belief. One widespread belief about resource management is that resources should go to those who

make best use of them. And the views we form about the character of both those who make good use of resources and those who squander them are thick terms. We might, for example, say the squanderer is 'lazy', a 'loser' or a 'profligate', while in contrast we might describe those who make good use of resources as 'go getters', 'winners', and are 'worth it'. Further still, when someone does squander resources, we wish we would have given them to someone who could have done more with them. For clarity, consider the following:

Selection committee: suppose a selection committee must choose their next batch of PhD candidates for the coming academic year. As such, the committee members have to sort through all the applicants and make the decisions of who (a) should be offered a place in the program, and (b), of those selected, who should be funded. Places on the PhD program are limited and funding further still; in this case, there are just twelve PhD candidate slots available, only five funding opportunities provided, but (iii) three-hundred applicants. Given the finite resources available and the number of applicants, how does the selection committee go about making choices as to how to spend those limited resources?

One natural (but by no means the only) criteria will be who, of those applicants, is most likely to produce work of a high enough calibre such that they will become fruitful and welcome additions to the academic community. That is, the committee hope to find candidates who will publish papers in academic journals, contribute in seminars and conferences, be a good colleague, etc. It is highly likely the committee will want those who can offer the biggest return of investment; those applicants with proven track records of performing above the rest and who will bear the sorts of aforementioned fruits the committee desires. All other things being equal, evaluating applicants and expending resources any other way would be counterintuitive; spending resources on applicants who are high risk would be foolish.

In selection committee, the committee members resemble utility servants; they want to make the best use of their resources and they intuitively understand 'best use' as that which maximises a desired outcome. To do so, what the committee search for are *utility angels*, i.e., applicants who have higher resource-to-outcome conversion rates than their competitors. Importantly, the committee members are willing to sacrifice all other applicants into the 'loving embrace' of these utility angels, choosing to reject the others rather than spreading resources thin, but evenly, over as many as possible.

The idea of a utility angel is given further merit when we observe that 'the best' in any field (whether sports, games, academia, fashion, etc.) are those who are a great return of investment; individuals or groups who produce significantly better outcomes than competitors. 'The best', it

seems, are great utility angels. To help make the point, reconsider our collective judgements about those who are substandard at converting resources to welfare:

A life squandered: Petrov is born into an affluent family and given a good and loving upbringing. He is sent to a private preparatory school where other powerful well connected parents (e.g., politicians, celebrities, royalty, high-tech CEOs, etc.) send their children. Petrov receives an excellent education and network opportunities abound. He is accepted into a prestigious university and offered a myriad of high profile internships simply in virtue of being the child of well connected parents. But Petrov makes no use of any of these resources. He underperforms at school and shuns social connections. He is rusticated from university and spends the remainder of his time playing video games and scrolling mindlessly through online forums, rather than actively pursuing the opportunities he's been constantly presented with.

Petrov has resources in spades: a safe and nurturing upbringing, good education and a powerful social network. But Petrov wasted his resources; he could have had the same type of life he lives now - the same level of welfare - for considerably less resource units. In light of these details, what sort of judgement do we render about Petrov? Our judgement of Petrov is likely coloured in anger and/or envy; Petrov squandered his resources and so did not deserve them in the first place. We might feel that we, or someone else, could have made better use of those opportunities. We judge Petrov and people like him poorly because they are *not* utility monsters; their resource-to-welfare conversion rate is substandard. Because of their substandard performances, we deem they should not be allocated resources. We desire 'praiseworthy' utility monsters, i.e., utility angels; those who provide the best return of investment. Petrov, and people like him, end up gaining our ire because they are utility *leeches*, i.e., their resource-to-welfare conversion rate is substandard.

So contra the utility monster objection, we actually have high praise for utility monsters, what I have designated as utility angels. We like and praise them, desire and aspire to be them, and certain actions in our lives are guided by pouring our resources into them. So, even though we might have a negative reaction to Nozick's utility monster thought-experiment, our actions in reality seem to reflect a very different belief. But how does this all help asymmetric welfarism?

Well, by recognising the existence of utility angels, there appears to be the very real option of simply jettisoning the supposed intuition which motivates the utility monster. We reject the utility monster not because of the idea itself, but rather because of the negative connotation to monsters; if redressed as a utility angel, our intuitions about the case seem to change quite dramatically. And given the intuition is supposed to be doing the work for the utility monster

objection itself, losing said intuition means losing the objection. We often talk about utility leeches as being wasteful and, because they are wasteful, we describe investing in them as meaningless. The life of a utility servant dedicated to a utility leech, then, seems quite meaningless. But a utility servant who dedicates their life to a utility angel suddenly seems quite meaningful.

3.9. Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this chapter was to defend asymmetric welfarism against a slew of objections. I argued the scope criteria failed because human lives are not the only lives which we ascribe meaning. We have strong pre-theoretical intuitions about many animals and objects which we maintain have meaningful existences. The lucky idiot objection failed because the cases used to motivate it actually served as evidence that luck can play a significant role in determining the meaning of one's life. The incompetent villain failed because objectors were not sensitive to how luck plays a role in making a life accidentally meaningless or meaningful.

I argued the result machine failed because our intuitions about meaning get obfuscated with our intuitions about justice. While we intuitively hold meaning should be meted out in accordance to effort and labour (i.e., one deserves meaning insofar as one works for it), we also recognised that a life can be meaningful without effort, and this strikes us as unfair. Next, I argued uniqueness is not a requisite for meaning nor adds to it because, what truly matters is what one actually does in life, and not what might or might not be possible in some possible world. I argued against the self harm objection because it rested upon a specific conception of well-being, namely hedonism, and that since asymmetric welfarism is silent about which theory of well-being is true, the objection is avoided.

I ended by developing two objections against welfare maximisation that can be applied to asymmetric welfarism: the repugnant conclusion and the utility monster. For both I deployed a debunking strategy, attempting to show that, when these arguments are applied to meaningfulness, they lost their force. I argued the repugnant conclusion failed because it is entirely unclear what constitutes a 'barely worthwhile' life. Under particular instantiations, the thought-experiment and the purported intuition it elicited were not as sturdy or clear-cut as supposed. I argued the utility monster was misguided by observing that our actions suggest we both prefer and applaud utility monsters, or 'angels' as I called them, in our practical lives. We think it is very meaningful to dedicate resources to utility angels and that doing so conferred meaning upon a life.

4. Fulfilment

Thus far I have dedicated chapters to advancing the case for asymmetric welfarism. I motivated and explained the view, showed what worked in its favour, and defended it against numerous objections. In this way, I hoped to show how plausible asymmetric welfarism could be in its own right. Yet one might rightfully wonder: why should we think asymmetric welfarism *better* than competing theories? One family of theories that stand in opposition to asymmetric welfarism are *subjectivist theories about meaning in life*. Roughly, a subjectivist theory is any theory which holds that certain propositional attitudes are, at minimum, necessary for a life to be rendered meaningful (Metz, 2013, pp. 164-165). I reject subjectivism because I deny that there are any subjective conditions which are necessary, let alone sufficient, for meaning in life.

This chapter unfolds as follows. I begin (§4.1.) by outlining a core motivation for subjectivism, the anti-alienation intuition (i.e., the intuition that it is implausible that a person could live a meaningful life while being alienated from it) which in turn generates the anti-alienation constraint on theories of meaning. Next (§4.2.) I map out the geography of subjectivist theories and the variety of ways in which they rely upon the anti-alienation constraint. After laying the groundwork, I spend the next two sections arguing subjectivism is neither sufficient (§4.3.) nor necessary (§4.4.). I consider how different varieties of subjectivism fair but find them wanting for, roughly, two reasons. First, that different ways of understanding subjectivism produce their own version of the same problem they are trying to solve. And second, many subjectivist theories end up abandoning the anti-alienation constraint which was their motivation to start with.

I then (§4.5.) provide a diagnostic story to explain the intuitive pull of subjectivism and the anti-alienation intuition: there is a distinct evaluative dimension that often accompanies meaning, which I identify as fulfilment. Fulfilment, I argue, best captures the motivations for subjectivism. I end (§4.6.) by reassessing the value and normative significance of meaning in life. Much of the value we place upon meaning actually belongs to fulfilment. While one might find such an upshot objectionable, I contend we should welcome such a result, as it better explains certain phenomenological experiences.

4.1. Subjectivism about Meaning in Life

Subjectivists hold, roughly, that meaning in life is either partly or wholly dependent upon an appropriate set of propositional attitudes. To clarify, consider whether a teacher's life is meaningful. For the subjectivist, the answer depends upon the person's own attitudes towards their life. If the teacher loved teaching or wanted to become a teacher and succeeded,

subjectivists would answer that the teacher's life is meaningful. But if the teacher hated teaching or never wanted to be a teacher, then subjectivists would say the teacher's life was meaningless. And if the person in question loved teaching or wanted to be a teacher but failed to become one, subjectivists would generally say no meaning has been conferred upon their life. Following Metz, we can roughly define subjectivism as follows:

(S1) A human person's life is more meaningful the more that she obtains the objects of her actual pro-attitudes such as desires and goals (Metz, 2013, p. 169).

(S1) may be a vanilla version of subjectivism, but it will serve for present purposes. As I advance my argument against subjectivism, we shall see variants emerge which aim to maintain the spirit of subjectivism while not falling prey to the considered objection.

What makes subjectivism attractive? There appear to be at least two motivating factors. The first motivation is a general skepticism about objective value. Since meaning is dependent upon value, so the thought goes, then without objective value one cannot have objective meaning. While such a view was dominant throughout the twentieth century, attempts to capture what makes a life meaningful were still plentiful, being cashed out along subjectivist lines (Ayer, 2000; Barnes, 1967; Camus, 1955; James, 1899; Nietzsche, 2010; Sartre, 1946; B. Williams, 1973).

However, I do not think skepticism serves as a powerful motivation for subjectivism. The reason being that one could develop a subjectivist theory about meaning while maintaining that there are objective values. It is not inconsistent to deny objective values are sufficient, or even necessary, for a meaningful life. For example, even if one agreed that a meaningful life required objective values and that one be engaged with or obtained those values, that may not ipso facto make a life meaningful. Wolf, for example, claims views which ignore subjectivism (e.g. asymmetric welfarism) are incomplete because, by doing so, they produce counterintuitive results:

Imagine, for example, that unbeknownst to Sisyphus, his stone-rolling scares away vultures who would otherwise attack a nearby community and spread terror and disease. Or imagine that the pot-smoker's secondary marijuana smoke is alleviating the pain of the AIDS victim next door. If Sisyphus and the pot-smoker do not care about the benefits their lives are producing, it is hard to see why the fact that their lives yield those benefits - that they contribute, in other words, to something larger or other than themselves - should make us any more inclined to describe their lives as meaningful (or to find their lives desirable) than we were before we learned of these consequences (Wolf, 2010, p. 21).

For Wolf and her sympathisers, a meaningful life requires both a subjective and an objective component: “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf, 2016, p. 256).

While Wolf offers a hybrid theory, one could maintain a pure subjectivist theory even if they admitted objective values existed. One could argue that objective values are not necessary for meaning. One might agree with Frankfurt that:

An enthusiastically meaningful life need not be connected to anything that is objectively valuable, nor need it include any thought that the things to which it is devoted are good ... Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved (Frankfurt, 2002, p. 250).

So while skepticism about objective value may be thought to motivate subjectivism, it appears unwarranted. Embracing subjectivism about meaning - even the most extreme version of it - is compatible with the view that there are objective values.

Luckily for subjectivists there is a second motivating factor. I call this motivation the *anti-alienation intuition*: the pre-theoretical intuition that for some thing to be meaningful it must mean *something to someone*, namely, the person whose life it is.³² How else, the subjectivist might ask, could something be meaningful? So strong is this intuition that it can be seen to form a corresponding constraint on theories about meaning in life. That is, for a theory to even be a theory about meaning in life (let alone a plausible theory) it must have some condition which addresses the *anti-alienation constraint*.

The anti-alienation constraint serves as a point of contention within the literature on well-being, and has been utilised most often as a weapon against pure objectivist theories about prudential value (i.e., that prudential good *G* is non-instrumentally good for subject *S* regardless of *S*'s propositional attitudes towards *G*). Railton perhaps provides the best articulation of anti-alienation:

It does seem to me to capture an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, as least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage with him (Railton, 2003, p. 47).

Admittedly, ‘meaning something to someone’ is vague. Below, I describe three ways the literature has interpreted the anti-alienation intuition and thus attempted to address the

³² I take ‘anti-alienation’ from Fletcher (2016). For examples of discussion about alienation in the philosophy of well-being, see (Dorsey, 2011; Fletcher, 2013; Railton, 1984; Rosati, 1996; Yelle, 2014).

constraint. Those three ways are (i) personal significance, (ii) autonomy and authenticity, and (iii) absorption.

First and perhaps most straightforward is personal significance; for something to be non-alienating, it must strike a chord, resonate, or connect with a person (Chastain, 2021). The suggestion that a life could be meaningful even if the person whose life it is was bored by or apathetic towards their own life strikes us as counterintuitive. A second way of understanding the anti-alienation intuition is via autonomy and authenticity (Berk, 2021; Calhoun, 2018; Sartre, 1946; C. Taylor, 1992). By this, to ‘mean something to someone’ is to say a life or activity is something freely chosen of the agent’s volition, or that they live authentically to who they are. Finally, one might cash out anti-alienation through absorption or engagement, i.e., becoming completely involved, caught up, or otherwise consumed by, some activity or object (Ayer, 1990; Frankfurt, 1982; Murdoch, 1970; R. Taylor, 1970). Such an understanding of meaning would make sense of why we take things such as love, friendship, or creativity, as deeply meaningful; they are things we can ‘wrap ourselves up in’.

Which ever way one goes, anti-alienation is a strong intuition about meaning and one which I believe serves as the primary motivation for subjectivism. Any theory which violates the anti-alienation constraint has therefore a definitive strike against itself.

4.2. Varieties of Subjectivism

Thus far I have described subjectivist theories as those which state that meaning in life is dependent upon propositional attitudes. However, that is about where agreement between subjectivists ends. It turns out there are various ways in which one might understand those attitudes and the conditions around them. There are, roughly, five basic divisions which we can use to sketch out the subjectivist landscape (Metz, 2013, pp. 163-179). They are:

- Whether pro-attitudes are solely sufficient,
- The nature of these propositional attitudes,
- Monism or pluralism,
- Whose attitudes are relevant, and
- Whether the attitudes are actual or hypothetical.

The first point of contention is whether pro-attitudes are solely sufficient or require some additional, objective, condition. While hybrid views have proven popular in recent times (in no small part due to Wolf’s (2010) fitting fulfilment theory), pure subjectivist theories still remain influential due in no small part to existentialist writers such as Sartre (1946) or Camus (1955).

The second division revolves around the nature of these propositional attitudes. While it is largely accepted that the relevant attitudes are positive or pro-attitudes (i.e., types of propositional attitudes in which we favourably wish for some state-of-affairs to obtain), there is a small group which contend negative or con-attitudes (such as anger or hatred) can also play a role in meaning (Munitz, 1993, p. 86; Starkey, 2006, p. 94). Even though pro-attitudes are widely held to be the relevant attitude, there appears to be no convergence upon the precise nature of those attitudes. For example, one might argue for desires (Griffin, 1981; R. Taylor, 1970) or preferences (Darwall, 1983), or that meaning is conferred by the deliberate choices we make (Camus, 1955; Sartre, 1946), or through our projects (Calhoun, 2018; B. Williams, 1973). Others still might argue for bringing about some purpose (Ayer, 2000; Nielsen, 1981; Smart, 1999, p. 16). Another option could be emotion, such as satisfaction (Martin, 1993), taking joy in what matters (Klemke, 2000), or caring or loving something (Frankfurt, 1982). One might also suggest meaning is itself simply an emotion (Starkey, 2006). And, finally, one might think the attitudes in question involve paying close attention to the details of something (Murdoch, 1970). This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it shows how far ranging views on this point can be.

Third, we might contest how many types or kinds of attitudes are necessary for a life to be conferred meaning. While monism seems to be largely assumed as the default position, there is no obvious reason for ruling out pluralism.³³ James (1899) argued meaning in life requires a passionate pursuit of an ideal (which would require both passion and active pursuit), while Markus (2003) and Boylan (2008) both appeal to cognition and volition.

The fourth point of dispute is about who the relevant bearer of those attitudes might be. The simple version of subjectivism outlined above, i.e., (S1), stated it was the person whose life it is who is the relevant party, but there may be good reasons for thinking otherwise. The most widely held view is that the relevant party is the person whose life it is (Ayer, 1990; Calhoun, 2018; Griffin, 1981; James, 1899; Sartre, 1946; R. Taylor, 1970; B. Williams, 1973). However, one might adopt an inter-subjective approach, as Darwall (1983, pp. 164-166), Brogaard & Smith (2005), or Wong (2008) have, claiming it is a group or community whose pro-attitudes are relevant in deciding the meaningfulness of a life.

Fifth and final is the question as to whether these attitudes are actual or hypothetical. By and large, subjectivists assume the status of the relevant attitude must be actual, whether that be held by the individual whose life it is or the relevant community to which they belong. Even so, there are those who argue the relevant attitude need only be hypothetical. Darwall (1983), for example, argues that a state-of-affairs confers meaning upon a life insofar as all human agents would prefer those states-of-affairs obtain, upon reflecting on it from an impersonal standpoint. Griffin

³³ A similar mistake has also been made in the philosophy of well-being. See (Lin, 2016).

(1981, pp. 54-58) goes a different way, arguing instead that what confers meaning on a person's life is whatever she would desire, if she were fully informed about all the options available to her.

Subjectivist theories are attractive because they capture what is presumed to be a strong pre-theoretical intuition about meaning in life, namely, the anti-alienation intuition. One might assume, then, that a subjective condition is at least necessary, if not solely sufficient, for meaning in life. Given asymmetric welfarism is an objective theory and therefore denies, nor has any place for, a subjective condition, the aforementioned is an unwelcome result. For the remainder of this chapter I aim to show that, despite these appearances, a subjective condition is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning in life.

4.3. Subjectivism is not Sufficient

If a subjective condition is taken to be sufficient for meaning in life then we struggle to account for both paradigm cases and existential angst. Subjectivism struggles to account for paradigm cases in two ways. First, subjectivism does not offer a straightforward way of explaining what the unifying commonality between meaningful lives is, nor what meaningless lives lack. Second, subjectivism often provides highly counterintuitive results when considering cases. Let us take each in turn.

When we reflect upon meaningful lives like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, or Marie Curie, our assessment does not seem to be solely informed by whether their lives met the correct subjective condition. We might well assume they had, but this seems more a background assumption rather than anything concrete. We do not ask whether or not our paradigm cases actually had the appropriate attitudes, or acted upon their own volition, or were being authentic. And in absence of such information, we would not withhold or withdraw our judgements.

But how much of our assessment of paradigm cases would change if we found out that these paradigm cases were alienated from their own life? Recall the scenario in which we found the secret diary of Nelson Mandela where, unbeknownst to anyone, he detailed his actual, narcissist reasons for pursuing his noble ends. However, let us suppose instead that Mandela had the opposite of whatever attitudinal state one championed. Would our intuitions about the meaningfulness of his life change? It seems to me our judgement about the meaningfulness of Mandela's life does not diminish. That is, we still hold that some meaning - indeed, a significant amount - has been conferred upon his life regardless of him meeting whatever subjective condition one endorses.

What about paradigmatic cases of meaningless lives? Again, it does not seem such cases are meaningless simply because they lack the correct subjective state. The reason we think the person in an experience machine, for example, lives a meaningless life is not because they lack

the appropriate attitudes. The same, it seems, holds true for a Pol Pot or Adolf Hitler; the meaninglessness of their lives does not appear to be because they do not meet the appropriate subjective condition. And even if they did have the appropriate attitudes, that would not by itself make their lives meaningful.

Subjectivism struggles to provide an adequate account of either type of paradigm case and produces counterintuitive results when we reassess these cases. If the grinning excrement eater meets the appropriate subjective condition then that would be sufficient for their life to be meaningful. And if those subjective conditions were met in a robust way, then their life could be a paradigmatically meaningful life. Lives such as Ted Bundy, Adolf Hitler, or a person in an experience machine would also be paradigmatically meaningful lives, standing shoulder to shoulder with the lives of Einstein, Frida Kahlo, or Harriet Tubman. Likewise, those who do not have the appropriate attitudes would live meaningless lives. If Beethoven was despondent and alienated from his musical projects and life in general, then subjectivism appears committed to saying his life was meaningless. And the same would hold if either Abraham Lincoln or Mother Teresa showed doubt, ambivalence, or an alienated attitude towards their life. Yet it is hard to imagine their lives were more meaningless than, say, the grass counter, simply because the grass counter was enraptured in their grass counting while Lincoln found himself worn, beaten and tired with the desire to do something else with his time.

The problem seems to be that maintaining that a subjective condition is sufficient fails to make sense of our intuitions about what kinds of projects can confer meaning to a life. That is, some lives or projects seem meaningful or meaningless regardless of any subjectivist constraint. Such a point has proven compelling for most with a bounty of examples attesting to its popularity. For example, merely surviving (John. Kekes, 1986, p. 81), harming others (Dahl, 1987, p. 12), being caught in a vicious cycle (e.g., growing more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land ad infinitum) (Wiggins, 1976), focusing one's entire life on a single colour (Morris, 1992, p. 58), maintaining exactly 3,732 hairs upon one's head (C. Taylor, 1992, p. 36), engaging in conspicuous consumption and being self absorbed (P. Singer, 1995, pp. 86-87), collecting bottle tops (I. Singer, 2010), memorising the dictionary (Wolf, 1997, p. 210), watching reruns of the same TV show (Bellioiti, 2001, p. 75), lining up balls of torn newspaper into rows (Cottingham, 2003, p. 21), becoming addicted to drugs (Belshaw, 2005, pp. 115-122), or eating one's own excrement (Wielenberg, 2005, pp. 18-23) all seem to be lives which are not made maximally meaningful (or meaningful whatsoever) simply in virtue of the person having the right subjective attitudes.

How might the subjectivist respond to such charges? Well, one could simply deny the intuitions above. Taylor (1970) once held such a position, arguing that what was wrong with

Sisyphus's life was that he simply lacked the appropriate subjective states-of-mind. If the gods could have implanted in Sisyphus an insatiable desire or love for rolling a boulder up a hill then, Taylor thought, we would think Sisyphus's life had become meaningful.

That said, such a judgement strikes me as highly idiosyncratic. Indeed, as Metz (2013, p. 174) notes, nobody seems to share Taylor's intuition about the case. And, as already flagged, Taylor himself has since rejected his initial position for two different reasons. First, Taylor (1981, pp. 19-24) points out that it seems the way in which Sisyphus had gained his desire, i.e., through divine intervention, vitiates meaning (John. Kekes, 1986, pp. 80-84; Thomson, 2003, pp. 56-58). Since the desire was a manipulation and not authentic, the satisfaction of said desire is thought to confer no meaning.

Such an objection, however, can be easily accommodated by the subjectivist. First, the subjectivist might respond by saying that this simply means the type of propositional attitudes in question are not the right kind to confer meaning. We have already seen above that autonomy and authenticity are ways of addressing the anti-alienation constraint. Give that, it seems possible for a subjectivist to develop a position which does not compromise subjectivism but accommodates our intuitive judgements about cases. Alternatively, we could adopt pluralism, arguing that autonomy/authenticity is jointly sufficient along with some attitude, but noting that both are subjective conditions.

The more powerful objection Taylor (1987, pp. 679-682) advances against his previous position is that it is simply too counterintuitive. The reason being because it is not simply a matter of having the right attitudes, but the object of said attitude must itself *merit* those attitudes. The object one desires or chooses, etc., is something of, for lack of a better term, objectively valuable. And indeed this seems to be the lesson drawn, which is perhaps why hybrid theories have proven popular in recent times (Wolf, 2010).

A second way would be to simply bite the bullet and admit that, while counterintuitive, such lives really are meaningful. Hooker (2008, pp. 184-192) attempts such a manoeuvre but hopes to make the pill easier to swallow. He considers a sybarite who aims to develop their sense of luxury and beauty. Hooker's intuition is that such a life could be conferred meaning if it were successful in achieving those ends, coming to the conclusion that the best explanation for his intuition is that meaning is conferred only because the sybarite has achieved the contingent object of their desires.

Hooker's reply can be seen to fail in at least two ways. First, the upshot of such a view is simply too counterintuitive to gain any real purchase (Hooker, 2008, pp. 260-262). I am inclined to agree with this response, but it is admittedly a little short and perhaps too quick. In light of

that, one might favour Metz's response: Hooker's sybarite case "implicitly smuggles in some objectively valuable conditions" (2013, p. 176). Metz notes Hooker's view requires, "the development and exercise of capacities beyond that of sub-human intelligence" (2008, p. 186), yet such a position is compatible with objectivism because the development and exercise of capacities seems to be something we deem as being objectively valuable. The sybarite case, Metz points out, differs from both Sisyphus and the above cases because the sybarite can be understood as engaging with something objectively valuable (i.e., the development and exercise of their capacities) whereas Sisyphus and the others do not.

Thus far we have considered responses a subjectivist might entertain in order to push back on the current objection. But this is not the only strategy the subjectivist might deploy. Instead of rallying against our intuitive judgements, the subjectivist might instead try to accommodate them by forming a theory which still holds that a subjective condition is sufficient for meaning. The subjectivist can do this, presumably, by revising or rejecting (S1) which, to remind, was:

(S1) A human person's life is more meaningful the more that she obtains the objects of her actual pro-attitudes such as desires and goals (Metz, 2013, p. 169).

I think (S1) turns upon two assumptions. First, that it is the attitudes of the individual whose life it is which confer meaning. Second, whether those relevant attitudes are hypothetical rather than actual. If I am right, then perhaps rejecting one of those assumptions and embracing an alternative will provide a satisfying resolution.

The first option is to hold that it is the attitudes and opinions of a group or community which matter, rather than the person whose life it is. Brogaard & Smith (2005) advance such a view, arguing that a life is meaningful if and only if, then only insofar as, that life is engaged in projects which the community, or public, hold to be valuable. On this view, the reason Sisyphus, a bottle cap collector, or Stalin, does not/did not live a meaningful life is because their projects, according to the community, are not worthwhile or valuable. This inter-subjectivist theory Brogaard & Smith espouse can be seen to amend (S1) in the following way:

(S2) a human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she engages in activities that are the object of her community's pro-attitudes (such as judgements that her actions are successful or were worth doing) (Metz, 2013, p. 176).

Brogaard & Smith's inter-subjectivist theory can be broken into three parts. First, for an activity to confer meaning, the community must have a way to judge the activity as being good or bad, successful or unsuccessful. That is why, according to them, day dreaming does not confer meaning; there is no way the community can judge it. Second, the community must be aware of the activity. The reason why mass murder is not meaningful, according to them, is because it

must be practiced away from the prying eyes of the community (Brogaard & Smith, 2005, p. 447). And third, the activity must have been successful, at least in light of the community's criteria and judgement. In light of the above, Brogaard & Smith seem to have captured a subjectivist theory about meaning in life which holds a subjective condition as being sufficient while still offering a way of vindicating our intuitions about paradigm cases.

While (S2) may seem to resolve the initial problem (i.e., intuitions about paradigm cases), it generates its own problematic cases. These cases, I argue, suffer from the same problems (S2) was designed to solve. For example:

Secret Science: Cletus lives in a theocratic state run by an oligarchy of religious fundamentalists. The society/community is also comprised of religious fundamentalists. The law forbids the practice of science and the community itself also hates science and scientific discoveries. Cletus, however, is enamoured with science - specifically viruses and vaccines. He studies and practices in secret from a hidden bunker under his house, ensuring his illegal activities don't result in incarceration or execution. A pandemic breaks out worldwide, and his state is hit hard. Cletus is able to identify the virus and eventually discovers a cure. He then produces a vaccine and dumps it into the city's water supply without anyone finding out. His actions result in curing the virus and ending the epidemic, saving the lives of his fellow citizens.

I suggest that the project Cletus engaged with conferred meaning upon his life. According to asymmetric welfarism, the reason why is because he improved and protected the well-being of other welfare subjects. But can the inter-subjectivist agree? The answer seems to be 'no' and the reason why is because it violates all three conditions of Brogaard & Smith's theory. First, the society/community has no way to judge the success or goodness of Cletus's activities. Second, the community think his activities, i.e., practicing science, are evil, and so his life would be meaningless. And, third, Cletus had to practice his activity 'under cover of dark' precisely because his community vilifies his chosen activity. So, according to Brogaard & Smith's inter-subjectivist theory, Cletus lives a meaningless life. Surely, however, this is incorrect.

The counterintuitive upshots (S2) produces can be seen running in both directions:

Child Sacrifice: suppose a community of people worship the pagan god, Moloch. According to the rites and myths of the community, Moloch demands child sacrifice. Specifically, Moloch demands stone effigies be built in His image and that the children be tied to the statue's outstretched hands which holds the sacrifice over an open fire to be roasted alive. Suppose

Ammon, a priest of Moloch, is the one who sacrifices the children during worship ceremonies that the community participate in. The community, being faithful to Moloch, see Ammon as not performing a duty per se, but participating in a privilege; the privilege of sacrificing children to their false idol.

I heavily suggest that the activity of sacrificing children to a false idol (or even a real one) does not confer meaning upon Ammon's life. Yet, it seems for (S2) the answer must be 'yes'. After all, the community (i) has a way to judge the activity, (ii) is very much aware of the activity (they watch it and, additionally, it is *their children* who are being sacrificed) and (iii) the activity is successful. I submit, however, that cases like Secret Science and Child Sacrifice demonstrate the implausibility of (S2). The problem for Brogaard & Smith's view, so far as I can see, turns out to be every condition laid down by their theory.

One might try, as Wong (2008) does, to save (S2) by arguing that the meaning of a life may be effected posthumously. How? By another community in the future coming about which values the activity in question. The artist not appreciated in their own time is a common trope, and one that Wong (2008, p. 143) makes use of when noting Mahler, a now celebrated composer, was not appreciated in his own time. And many other examples exist, such as Vincent van Gogh, Emily Dickinson, Galileo Galilei, and J.S. Bach, to name a few. Wong's argument might be able to resolve Secret Science and Child Sacrifice as their lives might become meaningful, or meaningless, depending upon some future community who deems their lives so. Ammon's life might have been meaningful at the time due to his community, but over time our own community deems his life meaningless, and so it is.

There are two problems with this move. First, as Metz (2013, p. 177) points out, Wong's position produces the counterintuitive upshot that a life cannot be meaningful until a community deems it to be. This would mean the *time* in which Mahler's life became meaningful after his death would be when a community appreciated his music and not when he wrote his music. Yet, intuitively, this seems wrong: "it is much more natural to say that the community at the time Mahler was alive failed to recognise the meaningfulness of his life that was *already present* because his music *merited appreciation*" (Metz, 2013, p. 177). So too, it seems, for Secret Science and other cases. Not everybody in a given community thought Martin Luther King Jr.'s life to be engaging in anything worthwhile, but it seems counterintuitive to suggest his life was meaningless just because there was not consensus as to whether the activities and projects of his life were valuable or not.

But the second problem is far worse, causing problems for not just Wong, but (S2) in general: inter-subjectivism fails to account for the very thing which motivated subjectivist theories in the

first place - the anti-alienation intuition. To recall, the anti-alienation intuition was a widespread intuition that states, roughly, for something to be meaningful it must mean something to someone, namely *the person whose life it is*. Yet (S2) holds the attitudes of the person whose life it is are irrelevant when assessing the meaning of their life. For those sympathetic to subjectivism, I imagine it would be dubious to suggest Cletus or Ammon lived a meaningful or meaningless life just because other people thought so, especially if they were bored by, or alienation from, their own life.

I should be clear that all I am trying to show here is that (S2) and this inter-subjective manoeuvre is inconsistent with the motivation for subjectivism. While asymmetric welfarism also excludes the attitudes of the person whose life it is, it is not motivated by an anti-alienation intuition. Rather, I attempt to explain away the intuition, as we shall soon see. But in an attempt to hold that some subjective condition is sufficient for meaning in life, inter-subjectivism ends up abandoning the very thing it was attempting to preserve.

There is, perhaps, one last move the subjectivist might make. They might deny that the relevant attitudes are actual, but are instead hypothetical. That is, an activity or state-of-affairs confers meaning to a life insofar as either the person whose life it is, or all human persons, would prefer it when reflecting upon it from an impersonal standpoint (Darwall, 1983, pp. 164-166; Griffin, 1986). This leads to:

(S3) A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she lives in ways all human agents would prefer upon the dispassionate consideration of their properties while abstracting from the way in which they would bear on their own lives (Metz, 2013, p. 178).

Yet such a variation still seems to suffer from the previous objection raised: (S3) is inconsistent with the anti-alienation constraint. By suggesting meaningful activities are those which a perfectly rational agent would dispassionately prefer, (S3) opens up a clear gap between anti-alienation and meaning. If the idealised values or attitudes are too dissimilar from the actual person's desires or values, then it appears we have violated the anti-alienation constraint. To give this idea traction, consider the following:

Envelopes: Jerry is a simple man with simple tastes and no particular ambitions or grandiose goals. He works in a political office, where he spends all day folding flyers, placing them in envelopes, sealing them, and then placing a stamp on them. He enjoys his work and the feeling of belonging and accomplishment it gives him. His work, in his own words, 'makes sense to him'. However, a perfectly idealised version of himself - Gary - teleports into his world and tells Jerry that, as the perfectly idealised version of himself, Gary

prefers doing philosophy. On the advice of his idealised self, Jerry gives up his job to pursue philosophy but finds the whole endeavour a horrible experience, full of frustration and confusion, leaving him bored, depressed, and disengaged from life.

According to (S3), Jerry's life is being conferred meaning only once he has taken up philosophy because his idealised version prefers it. But such an upshot should be deeply troubling for the subjectivist given that Jerry is clearly alienated from his own life.

One might reject the argument on the grounds that Envelopes smuggles in things which, according to (S3), would be meaning-conferring because the idealised rational agent would prefer them. For example, enjoyment, feeling of belonging, or achievement are all things which Jerry's job provide him, while doing philosophy does not. But such a response does not work because we could easily reconstruct the thought-experiment as to avoid these concerns. After all, what really matters is this: if the idealised person would desire A , but the actual person desires B , it is clearly alienating to hold that only A could confer meaning to that person's life simply because it was desired by their idealised counterpart (Fletcher, 2016, p. 74).

I want to repeat that while asymmetric welfarism does not vindicate our anti-alienation intuitions about meaning in life, it does not purport to do so. Nor is asymmetric welfarism motivated by such concerns, with the reason being that I reject the anti-alienation intuition and have gone to great lengths at arguing against a variety of objections which are spawned by holding such a position.³⁴ But this same move cannot be made by the subjectivist, given they hold the anti-alienation intuition is pivotal for their conception of meaning in life. So a subjectivist theory which is incompatible with anti-alienation is problematic, at best. Both (S2) and (S3) are subjectivist positions which, in their attempts to hold that a subjective condition is sufficient for meaning in life, both end up abandoning their very motivations. I submit that subjectivism, when taken as solely sufficient for meaning in life, fails to account for paradigm cases. Attempts to salvage the position by altering aspects of it might help to avoid these initial troubles but end up generating their own problems and abandon the anti-alienation intuition altogether.

But paradigm cases are not the only thing a theory about meaning in life should account for; there is still existential angst. One might think subjectivism can do a better job of account for existential angst than asymmetric welfarism. After all, angst is itself a subjective experience with common feelings or emotions of boredom, frustration, and hopelessness being associated with it. If the problem has subjective conditions/experiences, it is natural to assume the solution must

³⁴ See chapter 2 and 3.

be a subjective condition/experience too. If one were living a meaningful life, so the thought goes, one simply would not experience existential angst.

It is hard to deny the above. A subjective condition would, admittedly, speak to existential dread and anxiety, and what we might do to remedy it. The question, then, is whether a subjectivist theory accounts for equal to, or more, of existential angst than asymmetric welfarism. The answer to that question, I argue, is no. Subjectivism does not capture all of our concerns with regards to existential anxiety. Subjectivism does not, for example, account for our fears that our lives do not engage with, or contribute to, something larger than ourselves, or whether our lives ‘really matter’. Nor does subjectivism make much sense of our longing to contribute to or fit in with ‘the big picture’. And even if one were to fulfil the appropriate subjective conditions, a person can still wonder in earnest whether their life or efforts are meaningful.

The above only shows how subjectivism cannot account for all of existential angst. But as I admitted earlier, neither could asymmetric welfarism. So one might be left with the impression that both account for, roughly, equal parts, and so should be awarded equal plausibility (at least on this point). But this appearance, I suggest, is illusory. There are two reasons for thinking subjectivism accounts for less than it might claim.

First, subjectivism fails to account for existential angst because we can imagine ways of inducing the relevant attitudes without, intuitively, making that life meaningful. Consider a science-fiction medicine called ‘meaningful pills’, a drug which induces whatever attitude we think is sufficient for meaning; would a life on such pills be a meaningful life? Or, suppose we were able to genetically engineer a person’s predisposition to always hold the appropriate attitude. Would we think such a life meaningful? My intuition here is that the answer is a clear ‘no’.

One could try and bite the bullet here, arguing that perhaps our lives really would be meaningful if we were medicated or genetically engineered to meet the relevant subjective condition. But this bullet is bound to crack teeth, as there are real world cases which are analogous to the science fiction examples above; cases which (I hope) nobody could sensibly endorse as good policy (insofar as we are talking about meaning). Singer (1995, pp. 236-237) notes that prescribing tranquillisers to depressed housewives in the sixties was commonplace for suburban doctors. The motivation for doing so, Singer writes, was to resolve the dissatisfaction which results in the recognition of meaninglessness; to turn those housewives into “contented zombies” (P. Singer, 1995, p. 236). Singer also notes that providing tranquillisers to stem the flow of hopelessness precipitated by a lack of meaning in life does not actually solve the problem in any real sense:

It solves the problem only in the sense that alcohol solves the problems of Australian Aboriginals have in adjusting to Western civilisation, and crack and other drugs solve the problems of unemployed Americans living in urban slums (P. Singer, 1995, p. 236).

While medications (or other things) may resolve the feeling of existential angst, they do not address the actual problem which causes such dread to arise. Subjectivism, I think, confuses the symptoms with the cause. Existential dread, and the associated experiences it comes with, arise when a person *believes* meaning is lacking in their life. But just because we can negate or dull the associated mental states or induce the right kind does not mean we have done anything to cure the cause. That would be as erroneous as saying a doctor cured a broken leg by providing the patient morphine to dull the pain.

Holding some subjective condition as being sufficient for meaning in life does not account for all parts of existential angst and even for those parts it appears too, we have good reason for thinking otherwise. Asymmetric welfarism, I contend, does a better job of accounting for existential angst than any subjective condition. That said, however, one cannot shake the feeling that subjectivism captures something significant when it comes to our existential worries. My explanation, which will be fleshed out in §4.5., is that existential angst is not solely concerned with meaning in life, but with a plurality of evaluative dimensions in which we judge lives. For now, however, I submit that subjectivism does a worse job of explaining existential angst than asymmetric welfarism.

4.4. Subjectivism is not Necessary

Above I showed how subjectivism, when taken as solely sufficient for meaning in life, fails (or at best, struggles) to account for both paradigm cases and existential angst. This still leaves open the possibility that some subjective condition is necessary. That a subjective condition is at least necessary for meaning in life has proven popular, due in no small part to the forceful and compelling arguments Wolf (1997, 2010, 2016) advances in favour of a hybrid view. Wolf's fitting fulfilment theory about meaningfulness in life is summarised by her slogan, "meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (Wolf, 2010, p. 9). In abstract terms, Wolf's view is that meaning is conferred to a life when that person participates in activities which are objectively valuable (objective condition) and also desires to do so (subjective condition). Both conditions, according to her view, are necessary and jointly sufficient for meaning in life. Such hybrid theories tend to score highly in terms of plausibility because whenever one condition cannot account for our intuitions, the other part can.

However, in this section I aim to show that a subjective condition is not necessary for meaning. As I shall argue, the motivation for adopting such a view confuses *finding* life meaningful with one's life *actually being* meaningful.

To get a grip upon this argument, let us return to a point outlined earlier about meaning and its relationship to practical reason. I have described how meaning, and lack thereof, seems to provide us with reasons for action. One widely held belief, as expressed succinctly by Camus, is that when somebody wants to commit suicide, it is often because they think their life is not worth living, i.e., that their life is meaningless. And when we think our life meaningful, such as George eventually did in *It's a Wonderful Life*, we see that as a very good reason to continue living.

Bramble (2015) builds upon the above observations, offering us an argument centred around a further-altered Sisyphus case. I have deployed Bramble's Sisyphus earlier but, to remind, Bramble envisions a case in which, unbeknownst to Sisyphus, his stone rolling scares off ravenous vultures who would otherwise feast upon the population of a nearby village. In a moment of existential crisis about the meaning of his life, Sisyphus is about to throw himself off a cliff and we have just one chance to say something to stop him from committing the act. Bramble then poses the question: what could we say, or appeal to, to change Sisyphus's mind? In such a situation, Bramble writes his own response: "Wait, Sisyphus! Don't do it! You don't realise 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" (2015, p. 447).

What insights do we gain from Bramble's response? First, Bramble's response seems appropriate and addresses Sisyphus's concern, even if Sisyphus is unmoved by it. That is, the reason Bramble gives Sisyphus directly addresses the concerns he has, namely, whether his life is meaningful or not. Bramble points out Sisyphus's life has meaning - meaning of which Sisyphus himself was unaware of. All Bramble would be telling Sisyphus are the relevant facts about his life, and it is those facts (i.e., improving or protecting the well-being of other welfare subjects) which are doing the work.

Bramble's response is not idiosyncratic. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, it is precisely these relevant facts (i.e., facts about how George positively impacts the well-being of others) that George's guardian angel appeals to in order to convince George his life is meaningful and worth living. It is upon learning these facts about his life that George changes his mind about the worth of his life, deciding not to commit suicide but instead rush home back to his loving family and friends. George comes to believe his life is worthwhile; his life is meaningful, even wonderful.

To bolster the argument, consider what it would look like if a subjective condition were a necessary condition for meaning. When George or Bramble's Sisyphus (or anybody for that

matter) desires to end their life because they think it meaningless, it seems the subjectivist has to admit that person is correct. Why? Because their life would be meaningless simply in virtue of their depression, alienation, and attitude. If a subjective condition really was necessary then it would seem Sisyphus is correct in not just questioning the meaning of his life, but he would be right to think his life meaningless. Reimagining Bramble's version of Sisyphus with this addendum produces highly counterintuitive results; presumably we would have to say something like: 'Yes, Sisyphus, you're quite right in thinking your life meaningless. I guess there's no reason not to jump - nice knowing you!'

The lesson to be drawn, I submit, is that lives can be meaningful even when we believe otherwise and vice versa. People search for reasons or evidence as to whether their life is meaningful and, upon finding such reasons, come to believe their life is meaningful. In cases where they find no evidence, they believe their life meaningless. But a person can be mistaken; we are not infallible when it comes to assessing the meaningfulness of a life, even our own. And so finding one's life meaningful is not identical to one's life being meaningful. Since a person can err, a life can be meaningful without someone finding it so, and someone might find their life meaningful when it is not.

4.5. A Fulfilling Life

Even if the above arguments are correct, there appears no explanation as to why subjectivism is so attractive. We do, it seems, have strong intuitions about authenticity, autonomy, and attitudes, as playing an important role with regards to meaning. Surely, then, there must be *something* which is significant and valuable about our attitudes towards our own lives. The above arguments might provide reason for rejecting subjectivism, but those reasons arguably do not weaken our sentiments; the above arguments provide no diagnosis of these robust intuitions, nor a revision of them.³⁵

In this section I hope to resolve this quagmire. My answer is simple: intuitions and judgements which drive subjectivism are tracking a distinct evaluative dimension of a life: fulfilment. A fulfilling life is the type of life in which a subjective condition is necessary and, I think most likely, solely sufficient. Further still, a fulfilling life captures all the intuitions used in support of subjectivism about meaning in life. Judgements supporting subjectivism are picking out what makes life fulfilling rather than what makes life meaningful. By partitioning our

³⁵ There is a parallel here in the philosophy of well-being, where some have strong intuitions that mental states or other agent-dependent/subjective conditions must be met for a life to be good for the person whose life it is (e.g., (Griffin, 1986; Rosati, 1996; Sumner, 1996). It seems counterintuitive to suggest a person could live a great life for themselves even if they are alienated, bored by, or actively hated, their life (Railton, 2003, p. 47). Vindicating such intuitions has proven vexing for objective list theorists, with a variety of attempts at solving the problem. See (Ferkany, 2012; Fletcher, 2013; Lin, 2015; Parfit, 1987, pp. 493-502; Rice, 2013).

intuitions in this way, I believe we can dissolve a number of issues about meaning in life without sacrificing anything of value. The reason we find subjectivism about meaning attractive is because fulfilment and meaning often accompany one another, leading us to confuse the two as being one. But they are distinct and can be separated. And, once separated, the differences between the two becomes evident.

My strategy may raise concern, but there is precedent within the discipline. The literature on epistemic value (i.e., what makes knowledge valuable?), for example, has seen a similar development, with a distinction drawn between knowledge and understanding. The supposed value of knowledge is actually found in understanding with our mistake being that we have confused their value because they so often accompany one another (Carter & Gordon, 2014; Kvanvig, 2003; Pritchard, 2010, pp. 5-88; Zagzebski, 1996). But, according to this argument, they can come apart with the value residing in understanding.³⁶

I suggest much of the above holds for meaning and fulfilment. If a person's life is meaningful there is good reason to think it will also be fulfilling. Such an idea is hardly new and has been observed in ancient cultures, religions, and in modern psychology. But while fulfilment might often accompany meaning, they can be separated. Consider the case of Mother Teresa:

It is unlikely that Mother Teresa would have been terribly cheerful emptying bedpans and putting bandages on lepers. In any event, imagine that she lacked any potentially relevant attitude. Suppose that she loved neither the people she helped nor the activity of helping them, that she was not inspired by her work, but instead did it out of fear that she would face eternal damnation for not doing it, that for large periods, she wondered whether human beings were really worth all the trouble, etc. (Metz, 2013, p. 183).

Metz's intuition is that Mother Teresa's life is still meaningful, regardless of her attitudes towards her life or her activities. I agree, and I assume such an intuition is widely held. But is her life *fulfilling*? It seems the answer is 'no'; her life is clearly unfulfilling (at least in these moments). The reverse seems to hold too; consider the grinning excrement eater, who takes great delight in consuming faeces. Such a life strikes us as a paradigm case of a meaningless life. Even so, could such a life, even if meaningless, be fulfilling? While, admittedly, it seems a stretch of the imagination to think anybody could find such a life fulfilling, this speaks more to our limited imagination than anything substantive. If the excrement eater truly delights in their revolting activity, I can say many things about how prudentially bad or meaningless their life is, but accusing it of being unfulfilling does not seem to be one of them. As difficult as it might be to understand the excrement eater, I cannot deny that their life is fulfilling.

³⁶ Of course, whether such an argument is successful is a different question entirely, and one that certainly falls outside the scope of this thesis. For further reading, see (Pritchard, Turri, & Carter, 2018).

So meaningfulness and fulfilment often go hand in hand but they are not identical and they can come apart. But why should we think subjectivism is misidentifying the two? Well, consider what it takes for a life to be fulfilling. While subjectivism is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaningfulness, the same cannot be said of fulfilment. A fulfilling life, it seems, just *is* the life of a person who has the appropriate attitudes about their own life. When we ask ourselves whether Mother Teresa, or Nelson Mandela, or Hitler, or the bottle cap collector, lived a fulfilling life, it appears we cannot make a judgement about whether their lives were or were not (nor to what extent) fulfilling until we know what they thought about their own life.

Additionally, fulfilment is in lockstep with both motivations for subjectivism. While it might be disputed about how dependent meaning is upon objective values, a life can still be fulfilling even if there are no such values. But even if there are objective values, they appear to have no bearing upon fulfilment. Consider the grass counter; whether counting the same patch of grass everyday is objectively valuable or valueless appears to make no difference as to whether or not their life is fulfilling. So too, it seems, with the anti-alienation intuition. If a person is bored or otherwise alienated from their life then their life is undoubtedly unfulfilling. However, if they have engaged or have the appropriate attitudes, surely their life becomes fulfilling.

Recognising fulfilment as an evaluative dimension in its own right provides further explanatory power when we reconsider paradigm cases and existential angst. First, fulfilment can make sense of paradigm cases. When we think about paradigm cases of meaningful lives, we do not inquire about attitudes. For example, when we place Nelson Mandela upon our list, we do not think about whether he had the right attitudes or exercised autonomy and we do not suspend our judgement if we find no answer to that question. Instead, we consider the positive impact he made, i.e., how he improved or protected the well-being of welfare subjects. The same holds for meaningless lives too. The lives of Hitler or Richard Ramirez are meaningless and we think this regardless of their mental states or any other subjective attitude.

But were those same lives fulfilling? Note this question is conceptually distinct from asking whether those same lives were meaningful. We may infer their lives are fulfilling because the two often accompany each other, but it would be a mistake to think one entailed the other (let alone, that they could be identical). It also seems unhelpful to look at the facts about their life to help answer the question. The only information we need is their assessment of their own life. Whether their life is fulfilling or not seems roughly equivalent to the judgement that person makes about their life.³⁷

³⁷ I say 'roughly' because we might think that for a life to be truly fulfilled it must be an authentic attitude, i.e., an attitude which is not implanted or brought about by manipulation or adjusted preferences (e.g., the happy slave, and obedient housewife).

There also seems to be no pro tanto reason for thinking a person can be wrong about whether their own life is fulfilling or not. If the person who only watches reruns of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* reports they find their life fulfilling, we cannot say they are wrong about that. We might try and argue their life should not be fulfilling because of a variety of reasons, but whether they *should* find their life fulfilling is a separate question from whether their life *is* fulfilling. Unlike meaning, fulfilment does depend upon whether that same person judges their life to be so.

Meaning and fulfilment can help clarify our intuitions and judgements about a number of cases. To show how, reconsider Sisyphus and the variations thereof: Original, Taylor (1970), Wolf (2010), and Bramble (2015). To remind, *Original Sisyphus* has been punished by the gods to roll a boulder up a hill. However, every time he seemingly completes the task the boulder rolls back down, and he spends eternity locked in this vicious cycle. For *Taylor's Sisyphus*, the gods also imbue Sisyphus with a compulsive impulse to roll stones, making doing so enjoyable, pleasurable or deeply absorbing. In *Wolf's Sisyphus*, there is a town encircled by ravenous vultures who would feed upon the helpless townsfolk if they were not scared away by the thunderous sound the boulder makes after every it rolls back down, all of which is unknown to Sisyphus. In *Bramble's Sisyphus*, we inform Sisyphus of what positive contributions his boulder rolling causes.

A distinction between meaning and fulfilment allows us to make sense of each case; what is missing and what is not. Below, I provide what those judgements look like:

- Original Sisyphus lives a meaningless and unfulfilling life.
- Taylor's Sisyphus lives a meaningless but fulfilling life.
- Wolf's Sisyphus lives a meaningful but unfulfilling life
- Bramble's Sisyphus lives a meaningful life which, hopefully, becomes fulfilling.

Each assessment seems plausibly true and, dare I say, pre-theoretically so. That is, even before considering any of the various arguments I have advanced, describing each Sisyphus variation as I have seems pre-theoretically correct. The distinction between meaning and fulfilment, as understood throughout this thesis (i.e., asymmetric welfarism for meaning in life, and some form of subjectivism for fulfilment in life), vindicates such judgements.

I have argued there is a difference between meaning and fulfilment, and that this is a difference we should take seriously. The diagnosis of our robust intuitions about meaning in life and subjectivity is as follows. First, fulfilment is conceptually distinct from meaning. Second, meaning and fulfilment often accompany each other. And third, fulfilment shares all the features that subjectivists about meaning in life focus upon. In this way, fulfilment seems better captured by subjectivism than meaning, and so I submit that subjectivists have confused the concept of

fulfilment with meaning, developing theories about the former when thinking they theorise upon the latter. Finding life fulfilling and finding it meaningful appear synonymous, whereas life actually being fulfilling or life actually being meaningful, do not. If someone finds their life fulfilling it is hard to argue their life is not actually fulfilling, whereas the same does not hold for meaning; finding life meaningful does not make it so.

Asymmetric welfarism dovetails neatly with the above diagnosis. Such a theory provides a clear picture of meaning in life and shows how meaning is distinct from other closely related concepts, such as fulfilment. Such a diagnosis, coupled with the arguments I have advanced in this chapter, strengthens the case for asymmetric welfarism. Instead of trying to shoe-horn a subjective condition into meaning, I submit we instead appreciate the special place it has in a specific evaluative dimension of a life, namely, fulfilment.

4.6. Reassessing the Value of Meaning

Before ending this chapter, I want to reflect upon a seemingly problematic upshot for my position. The upshot being that meaning might not be as valuable as we suppose; much of the value we mistakenly place in meaning might actually reside with fulfilment. Such an upshot might serve as an objection to asymmetric welfarism because such a theory fails to vindicate our intuitions about the value of meaning in life. In this section, I argue such an upshot is a feature of my view, rather than a bug, and a result we should welcome.

One may think separating fulfilment from meaning devalues it. I have already explained that we pre-theoretically take meaning to be valuable. Meaning provides *pro tanto* reasons for action and lack of meaning in one's life can drive one to depression and self harm. Since there is a widespread intuition that meaning in life is valuable, a theory about meaning in life should provide vindication for that intuition. A theory should not just explain what makes a life meaningful, but also why meaning is valuable.³⁸

Why think this distinction deflates the value of meaning? Recall that in chapter 1 I outlined a variety of reasons which motivated the research topic. I explained there were both theoretical and lived experience reasons which seemingly indicated the value of meaning, with several cases supporting the view that meaning provides reasons: the graffitist, the social worker, and the artist. The graffitist tagged the property of others because they found it meaningful, while the social worker quit because they found their work meaningless. The artist who painted fruit bowls

³⁸ The literature on epistemic value (i.e., what, if anything, makes knowledge valuable?) serves as precedence for this. If a theory of knowledge cannot adequately explain the intrinsic value of knowledge then that theory is thought to be inadequate and so should be rejected. See (Pritchard et al., 2018)

did so because it was meaningful and quit when it stopped being so. In each case, the person in question was guided by whether or not (and to what degree) their activities were meaningful.³⁹

If the argument of the previous section is correct, then it would not be meaning which provides reason, but fulfilment. That is, the graffitiist tagged because it was fulfilling, while the social worker quit because finding homes for orphans was unfulfilling. What really motivates their choices was fulfilment, not meaning - and so it is fulfilment which they value (or is valuable), not meaning. Such an upshot might seem to rob meaning of a considerable amount of its perceived value and, for that reason alone, is enough to reject my proposal.

But I do not think this is a failure of my position but rather a strength of it. Deflating the value of meaning does not indicate it is valueless. Rather, what we learn is that we have overvalued meaning in life. We can now allocate both the appropriate degree and kind of value to it. Meaning is still undoubtedly valuable and still seems valuable in much the same way it did before, albeit for different reasons. We are undeniably social animals who desire connections and relationships with other creatures, whether human or animal, and we desire to form and take part in communities. We desire to make positive contributions to the lives of others, whether those closest to us, our communities, or the global village. Meaning in life, as I have conceptualised it here, still addresses these concerns. Even in times when such contributions are unfulfilling, we still believe making positive contributions to the welfare of others is both meaningful and has normative significance.

The philosopher, the artist, or the poet may find their work fulfilling, but they also want their work to be more than that; to be experienced, to challenge, or to inspire. The nurse, social worker, or police officer may not find their work fulfilling (at least, not all the time), but they still recognise their work as meaningful as they work to preserve life, peace, or security. This is to say, meaning is still valuable and normatively significant, even when we remove some of the initial value which motivated our research or interest in it.

Recognising fulfilment as a distinct and separate evaluative dimension of a life clarifies, or at least sits neatly with, our phenomenological experience of living for others and living for ourselves. Whether we put ourselves before or after the group (family, community, or nation), there can be tension between what is meaningful and what is fulfilling. We see both as valuable in their own right and for their own reasons and it can be difficult to know which to choose. The nurse who considers quitting their stressful and unfulfilling career sees the inherent value in helping others and improving or protecting their welfare and, for that reason, take the meaningfulness of their work as a serious reason to stay with their current vocation. But surely

³⁹ Or more accurately, the person in question was guided by their *assessment* on whether or not their activities were meaningful.

what they aim for is a delicate balance between the two; to find work which is meaningful but also fulfilling. We want to find a way to contribute to the lives of others which we enjoy.

Note also that such reasons and values remain independent from the domains of morality and prudence, even though they may also overlap. Doing what is meaningful does not entail doing the moral or ethical thing, and nor does doing what is fulfilling entail doing what is best for oneself. The musician who produces beautiful aesthetic experiences may increase the well-being of their listeners, but it is a stretch to think they have done anything morally praiseworthy, nor that they were morally obligated to make music. Moral actions may be meaningful, but meaningful actions need not be moral. Likewise, fulfilment and prudence are distinct though they may overlap. Pursuing a career in philosophy may be fulfilling for the would-be philosopher, but it is not entailed that their life is made better because of it. Indeed, their life could be made worse off because of their decision to pursue what they find fulfilling.

Additionally, we have serious epistemic constraints with regards to meaningfulness. Since we cannot know all the outcomes our life or actions are, or will be, responsible for, we cannot know how meaningful or meaningless our lives truly are. There is (presumably) no way Vincent van Gogh, or anyone else at the time, could have known how meaningful his life would become. Given we cannot truly know how meaningful our lives are or might be, it seems to me our concerns about meaningfulness are, to a certain extent, in vain. That is not to say a meaningful life is not valuable or should be ignored, but perhaps our collective preoccupation or obsession with it is unhelpful. What is within our grasp is whether our lives are fulfilling; that is something we have significant epistemic access to and, perhaps, significant control over.

4.7. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I made the case that subjective theories (the family of theories which hold some propositional attitude is either necessary or sufficient for meaning in life) are mistaken. I argued a subjective condition could not be solely sufficient because it failed (or at best struggled) to account for paradigm cases and existential angst. I examined a variety of ways in which a subjectivist might attempt to resolve these problems but found they failed because they generated their own counterintuitive results. Further still, the more sophisticated a subjectivist theory became the worse a job it did of accounting for the very thing which motivated it in the first place: the anti-alienation intuition.

I rejected subjective conditions as being necessary for meaning for two reasons. First, it seems a life can be conferred meaning even when such attitudes are absent and, second, subjectivist theories result in the counterintuitive upshot that a person can never be mistaken about how

meaningful, or meaningless, their life is. Finding one's life meaningful, I argued, does not make it so.

I then coupled my arguments against subjectivism with a diagnosis as to where such theories had gone wrong. Specifically, I argued there was a different evaluative dimension - fulfilment - which often accompanies meaningfulness and it was this other dimension which subjectivists had mistaken for meaning. I showed how fulfilment often accompanies meaning, how they can be pulled apart, and argued that fulfilment better encapsulates the sorts of motivations, intuitions, and subject matter subjectivists are concerned with. I then explained how understanding fulfilment as being distinct from meaning provides explanatory power across a variety of cases. Marrying the diagnosis proposed in this chapter with the case for asymmetric welfarism presents us with a full and robust picture as to why subjectivism is not as plausible as asymmetric welfarism. Just because a life is fulfilling does not make it meaningful, and just because a life is meaningful does not make it fulfilling.

5. Purpose

Here is one popular and intuitive way of understanding meaning: for something to be meaningful it must have a purpose. Saying something is ‘purposeless’ appears interchangeable with saying that same thing is ‘meaningless’. When we ask what meaning an action, event, life, or existence, may or may not have, we can understand that inquiry as being concerned with what goal, end, point, purpose, function, or *raison d’être* that thing has. When someone in the throes of existential angst beats their chest and cries out that the universe has no purpose, they might say that their life is meaningless. In other words, talk about meaning in life is widely understood as being synonymous with purpose.

Purpose theories about meaning in life are those theories which, roughly, maintain that a life is meaningful if, and only if, and then only insofar as, it has a purpose and fulfils, achieves, or engages with that purpose. Of course, not just any purpose will do, and there is division as to what types of purposes provide legitimate grounds for conferring meaning upon a life. For example, the relevant purpose could be assigned by oneself (Calhoun, 2018; Sartre, 1946), the community or social structure, (Confucius, 2007; Kim & Seachris, 2018), divine command (Cottingham, 2003; Craig, 1994/2013), or one’s nature (Aristotle, 2000; Darwin, 1859/2008).

In this chapter I shall argue that, whatever position one takes, purpose does not confer meaning upon a life. In other words, purpose theories about meaning in life are mistaken; purpose is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for meaning. I provide two arguments for my position. First is the anti-meaning objection; that purpose theories struggle to account for anti-meaning, i.e., that which is antithetical to meaning. Second is the epistemic objection; that we can make confident pre-theoretical judgements about the meaningfulness of a life without ever asking or learning about the purpose of that life, assuming it even has one.

This chapter unfolds as follows. I begin (§5.1.) by outlining the main motivations for adopting a purpose condition and provide the theoretical landscape for this family of theories. Next (§5.2.) I advance the anti-meaning objection, explaining what anti-meaning is, how it has played out in the literature, and show why purpose theories struggle to make sense of it, thus showing how such theories lack explanatory adequacy. Then (§5.3.) I move onto the epistemic objection. Here, I consider how we are able to confidently render judgements about the meaningfulness of a life, as evidenced by paradigm cases. Such judgements, I argue, are not informed by knowledge about the purpose (or lack thereof) of a life.

I conclude (§5.4.) my overall argument by providing an invisible-hand explanation to diagnose and explain why we pre-theoretically hold that purpose plays a crucial role in meaning.

Namely, that we attribute intentional action/agency and purpose to enhance the intelligibility of some given state-of-affairs, even when or where there is none. In order to understand why some state-of-affairs was brought about by a life, we suppose that person was purposefully aiming to bring said affairs about.

5.1. Purpose Theories

Purpose theories are united by the view that purpose plays a pivotal role in meaning in life. To illustrate, suppose Derek becomes a philosopher - would becoming a philosopher confer any meaning upon Derek's life? According to purpose theories, it would depend upon what purpose, if any, Derek's life had. If his purpose was to become a philosopher, then his life would accrue meaning (and arguably would be incredibly meaningful from achieving their purpose). However, if his life had a different purpose, such as becoming a singer, or had no purpose at all, then doing philosophy would not confer any meaning upon his life. Given that, we can produce a rudimentary definition of purpose theories:

Purpose theories about meaning in life: a life is meaningful if, and only if, then only insofar as, that life has some purpose and fulfils/achieves or engages with that purpose.

Note that according to purpose theories as I have understood them here, simply *having* a purpose is not enough to make a life have meaning. Rather, all a purpose provides is the grounds for possibility that one's life be, or become, meaningful. Meaningfulness depends upon how close or well one achieves their purpose or performs their function. Understanding purpose theories in this way allows them to account for there being meaningless and meaningful lives of varying degrees. So, on this view, a life can still be meaningless even if it were to have a purpose, namely, by not fulfilling it, while lives can be meaningful to different degrees depending upon the extent in which they work towards or fulfil their end.

So what motivates purpose? It seems to me there are a number of reasons. First, it seems widely accepted that purpose and meaning are synonymous, so much so that we might think it simply a brute fact. Questions like, 'what is the meaning of my life?', 'why is there something rather than nothing?', 'what's it all about?', and 'why am I here?', are the sorts of questions we invoke when considering meaningfulness and those same questions seem to be asking what is the reason, or purpose, of our life. And when we cannot find such reasons, or come to doubt such reasons exist, we naturally describe our lives as meaningless.⁴⁰ For these reasons, purpose theories arguably do the best job of capturing or explaining what we are concerned about during

⁴⁰ Mawson (2016) takes this observation in an interesting direction, arguing that this shows us that the concept of meaning is polyvalent.

moments of existential dread. The questions raised above are seen as being quintessentially existential in nature, and they seem to cry out for answers that are intelligible to us and explain where and how we fit into the ‘bigger picture’. Providing a reason for our existence would certainly go a great deal further at capturing many of these concerns than competitors.

The theoretical landscape for purpose theories is a proverbial smörgåsbord. For our aims, we can divide purpose theories into two camps, supernaturalism and naturalism.⁴¹ Supernaturalists claim that purpose which confers meaning must be grounded in the spiritual realm, e.g., God, souls, etc., whereas naturalism instead holds that the relevant type of purpose can be located in the natural world (Metz, 2013, pp. 79-82).

Quite arguably, supernaturalism about purpose has proved particularly compelling over the course of human history. There seems to be several reasons for this. First, supernaturalism fits neatly with our pre-theoretical intuition that for a life to be meaningful it must have been created for a reason. In other words, if a life were the product of accident, chance, or happenstance, then it is thought to be ipso facto meaningless (Cottingham, 2011; Craig, 1994/2013). Second, there is the pre-theoretical intuition that, for a life to be meaningful, the efforts of that life must last in perpetuity. If there is a God, i.e., an eternal and atemporal being, or if our souls are eternal, then the memory of our lives and their efforts would last forever. Craig appeals to both of these pre-theoretical intuitions in support of supernaturalism in dramatic fashion:

If each individual person passes out of existence when he dies, then what ultimate meaning can be given to his life? ... In the end it makes no difference whether the universe ever existed or not. ... The same is true of the human race. ... Mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of mosquitos or a barnyard of pigs, for their end is all the same. The same blind cosmic process that coughed them up in the first place will eventually swallow them all again. And the same is true of each individual person. The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race - all these come to nothing. This is the horror of modern man: because he ends in nothing, he is nothing. (Craig 1994, 2-3).

For theistic supernaturalists, it is widely held that the only type of purpose which confers meaning upon a life is that which is assigned by God, whether through his divine command and/or divine nature. Such views include the Thomist idea that we have some telos which involves knowing and being in a special relationship with God (Aquinas, 1975; Craig, 1994/2013; Poettcker, 2015; Tolstoy, 1983), that we are to adhere to objective moral rules or values which are

⁴¹ It should be noted that there is logical space for non-naturalism, i.e., theories which would hold that meaning is an abstract property which belongs neither to the spiritual realm or natural world. However, so far as I can see, this has had little attention paid to it (Metz, 2021). See (Audi, 2005).

intrinsic to God's nature (Cottingham, 2003, 2005; Craig, 1994/2013, pp. 161-167; Davis, 1987; Moreland, 1987, pp. 124-129), or that we have a unique, individual or group-specific purpose.⁴²

Naturalists deny any spiritual substance is necessary for meaning in life and instead ground it in the physical/material world.⁴³ We can divide naturalists into two sub-categories; subjective and objective. The vast majority of subjectivists ground purpose in the will of the person whose life it is (Ayer, 2000; Calhoun, 2018; Camus, 1955; Hooker, 2008; Luper, 2014; Nielsen, 1981; Sartre, 1946; Smart, 1999). However there is conceptual space for thinking that agents aside from the person whose life it is can assign meaning to a particular life, e.g., parents, community, or the state/nation one belongs to.

In contrast, objective naturalists maintain purpose is encoded or woven into reality. For example, one such view which has captured the imagination of some of the wider population would be biological Darwinism (Darwin, 1859/2008; Holland, 2009), which roughly holds that the purpose/meaning of a life (or all life) is to ensure the survival of its genes through reproduction. Another type of view which has received surprisingly scant attention within the literature about meaning in life are teleological or perfectionist views, such as that advanced by Aristotle (2000) or Confucius (2007). Such views hold that we, as humans, have some function which we are to perform, whether that be because of some essential characteristic or feature we have due to the type of entity we are or the role/place we have within a community or society.

Before going any further, I should highlight one obvious objection to purpose theories, which is that such theories can provide counterintuitive upshots when the purpose is either arbitrarily chosen or disvaluable. Such examples included counting blades of grass on a field (Rawls, 1971), consuming excrement (Wielenberg, 2005), memorising the dictionary (Wolf, 1997), or being caught in a vicious cycle (Wiggins, 1976). Positing such activities as the *purpose* of a life does little to sway us into thinking that such lives are meaningful, whether it be self-assigned or otherwise. For example, Sisyphus appears to be the quintessential case of a meaningless life; just because the gods assigned him the purpose of rolling the boulder does not result in his life becoming more meaningful when he engages in that activity.

⁴² The Abrahamic God assigns unique purposes to various persons and groups throughout scripture. For example, Moses was assigned the purpose of bringing the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10) while his brother, Aaron, was assigned by God to be Moses's prophet/spokesperson (Exodus 4:14-16), or the Jewish people as being his Chosen people (e.g., Deuteronomy 14:2, Exodus 19:5-6), or that we, a species, are commanded to "love each other as I [Jesus] have loved you" (John 15:12).

⁴³ I say this because there is conceptual space to maintain that fulfilling God's purpose to be sufficient for meaning in life, or that it would confer additional meaning, or that while fulfilling one's naturalistically grounded purpose would make one's life somewhat meaningful, doing so in addition to fulfilling God's would make one's life maximally meaningful. So far as I can tell, nobody defends any of these alternative positions. Purpose theorists, so far as I can tell, bet solely on one metaphysical horse.

One might think such an objection only rules out those purposes assigned by some agent, such as oneself or even God. But the considered objection also rules out certain objective views about purpose, such as biological Darwinism.⁴⁴ Whilst a popular view in at least some circles of contemporary culture, such a position does not hold up upon examination. That a life would be extremely meaningful simply because it had produced a thousand children without taking into consideration the quality of their lives (and their children's children, etc.) is highly counterintuitive.⁴⁵ These faults in biological Darwinism are most apparent when considering paradigm cases and existential angst. Even though Elizabeth I, Jesus of Nazareth, Nicola Tesla, Immanuel Kant, and Mother Teresa had no children, their lives still appear extremely meaningful. Indeed, questions about how many children they had seem irrelevant when evaluating the meaningfulness of their life. Biological Darwinism also fails to address and often exacerbates existential angst. When people are told the meaning/purpose of their life is to produce offspring, this is hardly a satisfying answer to what makes life meaningful, and the resulting emotions and thoughts can spiral into dark places.

5.2. The Anti-Meaning Objection

One pre-theoretical intuition we share about meaning holds that lives can be meaningful to varying degrees while, in the absence of such meaning, a life is meaningless. For example, Nelson Mandela seems to be a paradigm case of a meaningful life whereas Sisyphus appears to be a paradigm case of a meaningless life. And (again intuitively), there appears to be cases which land somewhere between those two extremes, such as a loving parent, a bohemian artist, or an avid baseball card collector. But what about the life of, say, an Adolf Hitler, a Joseph Stalin, or a Ted Bundy? Intuitively, such lives are not meaningful, but nor are they exactly meaningless either.⁴⁶ Rather, their lives appear to be antithetical to meaningfulness; their lives are not valuable according to this evaluative dimension, but rather disvaluable. Such lives seem to represent the negative counterpart of meaning, what the literature has come to call *anti-meaning* (Campbell & Nyholm, 2015; Di Paola, 2018, p. 128; Landau, 2011, pp. 316-317; Metz, 2002, pp. 805-807; 2012, p. 444; 2013, pp. 233-236; Morris, 1992, pp. 49-50; Munitz, 1993, pp. 89-93; Nozick, 1981,

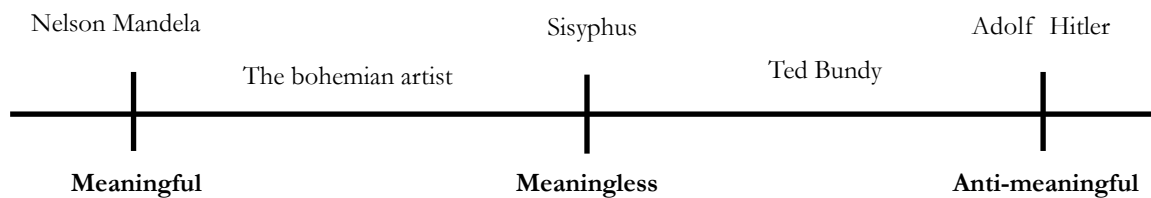
⁴⁴ This is just one way to take biological Darwinism; there are many who also take Darwinism to show that life (and the universe) is meaningless. Those who take this line endorse (without perhaps realising it) a theistic purpose theory about meaning in life, i.e., that for a life to be meaningful it must be created (non-accidentally) by a divine being who has some reason for that life existing. Given I have rejected that agency is needed for a life to be meaningful, and that meaning can also arise due to luck or chance, I am going to put aside this way of taking Darwinism. Below, I shall go into further argument for why God's purpose is not necessary or sufficient in life either. For further discussion, see (Aarssen, 2010; Holland, 2009; Ruse, 2019, pp. 97-132; Stewart-Williams, 2010, pp. 188-198)

⁴⁵ Even if those children (and their children's children, etc.) had good lives (i.e., high in well-being), it would be the fact that their lives are good, and not merely passing on one's genetics, which would confer meaning upon a life.

⁴⁶ This intuition may not be shared and I investigate this issue in earnest in the next chapter (chapter 6).

p. 612; Nyholm, 2021; Nyholm & Campbell, 2022; Persson & Savulescu, 2019, p. 229; Smuts, 2013).⁴⁷

Anti-meaning is that which stands in opposition to meaning, like immorality to morality, or ill-being to well-being. It is not merely the absence of the good, but rather the presence of the bad. For clarity, we can visually represent anti-meaning and how it relates to meaning and meaninglessness in the following manner:



In this section I argue that purpose theories are ill equipped to provide a satisfactory account of anti-meaning. While purpose theories can make sense of both meaning and meaninglessness and the degrees in which they appear to come in, it cannot make sense of anti-meaningful lives (and the extent to which a life can be anti-meaningful).

Now, one might be suspicious about the idea of anti-meaning, and use that to cut this objection off at the stem. One might, for example, follow Woodard (2017) and point out that the notion of anti-meaning does not seem to be part of our collective commonsense but is rather “self consciously revisionary” (2017, p. 73). Revisionist concepts, so the thought goes, should only be adopted if the costs of doing so are clearly outweighed by the benefits. But, Woodard claims, there is no reason to go beyond already existing concepts such as moral wrongs or badness to describe what is wrong with an action, such as burning down the Great Library of Alexandria or blowing up the Sphinx for fun. The commonsense ideas with regards to meaning in life are meaning and meaninglessness; a life either is meaningful or it is not.

Much of the above rejection of anti-meaning turns upon it being revisionist; but is it? I think there is good reason for thinking not. First, it seems intuitively clear that some actions can minimise the meaning of a life; that there is something, namely ‘anti-meaning’, which can serve as a defeater for meaning (Nyholm & Campbell, 2022, pp. 285-286). To illustrate, consider the life of Adolf Hitler. We can imagine that, even in light of the heinous actions he committed, he performed other actions which arguably did produce some good or beneficial consequences, such as making friends, sharing laughs with them, etc. Even granting this, we would not say his life is meaningful because of any good consequences he brought about. Why? Because it seems

⁴⁷ Other terms include ‘anti-matter’, ‘bad meaning’, ‘negative meaning’, and ‘sinister meaning’.

obvious that the bad consequences he is responsible for *defeat* any good consequences he might have produced through other actions; they minimise or erase any positive meaning which could be attributed to his life. That meaning can be reduced or erased suggests we have something like anti-meaning in our commonsense thinking.

One might say that this only gets us so far; that there is a defeater for meaning does not mean there is something called an anti-meaningful life. Can we not just say, then, that Hitler's life was meaningless without appealing to anti-meaning? I do not think so, for there seems to be an obvious difference between the 'meaninglessness' of Hitler's life and that of a person in an experience machine. The latter is abjectly meaningless while the former is not. Anti-meaning serves as a *counterforce* to meaning and provides a straightforward and intuitive way to account for the difference between Hitler's life and a meaningless one; his life was antithetical to meaning (Nyholm & Campbell, 2022, pp. 286-289). So while I can agree the word 'anti-meaning' does not quite roll off the tongue, it certainly seems to be a concept within our commonsense understanding of meaning in life and one which does significant work when we evaluate the meaning of a life.

So, what then would be anti-meaningful according to purpose theories? In their brief discussion of aim-achievement theories, which would fall under 'purpose' theories as I understand them here, Campbell & Nyholm (2015, p. 700) state that anti-meaning would, "consist in the failure to achieve one's central aims. A lack of any central aims entails meaninglessness, whereas frustration of said aims constitutes anti-meaning". The idea here is that purpose theory will hold that satisfying or fulfilling some end will confer meaning upon a life, whilst failing to satisfy that end will result in anti-meaning. So, for example, if one's purpose were to be an astronaut but one's efforts were frustrated (i.e., failed to become an astronaut) or simply did not work towards achieving that purpose, then one's life would not be merely meaningless, but worse, anti-meaningful.

But describing lives which fail to fulfil their purpose as anti-meaningful is, I think, overblown. Consider again the would-be astronaut; suppose they worked to tick all the boxes required to qualify but, in the end, failed to be selected for training and life forced their hand to pursue other endeavours. It does not seem the would-be astronaut's frustrated goals add any negative value *qua* meaning to their life, i.e., anti-meaning. Rather, it seems more intuitive to say that in having their purpose frustrated, they simply failed to add meaning to their life. In simpler terms, the would-be astronaut's life is meaningless. For clarity, compare the life of the failed astronaut to Hitler or Ted Bundy; it does not seem the would-be astronaut's life is comparably anti-meaningful when compared to these bona fide cases of anti-meaningful lives.

So if failing to achieve one's end or goal does not confer anti-meaning, what would? Intuitively, anti-meaning for a purpose theory would require its being the antithesis of the purpose or end of the goal itself, rather than merely failing to achieve one's purpose. Understanding anti-meaning for purpose this way is also consistent with how we intuitively understand anti-meaning for other families of theories. Merely failing to bring about good consequences is not enough to confer anti-meaning, as that just fails to confer meaning. For example, asymmetric welfarism offers us a clear example of what we should expect anti-meaning to be, i.e., making lives worse for other welfare subjects.

With this in mind, we can begin to see a problem for purpose theories, which is that only some of them can provide an account for anti-meaning. If we consider the would-be astronaut again, what precisely is antithetical to being an astronaut? What would count as working against such a purpose? It is not entirely clear if there is, or even could be, one. Perhaps spending one's time on a project other than one's purpose confers anti-meaning, but intuitively that does not seem quite right. If the would be astronaut chooses to spend their efforts on football instead, failing to achieve their purpose under such conditions does not seem to confer anti-meaning either; it is, again, simply the absence of meaning. What we need is something antithetical to the goal itself.

Perhaps the example of becoming an astronaut is too specific and what is required is something more abstract or general. For example, it might not be becoming an astronaut that confers meaning per se, but rather being one is sufficient to satisfy the actual purpose of a life, which could be something as abstract as engaging in creative endeavours (R. Taylor, 1987), or the pursuit of knowledge (Reginster, 2004), the development of a fundamental condition of human existence (Metz, 2013, pp. 222-239), or something they love (Frankfurt, 1982).

The problem, however, is that it is still unclear what is antithetical to even these types of abstracts. What is the opposite of creative endeavours, knowledge, the fundamental condition of human existence, or loving something? To illuminate this point, consider Kagan's (2014) exploration of ill-being (i.e., that which is antithetical to well-being). There, Kagan (2014, pp. 272-276) reflects upon Parfit's (1987, p. 499) proposed list of possible prudential goods which include (to name but a few) moral goodness, development of one's abilities, and knowledge, while possible prudential bads include being betrayed, enjoying sadistic pleasure, and being deprived of liberty and dignity. For our use, we can suppose that instead of being prudential goods that those items are instead proposed purposes; that the purpose of a life is to be morally good, developing one's abilities, etc. Kagan notes two points which work just as well here. First, it is ambiguous as to the relationship between these goods and bad and how, if at all, they pair up. Second, it is unclear what counts as being antithetical to a given good in this context; if the

purpose of a life is knowledge, then what would make that life anti-meaningful? Ignorance? False beliefs?

Of course, some cases seem more obvious than others; hate seems antithetical to love, likewise suffering/pain appear antithetical to happiness/pleasure. So maybe the purpose theorist could account for anti-meaning so long as they proposed purposes which had such opposites. Take, for example, purpose-asymmetric welfarism about meaning in life, i.e., the view that the purpose of a life is to protect/promote the well-being of other welfare subjects. On such a view, anti-meaning would be harming/minimising the well-being of others. Looking at it in this way, it would seem purpose theories do have a viable way of accounting for anti-meaning.

But this manoeuvre does purpose theories no good. For now it is obvious that it is not purpose which accounts for anti-meaning, but rather the value of the purpose in question. As should be clear from the given example, a theory about meaning in life can provide an adequate account of anti-meaning without making any appeal to purpose whatsoever, so long as the value is of the right kind (i.e., that which has an antithesis). Purpose is doing no theoretical or explanatory work to account for anti-meaning; it does not add anything to help account for anti-meaning.

Purpose, ironically, turn out to be pointless as it is parasitic to value when trying to account for anti-meaning. We started by thinking about what, if anything, would count as being antithetical to purpose, with the natural candidate being failing to achieve one's purpose. But if failing to achieve one's end is the antithesis of meaning, it seemed an inadequate explanation of anti-meaning. The reason being because failing to achieve one's purpose does not appear to add anything of negative value to a life (with take away anything meaningful from a life), but merely fails to add anything of positive value. In other words, having one's aims frustrated simply fails to confer meaning, rather than add anti-meaningfulness to it. We considered whether it was the project itself that can help purpose theories account for anti-meaning, but we found two problems. First, that it is not at all obvious that possible purposes even have an antithesis, such as being an astronaut, an artist, or pursuing knowledge. Second, it appeared to be the value itself which accounted for anti-meaning, leaving purpose itself inert. What I have shown through the anti-meaning objection is the theoretical inadequacy of purpose theories. Regardless of how one cashes out purpose, it fails to provide a fully satisfactory explanation of what is anti-meaningful.

5.3. The Epistemic Objection

In this section I advance the epistemic objection against the purpose condition. Roughly, the epistemic objection maintains that knowledge (of lack thereof) about the purpose of a life (if it even has one) does not alter our intuitions or judgements about the meaningfulness of a life. We

can make clear intuitive judgements about the meaning of a life without knowing the purpose of that life or if it fulfilled it. But even if we did know what that purpose was, that would not change our judgement. If this is right, then purpose does not appear to be relevant for meaning in life.

For the sake of clarity, let me reiterate how purpose is supposed to work. First, for a life to have the capacity for meaningfulness it must have a purpose and, second, that same life is conferred meaning only insofar as it achieves said purpose. If this is the case, then not knowing the purpose of a life would cause us to either be unable to make judgements about the meaning of a life, or suspend/withdraw said judgements until such a time where we learned that purpose, assuming the life in question even had one.

With that in mind, let us reconsider paradigm cases; those lives which we intuitively hold to be the best examples of the concept we aim to investigate. When it comes to meaning in life, we can identify three classes: meaningful, meaningless, and anti-meaningful lives. To remind, here is a small example of those found throughout the literature and this thesis:

Paradigm Cases

Meaningful Lives	Meaningless Lives	Anti-Meaningful Lives
Marthin Lurther King Jr.	Someone in an experience machine	Adolf Hitler
Nelson Mandela	The grinning excrement eater	Joseph Stalin
Mother Teresa	The couch potato	Pol Pot
Marie Curie	The grass counter	Ted Bundy
Pablo Picasso	Sisyphus	Mao Zedong

Now, in order to decide which lives are paradigm cases of any of the above categories, we arguably need to know *something* about their lives to make a judgement. Presumably, if we do not know who Nelson Mandela was, what he did, or his life story, it seems we would be agnostic as to the meaning of his life. In other words, we seem to need to know certain features about a life in order to make a judgement about its meaningfulness (or lack thereof).

For the purpose theorist, the reason why Mandela’s life was highly meaningful was because his life had a purpose and he achieved it. The different conceptions of purpose address this point in various ways. The subjective naturalist can say Mandela assigned himself a purpose and that we know, or can infer, what that purpose was by observing both Mandela’s words and actions throughout his life. The supernaturalist, likewise, could claim that God assigned such a purpose to Mandela’s life, or that his actions and projects contained within them, or led to fulfilling, that

God-assigned purpose. The objective naturalist could plausibly say that Mandela cultivated virtue and lived well.

While the above responses might hold some intuitive weight, I think appeals to purpose quickly crumble when probed. I fear that no purpose theory can provide an adequate response to the two following observations. First, we do not know if Mandela's life even had a purpose which could confer meaning, let alone what that purpose may or may not have been. Yet, even without this knowledge, we do not suspend our judgement about the meaningfulness of his life and nor do we retract said judgement once we realise we lack such knowledge. Second, purpose theories struggle to make sense of our intuitions involving counterfactuals about purpose and paradigm cases. If we suppose there were some alternative purpose which Mandela's life had but he failed to achieve it, we do not think his life meaningless (let alone anti-meaningful); his life seems just as meaningful as ever.

I will begin with the first; that our lack of knowledge about the purpose of a life (if it even has one) does not appear to be a relevant input when judging the meaningfulness of a life. Consider the paradigm cases (you can even list a few yourself and add them to the different categories) and ask yourself: 'did I even consider what the purpose of their life was? And, assuming I could find an answer to that question, did I consider how well, if at all, they achieved that purpose?' The answer to both questions, I believe, is a resounding 'no'. Of all the information we deem relevant to making an informed judgement as to the meaning of a life, it turns out that purpose does not register as being of any importance.

One obvious objection is that we do refer to the purpose of a life when judging paradigm cases; we look at what projects that person undertook and then infer from those facts that the purpose of their life must have been whatever end those projects aimed at or were involved in. For example, Pablo Picasso and Ludwig van Beethoven both appear to be paradigm cases of meaningful lives. They also, like the already listed paradigm cases above, dedicated their lives to some project, in their cases, artistic endeavours. From these observations we infer what the purpose of their life was; for Picasso, artistic exploration through painting, drawing, etc., while for Beethoven it was through music. After all, one might wonder, why else would someone dedicate themselves to such projects unless it were the purpose of their lives, whether self-selected or otherwise?

There are, however, serious problems with the above response, namely, that inferring the purpose of a life by observing patterns which characterise a life is not obviously the way we know what the purpose of a life is. There is first the problem of something like a naturalistic or is-ought fallacy; just because some thing works towards goal *G*, it does not follow that *G* is the purpose of that thing. This objection is most obvious when considering Aristotle's conception

of the good and how we come to know it; that because eyes see that it must be the purpose of an eye to see, or that because an acorn turns into an oak that it must be the purpose of an acorn to become an oak. The same problem holds for inferring the purpose of a life by observing actions: just because a life works towards *G* does not mean *G* is the purpose of that life.

Now a purpose theorist might object here by pointing out that the above objection turns upon theory specifics. They might, for example, suggest that the passionate pursuit of an interest to the point of great personal or moral sacrifice is sufficient enough for something to count as a purpose. It is, admittedly, highly unlikely that someone would dedicate themselves the way Mandela or Marie Curie did to their life projects unless they were deeply passionate about them. The problem with this objection, however, is that it is not clear if being passionate about something is what makes some end one's purpose, let alone the type of purpose which confers meaning. My passionate interest in learning Book I of Bach's *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* does not make it my life's purpose (it does not even make it *a* purpose). Even still, I could lack that same passion for another project and still consider that project my purpose; I might not be as passionate about writing philosophy as I am about painting miniature tabletop models or playing piano, but can still recognise the former as my purpose, while the latter two are merely pleasurable pursuits.

Let us continue to the second problem: that counterfactuals about one's purpose, or lack thereof, do not change our intuitive judgements about cases. If we suppose some alternative purpose to Mandela's life and that he failed to achieve it, we would not think his life meaningless (let alone anti-meaningful) in light of that; his life would appear just as meaningful as before. For example, we can imagine instantiations of Mandela's life in which his purpose is different from what we believe it to be, or that he had no purpose at all, or that we are unable to come to an unanimous agreement about his purpose. Would we be comfortable with surrendering our judgement that his life was highly meaningful in these instantiations, or worse still, declare his life meaningless in light of them?

Consider again the alternative world in which we discovered Nelson Mandela's secret diary in which he wrote that his life's purpose was to become a world renowned boxer. Throughout this imagined diary, Mandela describes that politics only began as a hobby or interest, but that he soon found himself swept up in it with social pressure to commit, and stay committed, to freeing South Africa from apartheid, which was so overwhelming that he could not withdraw from it. We can imagine further that even though he was glad he did much good during his life, he laments that he never became a world renowned boxer; it is a life regret in which he writes he never recovered. For the sake of argument, let us stipulate that Mandela's purpose was to become a world renowned boxer and that the purpose was formed under the ideal conditions for

whatever way one grounds purpose. In this counterfactual, Mandela's life had a purpose, but he failed to achieve it, instead becoming the first black president of South Africa and transitioned his nation out of apartheid. If purpose theories are right, then it would seem we would have to admit that Mandela's life was ultimately meaningless because he failed to realise his purpose. Such a result, I submit, strikes us as highly counterintuitive.

The epistemic argument provides us with grounds for rejecting purpose theories, for it seems we need not know the purpose of a life to judge how meaningful that life is. And even if we did, it does not appear informative. If purpose were important for meaning, then we would have to suspend our judgements about the meaningfulness of a life, including paradigm cases. We would have to withdraw our judgements about the meaningfulness, or lack thereof, for paradigm cases such as Nelson Mandela and the mythical Sisyphus. But giving up our judgements about paradigm cases seems to surrender too much.

A purpose theorist might try and get around the epistemic objection by arguing that, at best, it only shows that purpose is not a necessary condition for meaning in life. Purpose might still be a sufficient condition for meaning in life. For example, one might suggest that satisfying one's biological purpose by having children, in accordance to biological Darwinism, would be sufficient to make one's life meaningful, though it is hardly necessary for a life to be meaningful.

This manoeuvre fails because simply achieving one's purpose does not appear to even confer meaning upon a life, let alone serve as a sufficient condition. For example, consider Bart and Lisa, who both spend their time counting the same blades of grass on the same football field for their entire lives. Intuitively, their lives are meaningless; the activity of counting blades of grass confers no meaning upon their lives. Importantly, both their lives are equally meaningless. However, imagine if counting blades of grass were the purpose of Bart's life (while for Lisa it was not). If so, then successfully counting grass would make Bart's life meaningful. Such a result, however, is highly counterintuitive. Indeed, Bart's life is not even made slightly more meaningful when compared to Lisa's when they both perform the same task even when it is his purpose and not hers. So not only does purpose not appear sufficient, it does not even appear to contribute meaning.

Of course, one might disagree, suggesting that the Bart and Lisa cases mischaracterise the type of purposes which confer meaning. So how do we characterise purpose? I think when we think about purpose (at least those which we intuitively think confer meaning) we consider it to either have or involve certain elements which we deem valuable. For example, purpose often involves promoting the good, engaging with objective value, being free of vicious cycles and instead engaging in self-propagating goals (Bradford, 2022), perfecting a fundamental part of our human nature, being fulfilled, or confirming or realising our value system. Having a real bona

fide purpose often looks to involve these, or be constituted by them. If making other welfare subjects better off were Kevin's purpose, and he worked at a charity helping the disenfranchised, then he would arguably be fulfilling his purpose which, according to the view in question, would make his life sufficiently meaningful.

An observant reader will note that this move is not so different from that made against the anti-meaning objection. But as I showed, there is a clear gap between purpose and value, and that gap holds for the epistemic objection too. Kevin's life is intuitively meaningful (to at least some degree), but it is not evident that it is so because he is fulfilling his purpose, even if his purpose has value. Can we not just have these other things without purpose? What precisely does purpose do here? The answer, I suggest, is nothing.

For example, suppose Kevin's partner, Britney, also works at the same charity helping the disenfranchised. However, unlike her partner, her life has no purpose. They perform the exact same activities, working to improve the lives of others and produce the same amount of good. The only difference is that doing so is Kevin's purpose while for Britney, it is not. Given these stipulations we would expect at least some discrepancy between the meaningfulness of their lives. If purpose were relevant, we would expect Kevin's life to appear more meaningful than Britney's. Yet, I submit, this is not the case; both lives appear equally meaningful.

The epistemic argument provides us with grounds for rejecting purpose theories, for it seems we need not know the purpose of a life to judge how meaningful (or meaningless) that life is. Yet, even if we did know, it does not appear informative. If purpose were relevant but we did not know it, we would suspend or withdraw our judgements about the meaningfulness of a life, including paradigm cases; we would be agnostic as to the meaning of Nelson Mandela or Sisyphus's life. Yet even if we did know the purpose of a life, that does not appear to matter either. When a life does not achieve its purpose we do not think it less meaningful for doing so. And even if it did achieve its purpose, we do not think that makes that life meaningful. Giving up our judgements about paradigm cases is not just counterintuitive, but also seems to surrender too much, as we would be rejecting some of the very grounds which brought us to consider the purpose theories in the first place.

5.4. The Purposeful Life

Thus far I have put forth two objections against purpose theories which show their inadequacy. Regardless of the strength of these objections, there appears to be no obvious explanation as to why purpose theories have proven so attractive. Given how widespread and appealing purpose has been across the metaphysical landscape (from supernaturalists and theists to naturalists and atheists, etc.), there must be something both significant and valuable about it.

The issue, it seems to me, is that while the objections provide grounds for rejecting purpose theories, they do not, by themselves, weaken our intuitions about the relationship between purpose and meaning in life.

In this section, I aim to resolve the aforementioned issue by showing how intuitions and judgements which drive purpose are best understood as tracking a distinct evaluative dimension of a life, which is purpose. A purposeful life is that which has and achieves its purpose. A purposeful life is another unique and distinct evaluative dimension different from not just meaning but other evaluative dimensions argued for in this thesis. To help explain why we think purpose is relevant to meaning, I develop an invisible-hand explanation, namely, that we superimpose a purpose over a life we judge meaningful then mistakenly think fulfilling that purpose to be the thing which conferred meaning. But such meaningfulness, and any patterns of behaviour which confers it, can be explained without needing to refer to teleological reasoning.

I have already noted that when we identify a life as meaningful, we also attribute to it, or infer it has, a purpose. And we seem to do so even when we do not know what the purpose of that life actually is, or might be (assuming it had one at all). When we consider the life of Nelson Mandela, we think the purpose of his life to be the thing which characterises or is noteworthy about his life. Arguably, the most noteworthy thing about Mandela's life was that he ended apartheid in South Africa. From here, we then infer that the purpose of his life was to 'end apartheid in South Africa' to explain the fact that he ended apartheid in South Africa; our error is that we think it is not the states-of-affairs or the consequences that follow them which confer meaning, but rather the fulfilment or achievement of this superimposed purpose.

Humans, however, have a long and storied history of mistakenly attributing purpose where there is none. The most obvious case are teleological arguments for the existence of God (Ratzsch & Koperski, 2022). Roughly, these arguments, as the name implies, attempt to show (or at least provide us with good reason for thinking) God exists by pointing out that the complex nature of the universe is highly unlikely to be the product of chance but, rather, of intelligent *purposeful* design. Arguably the most famous version of such arguments is Paley's watchmaker analogy:

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that, for any thing I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to shew the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer I had before given, that, for any thing I knew, the watch might have always been there. ... There must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use (Paley, 2006, pp. 7-8).

Teleological arguments, such as Paley's watchmaker analogy, have lost much of their potency in an increasingly secular world. This seems to be primarily because of our growing understanding of the empirical world and the comprehensive naturalist theories explaining it. The most obvious example of such advancement is found in Darwin's (1859/2008) *On The Origins of Species* where he explains how a blind and unpredictable system can produce complex life forms which give the misleading appearance of having been designed. After Nozick (and so after Adam Smith), we can call such explanations *invisible-hand explanations*: "they show how some overall pattern or design, which one would have thought had to be produced by an individual's or groups successful attempt to realise the pattern, instead was produced and maintained by a process that in no way had the overall pattern or design 'in mind'," (Nozick, 1974, p. 18).

To be clear, the point here is that we often misattribute purpose where there is none; we see a pattern or a set of outcomes and assume that they could only come about by design. I think this misattribution is a significant contributor as to why we think purpose is identical to meaning. When we judge a life as meaningful we construct a narrative about it which presupposes that the purpose of that life was to achieve the very state-of-affairs which makes that life noteworthy. But as I have argued, we do not actually know whether bringing about said state-of-affairs was the purpose of that life; it could have done so by accident, or had a different purpose, or no purpose at all. This invisible-hand explanation provides us with a debunking argument against purpose theories, diagnosing and explaining why we confuse purpose and meaning.

I should like to note that the invisible-hand argument does not mean that lives do not, or cannot, have a purpose. Nor does the above rule out that a purpose is what motivated a person to act this way or that, characterising their lives with a pattern of actions which we deem meaningful. Rather, the dispute is whether purpose makes a life meaningful, rather than being something that just overlaps with or accompanies meaning. It is this final claim which I have argued for in this chapter, not necessarily the two former. Intuitively at least, the odds of someone making their life meaningful the way Nelson Mandela or Marie Curie did is highly unlikely to be the case unless they were guided by some goal. Even if we were to settle the debate as to what type of purpose is the correct type, it does not appear to matter; purpose is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning in life.

I should clarify that divorcing purpose from meaning does not, on its own, denigrate the value of purpose. Even if purpose does not make life meaningful, we still want our lives to be purposeful. Purpose can cure, or at least inure, us against some of the more troublesome aspects of existential dread and the emotional and psychological toll such anxiety can have; purpose can give us hope about our future and what we will do with our time (Calhoun, 2018, pp. 46-89; Cholbi, 2022). Whether we learn of, find, create, or assign it, purpose provides us with a reason

for being. As rational animals, it seems we cannot help but need reasons, and purpose (or perhaps the mere perception of purpose) can be enough to make sense of our life and the events which occur in it. Having a purpose often contextualises our actions, events, and life when taken as a totality, into an intelligible, coherent, and understandable narrative.⁴⁸ In this way at least, purpose can help make sense of the ‘meaning’ of a life in terms of intelligibility rather than in terms of value. Yet, when a life is purposeless, we struggle to understand why things are the way they are; the world becomes, in some very real sense, incomprehensible.

Our intuitions about purpose are best understood as tracking just that: purpose. A purposeful life, I submit, just is a life which has the right kind of purpose. Of course, it is an open question as to what grounds purpose such that it is the ‘right’ kind. I might assign you the goal (or command) of giving this thesis an outstanding review, but that clearly would not be a legitimate grounds for purpose; it would not be the kind of purpose which makes your life purposeful. Would God’s commands do so, or even self commands? Do the purposes need to be of a certain kind, such as long term projects, open ended goals, or objectively valuable rather than fleeting or frivolous? These are interesting questions for the purpose theorist, but fall outside of the scope of this thesis.

5.5. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, this chapter has considered a family of theories I called purpose theories. Purpose theories are united by their shared view that purpose plays a fundamental role in the meaning of a life. I argued this was not the case, providing two objections for thinking so: the anti-meaning objection and the epistemic objection. The anti-meaning objection showed that purpose theories struggle with accounting for anti-meaning, i.e., that value which is antithetical to meaning. Purpose theories provide inadequate explanations for anti-meaning because their proposals produce either counterintuitive results or unsatisfying answers (if they can provide any answer at all).

The epistemic objection showed that we need not know the purpose of a life, or lack thereof, to render judgements about the meaningfulness of a life. This point was given particular clarity when considering paradigm cases; it is intuitively clear to us which lives are the most meaningful and meaningless, even when we do not know the purpose of their lives. Yet, even if we did know that purpose, it would not change our intuitive judgements about them.

I ended by marshalling an invisible-hand explanation as to why we mistakenly think purpose has a relationship to meaning in life. When we judge a life to be meaningful because of some

⁴⁸ These above observations suggest an important relationship between purpose and intelligibility. Interestingly, intelligibility is becoming a growing family of theories about meaning in life in their own right (Repp, 2018; Seachris, 2019; Thomas, 2019b). For further discussion, see (Landau, 2021).

noteworthy feature of that life, we misattribute a purpose to that life, namely, that it is the purpose of that life to bring about said feature. We then mistakenly think that the feature only confers meaning upon a life because we think it the purpose of that life. But it is the noteworthy feature itself, not purpose, which confers meaning; and that noteworthy feature could have been brought about for other reasons aside designs. Purpose is best understood as a unique evaluative dimension in its own right, rather than being interchangeable with, identical to, or a constituent of, meaning. A purposeful life is important for a various reasons, including ailing existential woes, giving life direction, and helping impose intelligibility upon our lives.

6. Significance & Morality

As we have seen throughout this thesis, one popular way of informing, developing, and critiquing a theory about meaning in life is by compiling a list of paradigm cases, i.e., lives which we pre-theoretically hold to be the most meaningful lives (if any lives can be). In doing so we can investigate what common denominator, or denominators, exist between them which would vindicate our intuitions about them. One class of lives which are cited as highly meaningful are those of ‘moral saints’, i.e., individuals whose lives are characterised by moral actions.⁴⁹ Examples of moral saints often cited as paradigm cases of meaningful lives include Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela. Such observations have lead many to draw the conclusion that morality serves as either a necessary or sufficient condition for meaning in life.

Yet there is another class of lives antithetical to moral saints which causes a schism in our collective pre-theoretical intuitions: *moral monsters*, i.e., individuals whose lives are characterised by immoral action. Consider the following:

Moral Monster: Ioseb loses interest in school and becomes enamoured with politics after reading Chernyshevsky’s *What Is To Be Done?* At fifteen, he becomes an avowed Marxist after reading *Das Kapital*, and later joins Vladimir Lenin, who eventually leads a successful political revolution. After Lenin passes away, Ioseb - now Joseph Stalin - becomes de facto leader of Soviet Russia at forty-six. Stalin’s rule proves to be devastating for the people of the USSR, with mass repression, ethnic cleansing, wide-scale deportation, hundreds of thousands of executions, and famines which resulted in the deaths of millions. He passes away peacefully in bed at age seventy-four.

Can the life of a moral monster be meaningful? Did Stalin live a meaningful life and, if so, how meaningful was it? Our answers to these questions are unlikely to converge because we do not seem to have a shared intuition about the relationship between morality and meaning in life. For some, Stalin’s life was not meaningful because of his immoral actions (Cottingham, 2003, p. 28; Ignieski, 2016; Loudon, 2013; Mawson, 2018, pp. 234-235; Mintoff, 2008; P. Singer, 1995, p. 259; Wolf, 2010), while for others his life is or could be meaningful because morality is irrelevant to meaning (Edwards, 2000; James, 1895; J. Kekes, 2000; Sartre, 1946). Either way we develop a theory about meaning in life and its relationship with morality will produce undesirable results. If a theory about meaning claims morality is important for meaning, it will be rejected by those

⁴⁹ I take ‘moral saints’ from Wolf (1982).

who think moral monsters live meaningful lives. On the other hand, if a theory claims morality is irrelevant for meaning in life, it will be rejected by those who think moral monsters live meaningless lives. So what is the relationship between morality and meaning in life, and how might we resolve our disagreements to the satisfaction of all?

In this chapter I chart a course between Scylla and Charybdis by arguing that both sides are partially right but for the wrong reasons. My position is that moral monsters do not live meaningful lives but not because of immoral actions per se, but rather because of the consequences of their actions, namely, causing harm and suffering. Morality, I shall argue, does not confer meaning upon a life. Those who maintain that morality is relevant to meaning in life have confused the cause (moral action) with the effect (consequences). And those who maintain that the life of a moral monster can be meaningful have confused meaning with a closely related evaluative dimension, significance. Asymmetric welfarism, I shall show, dovetails neatly with this position.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I begin (§6.1.) by providing the relevant background information including how morality is understood within the literature, the types of lives cited as paradigm cases, and an overview of the theoretical landscape with regards to the position one might take on the relationship between morality and meaning. I then argue (§6.2.) that moral monsters do not live meaningful lives, but not because of immorality. Morality itself does not confer meaning, but has the appearance of doing so because moral actions often cause good consequences, namely, promoting or protecting the well-being of other welfare subjects. Yet it is the consequences, not the actions themselves, which determine the meaning of a life. Only cases in which morality does promote or protect the welfare of others do we think it confers meaning, and in cases where it does not, or minimises well-being, we think it meaningless.

I end by arguing (§6.3.) that those who hold that moral monsters can live meaningful lives have confused meaningfulness with significance. Significance, like meaning, is determined by impacts upon others, but with the difference between them being that significance is conferred regardless of whether that impact be for good or ill. I bolster the plausibility of my position by pointing out that if immorality really did confer meaning, then it would result in the counterintuitive upshot that choosing the life of a moral monster would be both a praiseworthy and choiceworthy thing to do. While becoming a moral monster does not seem to be a way of making one's life meaningful, it does appear to be a legitimate way to make one's life significant.

6.1. Paradigm Cases and the Theoretical Landscape

There are three basic points which we need a grasp of to move forward. First, a working definition of morality, second, a recapitulation of paradigm cases and their role within the literature, and third, an overview of the theoretical landscape with regards to the different hypotheses about the relationship between morality and meaning in life. The purpose of this section is address these points.

To begin, we should understand talk of ‘morality’ and ‘moral action’ within this context as both wide and far-reaching, i.e., not specific to any particular conception of morality or ethical theory. In this way, we should understand morality as a collective term, that it contains ‘being moral’, ‘performing moral/ethical actions’, ‘ethical behaviour’, ‘good works’, ‘doing good’, ‘being good’, ‘rightness’, ‘virtue’ etc. We should also understand the domains of morality are threefold: (i) actions categorically demanded in accordance to impartiality, (ii) duties typical of personal relations, and (iii) supererogatory actions (Kipke & Rüter, 2019, p. 228). It is important we recognise morality and moral actions in this wider common-sense way because, as we shall soon see, the purported relationship between morality and meaning in life is not thought to be theory specific. That is, the view is not that moral actions confer meaning upon a life if by ‘moral’ we mean under some particular theory (e.g., Kantian, utilitarian, virtue theory, etc.). Rather, the view is that whatever ethical theory turns out to be correct will be compatible with whatever particular hypothesis about the relationship between meaning and morality one champions.

Second, let us reconsider paradigm cases; those cases in which we intuitively hold to be exemplars of meaningful or meaningless lives. Within both this thesis and the literature, paradigm cases have been pivotal and indispensable for developing and critiquing theories about meaning. Given how vital they are, it matters a great deal that we get them right or, at the very least, come to a collective agreement about them. Below I describe the types of paradigm cases I have used throughout this thesis and, for the sake of this chapter, divided them along moral lines:

Paradigm Cases: Meaningful Lives

Moral	Non-moral	Immoral
Martin Luther King Jr.	Marie Curie	Pablo Picasso
Mahatma Gandhi	Albert Einstein	Richard Wagner
Nelson Mandela	Vincent Van Gogh	Caravaggio
Harriet Tubman	Wolfgang Amodeus Mozart	William Shockley
Mother Teresa	Ella Fitzgerald	Richard James Arthur Berry

Paradigm Cases: Meaningless Lives

Immoral	Non-moral
Adolf Hitler	Someone in an experience machine
Joseph Stalin	The grinning excrement eater
Pol Pot	The couch potato
Caligula	The grass counter
Ted Bundy	The bored aristocrat

But are these cases accurate? Would such a list even be *widespread* amongst us? There may be good reasons for thinking not, with one reason being because of the differing views we have as to the relationship between morality and meaning. On the one hand, one might argue these cases *overstate* the role of morality. On the other hand, one might argue these cases *understate* the role of morality.

To give this clarity, consider a problematic case such as Pablo Picasso. Picasso's artistic contributions and the legacy he left behind are significant and he engaged in life projects which he deeply cared about. Regardless of theoretical commitments, Picasso is a prime candidate of a paradigm case of a meaningful life. That said, Picasso was a highly immoral person; he is widely recognised as a womaniser and a misogynist who treated the people (particularly women) in his life cruelly and callously.⁵⁰ What are our intuitions about the meaningfulness of Picasso's life? Well, some may hold that Picasso's life is *disqualified* as being meaningful because of his immoral actions. Others could maintain his life was meaningful *despite* his immorality. While others still might think Picasso's life is meaningful precisely *because* of his immorality.

Finally, we need an understanding of the theoretical landscape with regards to the relationship between morality and meaning. What we find, it turns out, is a proverbial smörgåsbord. We might think that the only way to live a meaningful life is by characterising one's life with moral action. Or we could instead opt for a weaker claim, arguing that morality is either a necessary or sufficient condition for meaning in life. How we might cash out or understand those conditions varies (Kipke & Rüter, 2019). With regards to necessary conditions, we could maintain either (a) for a life to be meaningful it must pass a threshold of moral action (Igneski, 2016), or (b) that to count as meaningful it must not cross a threshold of immoral actions (Cottingham, 2003, p. 28; Landau, 2011; Loudon, 2013; Metz, 2013, pp. 234-235). With regards to sufficient conditions, it

⁵⁰ Picasso is quoted by one of his mistresses as saying that, 'women are machines for suffering' and that, 'there are only two kinds of women: goddesses and doormats. Additionally, in *Picasso, My Grandfather*, Marina Picasso wrote of his treatment of women: "he submitted them to his animal sexuality, tamed them, bewitched them, ingested them, and crushed them onto his canvas. After he had spent many nights extracting their essence he would dispose of them, bled dry. Like a vampire at dawn."

could be that a life can be meaningful if it either passes a certain threshold of moral actions (Landau, 2011; Metz, 2013, pp. 227-229; Mintoff, 2008; P. Singer, 1995, p. 259), or does not cross a threshold of immoral actions. A third option is to concede that morality is neither necessary nor sufficient, but can still contribute to meaning in life when supplemented with the relevant element, whether it be some subjective element (Wolf, 2010, 2016), such as caring about or engaging with morality, or some objective element, such as caring relations (Baggini, 2004; Eagleton, 2007, pp. 164-173), discovering scientific truths (Smith, 1997, p. 213), or artistic endeavours (R. Taylor, 1987).

We could instead position ourselves on the other side, i.e., that moral actions are irrelevant to meaning in life. While such a view is not explicitly fought for in the literature, we can identify some who implicitly endorse it or have views which are at least compatible with it. Both Kekes and Edwards can be read as accepting that morality is irrelevant to meaning in life, or at least being sympathetic towards such a position. For example, Kekes (2000, p. 30) writes, “that immoral lives may be meaningful is shown by the countless dedicated Nazi or Communist mass murderers”, while Edwards thinks:

Although frequently when people say about somebody that his life has or had meaning, they evidently regard this as a good thing, this is not invariably the case ... as long as I was a convinced Nazi (or communist or Christian or whatever) my life had meaning, my acts had a zest with which I have not been able to invest them since, and yet most of my actions were extremely harmful (Edwards, 2000, p. 144).

That said, any theory about meaning in life which does not adopt one of the previously outlined positions would, I think, be compatible with the view that morality is irrelevant to meaning (e.g., (Ayer, 1990; Calhoun, 2018; Frankfurt, 1982; Sartre, 1946)). Alternatively, we could hold the counterintuitive view that morality either minimises meaning, or that immorality enhances it. While not represented in the contemporary literature, both Nietzsche (1887/2006) and Rand (1957/1999, 1964) could arguably be interpreted as holding such a view, if we understand ‘morality’ and ‘moral action’ in the commonsense pre-theoretical way I have described above.

Let me put my own cards on the table. My view is that morality is irrelevant when determining the meaning of a life. Performing moral actions does not confer meaning on a life and nor does performing immoral actions reduce it. Morality is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning, and neither does it contribute additional meaning when accompanied by the relevant elements. For brevity, we can call this position the *irrelevance thesis*. So, I endorse the irrelevance thesis. However, I also want to say that moral monsters, such as Stalin or Hitler, lived meaningless lives. I believe asymmetric welfarism resolves this dilemma in a highly plausible and satisfactory manner. In brief, what I shall argue for is this: there are two evaluative dimensions

which markedly overlap with meaningfulness, those being morality and significance. Morality overlaps with meaningfulness because moral actions, being pro-social/altruistic, often promote or protect the well-being of other welfare subjects, while immoral actions often do the opposite. Significance overlaps with meaningfulness because significance is also measured by the aggregate quantity of impact a life has on the well-being of others, but cares not whether it be for good or ill.

Before beginning my argument, I want to draw attention to some attractive qualities of the irrelevance thesis independent of theoretical commitments. For one thing, it seems to vindicate our intuitions about a class of lives I call *game changers*, i.e., lives which make such a contribution that we either overlook or ignore (almost) any moral wrong doing they may have committed. Such lives might include individuals like Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Caravaggio, and Richard Wagner.⁵¹ Indeed, these cases seem to provide evidence against the claim that morality is a necessary condition for meaningfulness, since we know they were highly immoral people who (most likely) did little, if any, moral good during their lives. Game changing lives appear to be meaningful *despite* morality.

The second attractive quality of the irrelevance thesis is that it can account for the pre-theoretical intuition that moral monsters (like Ioseb) can, or do, live meaningful lives. Moral monsters, to repeat, are lives which seem meaningful regardless of any (or even all) immoral actions they committed during their lives (indeed, we might think it is precisely those immoral actions which make their life meaningful). After all, moral monsters like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao made a significant impact on the world in their own time and for generations to come, shaping the geo-political world and world history. How, one might ask, could their lives not be meaningful?

But one's vindication is another's counterexample. As mentioned, there is also the pre-theoretical intuition that the life of a moral monster, like Ioseb, is meaningless. Given the irrelevance thesis allows otherwise, this makes it counterintuitive for those with said intuition. I also share this intuition: moral monsters like mass murderers, political tyrants, serial killers, committed racists, antisemites, or sex offenders, are not the types of lives which spring to mind when people compile their list of paradigm cases of meaningful lives. Yet the irrelevance thesis, and any theory either endorsing or compatible with it, is vulnerable to such counterexamples. Even in light of any attractive qualities the irrelevance thesis might have, I take such a counterintuitive result to be a compelling reason for why the irrelevance thesis is not strongly

⁵¹ Gauguin abandoned his wife and five children to pursue art and pedophilia in Tahiti. Picasso was a misogynist and abuser of women. Caravaggio was abusive, violent, and a murderer, Wagner was an anti-semiter, racist and German nationalist who, even to this day, is still associated with Nazism and German nationalism.

represented or endorsed in the literature. It is arguably because of such cases that many maintain morality must have some sort of relationship with meaningfulness, in one way or another. So, if a theory which adopts the irrelevance thesis fails to resolve this problem in a satisfactory manner, that failure is going to count as a strike against the plausibility of that theory.

6.2. Morality and Meaning

In this section I aim to show why morality is *not* the reason for why moral monsters live meaningless lives. I believe that once we partition our moral concepts we shall find that morality is not what confers meaning. As I shall now argue, it is not moral actions which confer meaning but rather promoting or protecting the well-being of others. Because moral actions often result in, or are correlated with, such consequences, we mistake the cause for the effect. If we remove the common consequences of moral actions, i.e., making others better off, or worse still that a moral action results in making others worse off, we shall find morality is not enough by itself to confer meaning upon a life.

To begin, I should like to redraw our attention to the fact that it is not specified what type of moral action confers meaning, or what type of immoral action reduces it. As noted earlier, what is meant by moral action is pre-theoretical and commonsensical. Presumably then, any moral action counts as a meaning maker and so any configuration or combination of moral actions will be enough to make a life meaningful. Reflecting upon the moral saints who are often cited as being paradigm cases of meaningful lives, we see that, though their lives are characterised by moral actions, the pattern or type of moral actions are not the same.

Yet it does not seem to me that just any moral action or pattern thereof shall do. There appears to be moral actions which, no matter how many of them one were to perform, they would not confer meaning upon a life, let alone reach a sufficient threshold to make a life meaningful. Those moral actions which do appear to confer meaning upon a life will be those that promote or protect the well-being of other welfare subjects, while those moral actions which do otherwise do not confer meaning.

For our purposes, we can group moral actions into roughly three categories. First, there are moral actions which often result in promoting the well-being of others (e.g., donating to a charity). Second, there are moral actions which often result in protecting the well-being of others (e.g., saving someone from drowning). Intuitively however, not all moral actions promote or protect well-being, so there must be a third category, namely, moral actions which rarely, if ever, result in promoting or protecting the well-being of other welfare subjects. If we thought that all moral action fell exclusively into either the first or second category there would perhaps more ethical consequentialists running amok than there already are. I should also point out here that

the first and second categories are not, nor need not, be understood as consequentialist. Even if one were to hold a non-consequentialist ethical view, we can still agree that respecting or protecting rights, doing our duty, honouring agreements, acting virtuously, etc., most often produces consequences which promote or protect the well-being of others.⁵²

The paradigm cases listed earlier, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, appear to be examples of the first two categories; the most often cited paradigm cases are those which are characterised by moral actions which promoted or protected the well-being of others. But what of the third category? We can imagine a person, Daria, who, though strongly tempted to act immorally, chooses not to give into temptation. Her life is characterised by a type of moral action which neither protects nor promotes well-being. In light of that, does Daria's life seem meaningful? Intuitively, the answer is no, and her life is certainly not as meaningful as Mother Teresa's or Gandhi's. And the feature which seems to explain this intuition is that the type of moral action which characterises Daria's life does not confer meaning because they do not make anyone better off.

One might object that Daria is not a case of a life characterised by moral action because she only refrains from doing immoral actions, which is not the same as doing moral actions. Just because you do not do something bad does not mean you did something good. So, Daria is not a fair case. I do not think this objection holds because, as I framed it, Daria is actively choosing to do the right thing in the face of temptation; she chooses not to steal, or lie, etc. Suggesting she is not making a choice but instead simply not acting is inconsistent with our collective recognition that choosing not to do evil is still choosing a moral action. For example, when it comes to the trolley problem, we acknowledge that refraining from pulling the lever is still choosing an action and, for some at least, proves also to be the correct moral action.

Another objection could be that Daria actually collapses into one of the other categories. That because she chose not to rob people that she is therefore protecting their well-being. By not giving into temptation, Daria protects others from herself. This would be a neat solution if it did not contradict our collective intuitions about analogous cases. We do not, for example, think that the school or workplace bully who refrains from assaulting someone has protected their would-be victim's well-being.

⁵² This correlation between impacts on well-being and what counts as a moral action is one reason some adopt ethical consequentialism. It is also presumably why utilitarianism has cast such a looming shadow over ethics. For example, Foot (1985, p. 196) writes, "it is remarkable how utilitarianism tends to haunt even those of us who will not believe in it. It is as if we forever feel that it must be right, although we insist that it is wrong". Likewise, Korsgaard (1993, p. 24) speculates that, "to later generations, much of the moral philosophy of the twentieth century will look like a struggle to escape utilitarianism. We seem to succeed in disproving one utilitarian doctrine, only to find ourselves caught in the grip of another".

Perhaps Daria's life is not meaningful because she simply has not performed enough moral actions to pass the threshold required to make her life meaningful. One could argue that moral actions of this third category are not 'worth' as much as the other two, and so Daria needs to perform additional moral actions in order to pass the threshold. This manoeuvre fails because we can simply stipulate a case in which Daria's life is characterised by nothing but moral actions of this third sort. We can imagine a case in which Daria, from birth until death, is continuously tempted to violate the rights of others or act maliciously/viciously towards them, but refrains from doing so every time. In this case, Daria is a type of moral saint; she never, under any circumstances, gives into temptation. Yet it seems no matter how much we add of this particular variety of moral action, our intuitions about the meaning of her life do not change.

A final objection could be that all the Daria case shows is that the type of moral actions which characterise her life are not enough to confer meaning; only moral actions of the first two make a life meaningful. But this objection seems to abandon the claim that morality is a condition for meaning in life, and instead opts for a much weaker position that morality, at best, contributes to meaning. The considered objection requires moral actions to be supplemented by features aside from the moral character of those actions in order to confer meaning. In other words, moral actions themselves are not enough. Recall, however, that the pre-theoretical intuition in question maintained that moral actions are enough to confer meaning by themselves. Yet we have seen that only certain types of moral actions contribute meaning, i.e., those moral actions which promote/protect the well-being of other welfare subjects.

The above argument has opened up a noticeable gap between moral actions and consequences. And if I am right, it appears to be those moral actions which result in promoting/protecting the well-being of others which confers meaning to a life rather than the moral actions themselves. We can exacerbate the problem by considering two more types of cases which are both arguably characterised by moral action yet fail to make for meaningful lives. First, a life in which one fulfils moral duties owed to oneself, and second, a life in which one's moral actions have the unintended consequence of making others worse off.

Though there may be some debate as to whether any self-owed duties exist (or how binding they are), let us assume for the sake argument there are such obligations (Cholbi, 2015; Denis, 1997; Eisenberg, 1968; Fotion, 1965; Hills, 2003; Kading, 1960; Mothersill, 1961; Muñoz, 2020; M. G. Singer, 1959, 1963; Timmermann, 2006). In keeping with the spirit of Daria, we can imagine a life characterised by moral action à la self-obligation. Imagine Jane, who, as the last living being on Earth, owes no moral obligations to anyone but herself and unfailingly meets every one of them. Do the moral actions which characterise Jane's life make her life meaningful? Again, like Daria, the answer appears to be 'no' and for much the same reasons; this variety of

moral action does not seem to be the right type to confer meaning. Even if the moral actions in question promote or protect her own well-being, Jane's life does not seem to be made any more meaningful because of it. The types of moral actions which appear to confer meaning are those which promote/protect the well-being of others.

Second, consider cases in which those moral actions which most often promote/protect well-being fail to do so. We can imagine, for example, Quinn, whose life is characterised by all the types of moral actions thus described but, despite her best efforts, always ends up doing more harm than good. The consequences of Quinn's moral actions, regardless of any intentions she may have, neither improve nor protect anybody's welfare and, more often than not, result in harming others. Quinn strikes me as a life characterised by moral actions but, much like Daria and Jane before her, does not have her life be made meaningful because of it.

Indeed, Quinn appears to be the opposite case of the incompetent villain (§3.3.), which I illustrated through the case of Dr. Mischief. To remind, Dr. Mischief was a super-villain who infiltrated a water reservoir and poisoned the water supply with the express intention of dooming city. However, Dr. Mischief ended up doing much good, with the poison actually serving as an antidote to a horrific virus plaguing the city. Though his actions were arguably immoral, through either incompetence, bad luck, or intervention, he ended up protecting and promoting the well-being of many which was the complete opposite of that which he intended. I argued that Dr. Mischief's life was *accidentally* meaningful. Quinn's life, in contrast, is accidentally meaningless.

To give the above further traction, reconsider the familiar counter-factual scenario involving Nelson Mandela. To remind, suppose we were to discover the secret diary of Nelson Mandela in which he confessed in earnest that all of his efforts were done, not for the betterment of his fellow countrymen, but to feed his narcissistic ego in hopes of becoming an authoritarian despot who would purge South Africa of all those he believed opposed him or stood in his way. Not only would such revelations prove shocking, it would also colour his actions in a very different light. Intuitively, if these were his motivations and intentions, that would make the actions which characterised his life immoral. In such a case, we would have a life which, though characterised by undoubtedly immoral actions it would have still produced good consequences. But would such revelations change our intuition about how meaningful his life was? It does not seem that they do.

As shown, we need not appeal to morality or immorality to understand why some people judge the lives of moral monsters, like Stalin, as meaningless; they caused immense amounts of harm to others. Unlike Dr. Mischief or the reimaged Mandela case (both of whom aim to do evil but produce good consequences by accident or incompetence), moral monsters are *successful*

at harming others. But causing harm need not be what makes their actions immoral; their actions can be immoral for other reasons. In light of that, I submit we have a diagnosis and explanation for why someone might judge morality to be a component of meaning in life: those who judge that moral monsters live meaningless lives due to their immorality have confused the cause, i.e., immoral actions, with the effect, i.e., minimising or reducing the well-being of others. Immoral actions are highly correlated with bad welfare outcomes, but it is the latter, not the former, which is relevant to the meaningfulness of a life. Such a mistake, however, is understandable because it is highly likely that a moral life will be a meaningful life (and an immoral life will be a meaningless one) given this strong correlation. But correlation, as the saying goes, does not equal causation (or identity).

On my view, the moral monster lived a meaningless life not because their life was characterised by immoral actions, but rather because they were successful in harming or reducing the well-being of other welfare subjects. With the above arguments, I have shown that moral action is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning in life. Morality is irrelevant.

6.3. Significance and Meaning

Thus far I have argued that we can hold the irrelevance thesis while also maintaining and vindicating the intuition that the life of a moral monster is meaningless. But the proposal of the previous section only solves half the problem; what about those pre-theoretical intuitions that maintain the moral monster *does* live a meaningful life? My argument, thus far at least, does not provide us with any explanation as to why we might find something plausible about describing the life of a Hitler or Caligula as meaningful. As I pointed out previously, there is something plausible and intelligible about describing such lives as meaningful. After all, their lives have been considerably influential. In response to this half of the problem, I shall argue there is a confusion between meaning and significance. In short, I contend that the life of a moral monster may be significant, but not meaningful.

So what is significance? I propose we understand it roughly as follows:

A significant life: a life is significant insofar as that life impacts the well-being of other welfare subjects.

Note that significance is also dependent upon outcomes. However, unlike meaning, which depends upon the value of those impacts upon well-being, significance is value neutral. In other words, all that is required to confer significance to a life is the aggregate quantity of welfare impacts, whether for good or ill. On this view, meaning and significance are closely related and it is easy to see why; if a life is meaningful then it is also significant, and the more meaningful a life is the more significant it is too. But this relationship does not go both ways. A life which is

significant might not be meaningful. Instead it may be incredibly meaningless because the life in question may have caused more harm than good. The explanation for why someone might mistakenly hold that moral monsters live meaningful lives is because they have understandably confused significance with meaning.

Let me begin by pointing out that by understanding meaning and significance in this way provides us with an explanation for how pre-theoretical intuitions both converge and diverge across paradigm cases. Consider, for example, Gandhi and Hitler. While Gandhi improved and protected lives and Hitler caused great suffering and harm, the actions of both men are still felt today (and most likely will continue to be so into the future). That said, judging both lives to be meaningful seems mistaken and does not properly differentiate what makes their lives notable. However, in understanding the difference between meaning and significance as I have proposed, we have a way of capturing that difference while also capturing what their lives have in common; while Gandhi's life was meaningful and Hitler's was meaningless, both lives are significant. If my proposal is compelling, then the distinction between meaning and significance offers us a straightforward way of resolving the pre-theoretical intuition that moral monsters live meaningful lives: those intuitions are best understood as tracking the evaluative dimension of significance, rather than meaning. But it is understandable why we would be misled given how they overlap.

We can find further support for the distinction between meaning and significance, independent of any theoretical commitments, by considering both evaluative dimensions and our intuitions about praiseworthiness and choiceworthiness. There is, I contend, an incompatibility between (a) the intuition that moral monsters live meaningful lives, and (b) the intuition that meaningful lives are both praiseworthy and choiceworthy. That is, if meaning is a normative concept which provides us with reasons to act, and if the life of a moral monster really were a meaningful life, then we would have reason for praising moral monsters and becoming one ourselves. But such a result is highly counterintuitive and so good reason for thinking (a) is mistaken.

It is widely acknowledged that a life which is meaningful is considered worthy of praise; to be lauded and held in esteem. Kauppinen, for example, observes:

In short, then, it seems that when we say that someone's life is meaningful or want our own lives to be such, what we say or want is that certain positive attitudes are fitting towards it. Consequently, asking what makes our lives meaningful amounts to asking what agential pride, admiration, and elevation fitting (Kauppinen, 2016, p. 283).

Further still, we take meaningfulness to be choiceworthy too. If φ were to make a life more meaningful then we take that as a reason for performing or bringing about φ . This was an

observation I made at the very start of this thesis, when I noted that we treat meaningfulness as being normatively significant. While meaning does not seem to produce duties or obligations, all things being equal, it is still better to make choices which render one's life meaningful than to not.

Yet if we believe that moral monsters live meaningful lives we run into considerable trouble. For if the above observations are correct, then the life of a moral monster, such as Pol Pot **or** Mao, would be praiseworthy because their lives would be meaningful. Stranger still, the sort of immoral actions which they committed would also be choiceworthy. That is to say, if one wanted one's own life to be meaningful, then committing heinous immoral actions would be a legitimate way of doing so. Becoming a moral monster - characterising one's life with immoral actions - would be a choiceworthy thing to do. Such results are highly counterintuitive.

Given the above, it seems we have but three options: (i) bite the bullet and admit the life of a moral monster is indeed praiseworthy and choiceworthy, (ii) give up the intuition that meaningfulness is both praiseworthy and choiceworthy, or (iii) give up the notion that the life of a moral monster is meaningful. I take (i) to be highly unattractive given how counterintuitive the upshots are. Though (ii) is a better option, it does not seem viable given how widespread our intuition about how praiseworthy and choiceworthy meaningful lives are. That leaves us with (iii), which I also take to be our best option.

How I have understood meaning and significance dovetails neatly with the above observation. Note that, pre-theoretically speaking, meaning and significance do not have the same connotations in terms of value. While meaningfulness has positive connotations, such as being praiseworthy and choiceworthy, significance in and of itself does not. Rather, it seems significance is value-neutral. I have pointed out that if causing harm could confer meaning upon a life, then that would give us reason for choosing to cause harm and praising those who do. This turned out to be highly counterintuitive because causing harm appears to be neither of those things. But would causing harm to others make one's life significant? Suppose, for example, there were a great library containing all the world's knowledge. Suppose Trent was presented with the opportunity to burn down this library; should he? If he desires to make his life more meaningful, then burning down the library does not seem to be the way of doing so. But what if he desires only to make his life significant? The answer to this question, unlike the former, seems to be 'yes'. If one were considering making one's life significant, causing harm does appear to be a way of doing so, and the more harm one would do the more significant one's life appears to become.

To end, I would like to point out that the distinction I have made between meaning and significance also dovetails with, and I think rounds off, the literature on anti-meaning, i.e., that which, according to a theory about meaning in life, is disvaluable (Campbell & Nyholm, 2015;

Landau, 2011, pp. 316-317; Metz, 2002, pp. 805-807; 2013, pp. 233-236; Morris, 1992, pp. 49-50; Munitz, 1993, pp. 89-93; Nozick, 1981, p. 612; Smuts, 2013, p. 116). Anti-meaning helps us understand the intuitive difference between two different classes of meaningless lives, in this case, immoral from non-moral lives. While non-moral meaningless lives (e.g., the grass counter, the grinning excrement eater, etc.) appear to be bona fide meaningless lives, moral monsters seem more than just meaningless, and describing their lives as ‘anti-meaningful’ appears to capture that. The problem, however, is that describing the lives of moral monsters as anti-meaningful does not explain why we find it intelligible to describe those same lives as meaningful too, or even why some take said lives to be actually meaningful. In understanding significance as I have proposed clears up this quagmire; anti-meaningful lives are significant lives.

To conclude, I have provided a diagnosis and explanation for why someone would mistakenly hold the pre-theoretical intuition that the life of a moral monster is meaningful without appealing to morality. I argued said intuition is best understood as tracking a different evaluative dimension to meaning which I identified as significance. This mistake is understandable given how both evaluative dimensions overlap, causing us to think they are one and the same. I contended such a proposal fit better with our intuitive understanding about the role praise and choice have with regards to meaning in life. That is, if immoral actions did make a life more meaningful then we would have reason to both praise immoral lives and choose to live them ourselves. While the aforementioned is counterintuitive, it turned out that if one wanted one’s life to be significant, then causing harm would be a way of doing so.

The position I have advanced here (i) dovetails with asymmetric welfarism, (ii) complements my argument for the irrelevance thesis, (iii) explains where and why our intuitions might converge/diverge upon particular paradigm cases, and (iv) helps round off anti-meaning in life. I submit then, that given asymmetric welfarism fits with all of the above, it be award further plausibility points.

6.4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I argued that even though morality is irrelevant to meaning in life, moral monsters live meaningless lives. To do so, I explored our divided intuitions about moral monsters and whether such persons could live meaningful lives. My aim was to show (a) why the life of a moral monster was not meaningful but for reasons which were not due to morality, (b) explain why someone might understandably mistake moral monsters as having lived meaningful lives, and (c) how asymmetric welfarism fit into this picture.

For the former, I argued that the reason for why someone might believe morality confers meaning is because moral actions often produce good consequences, such as promoting/

protecting the well-being of other welfare subjects. Given moral actions are pro-social and often altruistic, acting morally is often the most direct way of making others better off (and inversely, immorality is anti-social and often selfish, so immoral actions often harm or minimise the welfares of others). However, as I argued, holding that moral actions confer meaning is to confuse the effect with the cause. Recognising that moral actions are not solely defined by the outcomes they produce allowed us to pull apart moral actions from their consequences on well-being. Doing so revealed that moral actions which do not make others better off failed to confer meaning, while moral actions which made others worse off reduced the meaning of a life.

For the latter, I argued that the reason for why someone might think the life of a moral monster is meaningful is because they have confused significance with meaning. Significance, I proposed, is measured by the impact one has upon the well-being of others whether for good or ill. In this way, we could see that the life of a moral monster, while meaningless, is still significant. I provided two additional data points to bolster my position. First, I noted that if immoral actions did confer meaning then it would make lives characterised by such actions not just worthy of praise, but also a legitimate option if we wished our own life to be meaningful. Such a result, however, was counterintuitive. What was intuitive, however, was the idea that immoral actions could confer significance to one's life. Second, I considered how significance fills a gap in the literature about anti-meaning. While anti-meaning helps us understand the difference between bona fide meaningless lives and those of moral monsters, it does not explain why anti-meaningful lives can still be intelligibly described as meaningful. The evaluative dimension of significance clears up this paradox: anti-meaningful lives, while by definition not meaningful, are still significant.

Through the examination of the relationship between morality and meaning, we have clarified two different evaluative dimensions a life can have which stand alongside meaning: morality and significance. Given asymmetric welfarism about meaning in life dovetails neatly with both of these evaluative dimensions, just like it did with the other evaluative dimensions of fulfilment and purpose, I submit that asymmetric welfarism be awarded further plausibility points.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have articulated a case for *asymmetric welfarism about meaning in life*; that a life is meaningful insofar as it improves, promotes, protects or preserves the well-being of other welfare subjects. To do so I deployed a basic two-pronged strategy. First, for every objection raised I provided a response to defuse it. Second, for those objections which have particularly strong intuitive pull, I provided a diagnostic; that the objection was best understood as tracking a different evaluative dimension. Each of these evaluative dimensions were either related to or overlapped with meaning, and so it was understandable why we should err in thinking them identical. Such a strategy across multiple chapters resulted in a by-product, namely, a list of evaluative dimensions of a life, identified as follows:

- meaning • prudential value • fulfilment • purpose • morality • significance

Let me sum up, in the briefest terms, the thesis. I argued that how meaningful a life is correlates with the good it produces for others. Specifically, a life is conferred meaning insofar as it increases or protects the well-being of other welfare subjects. I called this view asymmetric welfarism because (a) it is a welfarist view about the good with regards to meaning (welfarism), and (b) because the relationship between whose welfare is relevant was not equal; the welfare of the person whose life it is does not count when considering the meaning of their life (asymmetry). The aim of this thesis was to argue that asymmetric welfarism was the most plausible theory about meaning in life when compared to competitors.

Chapter 1 sketched out my methodology as being a combination of Enoch's plausibility point-scoring system and triangulation. The former approach awarded points for every piece of data a theory accounted for while deducting points for every piece of data not accounted for, with the most plausible theory being that which ends up with the most points. The latter approach attempts to locate the unique place a concept has within its conceptual network, i.e., related concepts, ideas, etc. A theory which best does this is the better theory.

I argued asymmetric welfarism was the most plausible theory because it won the most plausibility points. Asymmetric welfarism did so because it (a) vindicated a swathe of intuitions, (b) provided compelling responses to objections, and (c) provided a diagnosis and revision of where influential objections/intuitions went awry. Asymmetric welfarism satisfied triangulation because it picked out the unique place meaning in life occupies within its conceptual network and also gave explanations about the relationships between meaning and those other related concepts.

In chapter 2 I made the case in favour of asymmetric welfarism. I argued improving or protecting the well-being of other welfare subjects (human or otherwise) is intuitively the quintessential or paradigmatic way of conferring meaning to a life and that a project, action, or event conferred meaning because of welfare outcomes. That is, art, music, science, achievement, etc., do not confer meaning upon a life unless they positively impact the welfare of others. Chapter 3 saw me defend asymmetric welfarism from a vast array of objections across a variety of subjects including luck, scope, agency, uniqueness, and intentions.

Chapters 4 and 5 each considered a powerful intuition about meaning in life and how each generated a specific type of condition thought to be necessary and/or sufficient for meaning in life. First, for some thing to be meaningful it must mean something to someone, and second, for some thing to be meaningful it must have a point or reason for being. The former motivated subjective conditions (and theories) while the later motivated purpose conditions (and theories). I argued that neither condition was sufficient nor necessary for meaning in life. However, given how powerful such intuitions are, I provided an explanation as to what they were really tracking, with the former tracking fulfilment and the later tracking purpose.

Chapter 6 continued investigating these powerful intuitions but identified a division about the role morality may, or may not have, in the meaning of a life. Some hold that morality is very important for meaning while others think it matters not. I attempted to sail between Scylla and Charybdis by arguing there is a difference between meaning, morality, and significance. Those who hold that morality matters a lot for meaning have confused morality with meaning, while the latter have confused meaning and significance.

Final Thoughts

We have now reached the end of this thesis. I have made a variety of arguments to advance asymmetric welfarism, some of which had the brute yet effective simplicity of a cudgel, while others took on a more baroque guise. Given this is the end of the road, I think it only fitting to finish by reflecting upon how asymmetric welfarism bears upon my own life. So, how meaningful, according to asymmetric welfarism, is my life?

Well, that really depends. On one hand, I think on net balance I have made the lives of my friends, family, housemates, and colleagues better through the conversations and activities I have shared with them. I like to think I have added to the well-being of my students over the years. I hope I have made my supervisors and any professor I have interacted over the years better off, or at the very least hope I have not made them worse off from having done so. On the other hand, I have most likely made nonacademic co-workers worse off, either boring or frustrating them by talking about philosophy, or jazz, or whatever esoteric subject has caught my interest.

Optimistically, however, I would say my life is *marginally* meaningful according to asymmetric welfarism.

Has pursuing philosophy conferred meaning upon my life? Has writing this thesis added meaning to my life? The answer to these questions ultimately depends upon you, the reader; if you gained some basic prudential good from reading this, then yes, but if you did not, then no. And if reading this thesis somehow made you worse off, then the meaning of my life has been minimised.

So, is my life meaningful? Probably. Is my life fulfilling? Yes. Is it prudentially good? Yes. Does it have a purpose? Multiple ones. Is my life moral? I hope so. Is my life significant? I wish it were, but I think it highly unlikely. Even so, do I have friends, family, and pets who make my life better and I theirs? Absolutely. And perhaps the answer to this last question is, according to asymmetric welfarism, what makes my life meaningful.

Well, meaningful enough, at least.

I don't know how much value I have in this universe. But I do know I made a few people happier than they would have been without me; as long as I know that, I'm as rich as I ever need to be.

- Robin Williams

Appendices

A. Loose Ends

How successful has the argument for asymmetric welfarism been *overall*? Even if everything I have argued for here were (more or less) correct at the micro level, that might not be true at the macro level. A particular individual argument for radical skepticism in epistemology, or for utilitarianism in ethics, for example, may very well be convincing on its own. But if we step back far enough to consider the edifice constructed in its entirety, we may find ourselves scratching our heads as to how we ended up in such a strange place. So my aim here is to flag potential problems at the macro level and provide responses to them.

A.A. Desiderata

One problem is that there may be desideratum which asymmetric welfarism has not, and perhaps cannot, account for. Metz (2013, pp. 220-222) makes a compelling case that an adequate theory about meaning in life must account for nine desiderata:

- I. *Spiritual Realm*: supernatural conditions could confer meaning.
- II. *Subjective Conditions*: certain mental states can enhance meaning.
- III. *Negative Conditions*: certain actions or mental states can reduce meaning in life.
- IV. *Good Consequences*: enhancing the well-being of others confers meaning.
- V. *Moral Constraints*: degrading behaviour undercuts meaning-conferring power of good consequences.
- VI. *Agent-Relativity*: meaning is enhanced when promoting final ends for oneself rather than just others.
- VII. *Internal and External*: meaning is both internal/self regarding and external/other regarding.
- VIII. *Deliberation and Decision*: meaning comes about through authentic and untarnished reasoning (free of weakness of will, addiction, etc.).
- IX. *Object of Rationality*: meaning comes about through reasoning specifically directed at human nature rather than particularity.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, a theory about meaning in life must account for these; it seems asymmetric welfarism only vindicates our intuitions about III and IV. A score of two out of nine is hardly a welcome result, so we might have good reason for doubting the plausibility of asymmetric welfarism.

But vindication is not the only way of accounting for a desideratum; we can deny or revise it. I have gone to great lengths to deny and revise some of our intuitions, providing robust diagnostic explanations as to where, how, and why, those intuitions had gone awry. Specifically, asymmetric welfarism has access to the diagnostic manoeuvre by way of the multiple evaluative dimensions I posited as being related to, yet distinct from, meaning. For example, II is fulfilment, V is morality, VI could be fulfilment or purpose, and VII is combination of all.

But what about I, VIII, and IX? I think responses to each can be sketched out in light of my previous arguments. I am inclined to think that desideratum I refers to yet another evaluative dimension separate from meaning, namely the spiritual life. Such a life focuses on, for lack of a better expression, what is good for the soul, or spiritual nourishment. And the reason that spirituality, or living a spiritual life, appears to confer meaning is because most often such religious attitudes/behaviours are orientated towards helping improve the well-being of others, while religious or spiritual attitudes/behaviours which detract from the welfare of others are not just seen as immoral, but also meaningless. Given the sustained arguments made against agency or intentionality, I flatly deny VIII and IX respectively and I hope I have provided good reason for rejecting them.

A.B. Missing Theories

A second problem is that I have not addressed *all* theories about meaning in life. This might be the result of dividing up the theoretical landscape by those conditions which a theory favours instead of dividing it specifically along metaphysical lines. The objection points out that the aim of the thesis was to show that asymmetric welfarism is the most plausible theory of its competitors, but that I still have not shown this because there are competitors which I have left out.

Though this objection is right in pointing out I have not covered every theory about meaning in life, the objection does not pose any serious threat. The arguments made throughout this thesis undercuts the intuitive motivation for types of *conditions* which are widely found in existing theories. If a theory has either (a) a subjective condition, (b) a purpose condition, (c) an objective non-utility condition, or (d) a morality condition, then there is an argument in this thesis against that theory. So for those theories I have not addressed directly, they will most likely fall into at least one of these camps. As an example, let us consider Metz's fundamentality theory, which he develops into the following:

(FT₃) A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them, such that the worse parts of her

life cause better parts towards its end by a process that makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story; in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence or exhibits narrative disvalue (Metz, 2013, p. 235).

We can already see how previous arguments address several of the conditions which make up the fundamentality theory. For example, I have argued that there is no moral condition (chapter 6); I showed that there are no moral constraints upon meaning in life. I have shown there is no agency condition (chapter 3), which can be understood as exercising rationality and reason. And I have contended that only welfare improvement/protection inputs into meaningfulness (chapter 2); that other 'fundamental conditions of human existence' matter only insofar as they contribute to the well-being of other welfare subjects.

A.C. Unfalsifiable

A third problem is that my big picture could be accused of being *unfalsifiable*. The reason one might think there is no potential falsifier is because, for any objection or evidence which contradicts my argument, I could simply say the objection/evidence is about some other evaluative dimension than meaning. And if that evaluative dimension does not exist yet, I can make it up afterwards. If this is true, then there is no possibility of ever proving my position wrong.

I want to provide two responses. First, we might think the objection uncharitable. After all, I have been upfront and flagged both objections and problems for asymmetric welfarism which posed significant hurdles for my view, and I have been honest as to how well I think those arguments work. Second, we should remember that my goal was not to show that asymmetric welfarism is true per se, but rather that it was the most plausible. I did so by showing how asymmetric welfarism accrued more plausibility points than competitors. An obvious and natural pathway for falsifying asymmetric welfarism would be to just show how another theory accrues *more* plausibility points. Such an effort would likely include a better accounting of paradigm cases and existential angst, a more compelling explanation about the distinctions, relations, and interfaces, between the different evaluative dimensions raised throughout this thesis. Further still, I argued asymmetric welfarism dovetails neatly with our intuitive understanding of these evaluative dimensions and how they importantly differ. It could be shown that the delineation I have drawn around each evaluative dimension is mistaken, and so some other theory about meaning could do a superior job of fitting in with them.

So asymmetric welfarism is falsifiable. One could attack the arguments made in its favour, develop a theory which accrues more plausibility points than it does, provide a theory which does a better job of dovetailing with other evaluative dimensions, or redraw the map of the

evaluative dimensions such that asymmetric welfarism no longer fits, while some other competing theory does. All these options are on the table and nothing I have argued for here suggests otherwise.

B. An Ontology of Lives

Arguing for asymmetric welfarism has produced a novel by-product: the outlining of a variety of evaluative dimensions a life can have. Taking these evaluative dimensions in totality, I call it an *ontology of lives*. An ontology, in computer and information science, is a set of concepts and categories in a given subject area or domain, providing the naming and definitions of properties and the relations and interfaces between them. Given this thesis has outlined a conception of meaningfulness, while also delineating differences between other evaluative dimensions and how they relate to meaning, describing the by-product as an ontology of evaluative dimensions of a life seems apt. Here, I aim to show the sort of work this ontology of lives - independent of asymmetric welfarism - can do for us. This ontology turns out to be valuable in its own right. To begin, let us first recapitulate the ontology, as I have understood it in this thesis:

The Ontology of Lives

Domain	Concern
Meaning	the well-being of other welfare subjects
Prudential value	the well-being of the person whose life it is
Fulfilment	the preferences or desires of the person whose life it is
Purpose	Achieving the goal or performing the function of one's life
Moral	Perform the correct moral action or behaviour and/or displaying the right character or intentions
Significance	Impact upon the well-being of others for good or ill

B.A. Clarifying Cases

One thing we can apply the ontology to are our intuitions about paradigm cases. The ontology can provide insight into where and why our judgements diverge and how we might compromise. We have seen such an application peppered throughout this thesis but here I want to illustrate how much further work the ontology can do for us. The two tables below - T1 and T2 - provide individuals (both real and imagined) who lived lives in accordance to the varying evaluative dimensions. I should make clear that neither of these tables are exhaustive as they can only show two evaluative dimensions at a time. In saying that, a life may achieve more than just two evaluative dimensions of positive value and/or negative value. For example, a life could be

meaningful, significant, and purposeful without being fulfilling or moral. Both tables perform the elementary function of illustrating my point.

T1. Conflict between evaluative dimensions

	Meaningless	Disprudential	Unfulfilling	Purposeless	immoral	Insignificant
Meaningful		Vincent Van Gogh	The effective altruist	Smoky the Dog	The utility maximiser	The loving parent
Prudential	The happy surfer		The objective list exemplar	Paris Hilton	Jeff Bezos	The hobbyist
Fulfilling	The grass counter	The excrement eater		Experience machine	Pablo Picasso	The hermit
Purposeful	Charles Manson	The Prophet Elijah	The shelf stacker		Ted Bundy	The stamp collector
Moral	The well intentioned moral saint	Mother Teresa	The moral saint	The rights respecter		The contract upholder
Significant	Adolf Hitler	Wittgenstein	Nietzsche	Forrest Gump	Joseph Stalin	

T2. Overlap of evaluative dimensions

	Meaningful	Prudential	Fulfilling	Purposeful	Moral	Significant
Meaningful		Mozart	Paul Cézanne	Martin Luther King Jr.	Nelson Mandela	Alexander Fleming
Prudential	Mozart		Herbie Hancock	Aristotle's virtuous person	Ned Flanders	Jeff Bezos
Fulfilling	Paul Cézanne	Herbie Hancock		The Grass counter	Soup kitchen volunteer	Prince
Purposeful	Martin Luther King Jr.	Aristotle's virtuous person	The grass counter		Jesus of Nazareth	Paul of Tarsus
Moral	Nelson Mandela	Ned Flanders	Soup kitchen volunteer	Jesus Christ		Mother Teresa
Significant	Alexander Fleming	Jeff Bezos	Prince	Paul of Tarsus	Mother Teresa	

In thinking about cases within the framework of the ontology, we can begin to get to the heart of our agreements and disagreements about cases. My hope is that thinking about cases in light of the ontology will help illuminate disagreements in an intuitive and informative way in which our intuitions will collectively converge after discussion.

What is of vital importance here is that, even if my conception of meaningfulness is mistaken (or any other conception of an evaluative dimension discussed here) the ontology still provides insight and clarity into what it is we are thinking about when we think about paradigm cases. In other words, the ontology provides both the conceptual language and framework for a more systematic way of discussing these evaluative dimensions and their relationships with one another.

B.B. New Desideratum

The ontology provides a new desideratum for testing theories about meaning in life. That is, theories about meaning in life must provide an adequate account and explanation as to how their conception of meaning properly fits within the ontology. We might describe the desideratum as follows:

X. *Ontology*: an explanation of how meaning relates to, overlaps with, but is importantly distinct from, other evaluative dimensions such as fulfilment, significant, purpose, etc.

Something like X has been hinted at throughout the literature before, but has not received the attention it arguably deserves. I noted earlier that Calhoun (2018, pp. 22-23) suggested a theory which allows ‘meaningful’ to be cashed out via another evaluative dimension, such as ‘significant’, would be undesirable because meaningfulness is supposed to pick out some special or unique concept. Metz (2012) used the concepts of ‘significance’ and ‘meaningful’ interchangeably, but argues there is a conditional relationship between meaning and worth. And similarly, Wolf (1997, 2010) draws a clear distinction between the evaluative dimensions of happiness, morality, and meaning. In taking their ideas seriously, we have discovered additional evaluative dimensions and provided cursory explanations about the relationships between them.

Furthermore, we might find that X serves as not just an important desideratum or data point for philosophy of meaning in life, but also for well-being, ethics, and value theory more generally. To give a rough sketch of what that might look at, consider *desire-fulfilment theories about prudential value*, i.e., theories of well-being which state a life is made better (for the person whose life it is) insofar as their preferences or desires are satisfied (Fletcher, 2016, pp. 27-48). Preference theories of well-being overlap with a particular subset of subjective theories about meaning in life and also the evaluative dimension of fulfilment. Their overlap might be such that they are identical - a result in which prudence, meaning, and fulfilment would be one and the same. But given how we want our concepts to do “distinctive conceptual work not performed by the other” (Calhoun, 2018, p. 23), having these dimensions be determined by the same value is, to borrow Calhoun’s expression, ‘an unwelcome result’. If we are able to nail down one particular evaluative dimension, we can rule it out as a theory of a different one. That is to say, if

preference theories of well-being are better suited at capturing the fulfilling life, then (a) preference theories are best understood as theories of fulfilment rather than welfare, and (b) we can *rule out* preference theories as the correct theory of prudential value.

Consider also perfectionist theories about well-being, i.e., theories that state a life is better for the person whose life it is the closer they reach their *telos* or perfect their nature. Note, however, that such a theory seems identical to purpose theories about meaning in life and the evaluative dimension of purposefulness. If a perfectionist theory better captures purpose in life, then (a) purpose theories would be best understood as theories about the purposeful life, and (b) we can rule out perfectionism as the correct theory of prudential value.

Again, even if I am wrong about asymmetric welfarism as being the correct theory of meaning in life, the ontology and the desideratum it provides is left unscathed and still provides us with a way of gaining traction on theories across not just meaning, but the other values identified within the ontology.

B.C. Monism, Pluralism, and Polyvalence

One question which has recently received attention is whether meaning in life is a coherent, unified, stable concept or rather an unstable, contextually dependent bundle of concepts.⁵³ *Monism* maintains there is one necessary and sufficient condition for meaning in life, whilst *pluralism* maintains there is more than one condition which might be necessary and/or (jointly) sufficient for meaning in life. Though monists and pluralists may disagree about the number of conditions meaningfulness might require, they agree that meaning in life is a coherent, unified and stable concept; there is one question about meaning in life, and it need only one answer.

Polyvalence, however, rejects this agreement. Rather, polyvalence maintains that meaningfulness is an unstable, contextually dependent group of concepts. For the polyvalent, there are actually multiple questions which have multiple and incommensurate answers. Recently, Mawson (2016, 2018, 2019, 2021) has championed polyvalence, presenting a powerful challenge to the status-quo. Mawson contends that the question, ‘what is the meaning of life?’, turns upon two important hinges: ‘meaning’ and ‘life’. For example, when we speak about meaning ‘of’ or ‘in’ life, we could be doing so on a cosmic scale (what is the meaning of it all?), cosmic significance (what is the meaning of sentient/human life?) personal interest (what is the meaning of my life?), explanation (how did life arise?), etc. Since there is more than one question no any one theory about meaning in life can provide a satisfactory answer because lives can have multiple meanings, all of which have very different sets of conditions. This is, according to Mawson

⁵³ This question has an existing analog within the philosophy of well-being. See (Alexandrova, 2017; Campbell, 2016; Fletcher, 2019).

(2016, p. 173), “a big part of the explanation of why we’re dissatisfied with every answer that has been given to the question and every answer that will be given or can be given to it”.

So far as I can tell, Metz (2018) is the only person who has attempted to defend the status-quo, arguing that we should reject polyvalence because he doubts it would serve us much use in facilitating philosophical discussion about meaning in life. He offers five reasons for thinking so. First, he thinks that once we reflect upon meaning in life, we shall find individualistic interpretations to be central of our collective concern. Second, that because the literature has focused upon this individualistic interpretation of meaning in life, we should continue to do so. Third, by keeping our philosophical concern narrow we can ensure that we do not talk past one another when engaging in philosophical debate. Fourth, keeping the focus narrow helps advance philosophical inquiry. And fifth, the dissatisfaction we feel about theories about meaning in life might be dissatisfaction about something else, other than meaning.

Mawson’s (2018) reply, roughly, is that Metz is being Procrustean. Going into his precise reasons will take us further afield than I would like, so I will just say I am inclined to agree with Mawson’s assessment and it is not hard to see why. Metz, so far as I understand him, does not provide any strictly philosophical argument for why the concept of meaning should be narrowed down to just individual lives. His reasons, rather, seem more pragmatic; it is in our best interest as a field to artificially and purposefully limit the scope of meaning. I think I also fear that Metz is conceding the point; that is, that polyvalence is true but that we should ignore it, or at least pretend it is not true, for pragmatic reasons. Presumably, however, we want to reject polyvalence.

The ontology, I contend, provides a way to settle this dispute. The resolution I offer is as follows: Mawson’s observations are correct, in that questions about ‘meaning’ in/of ‘life’ are incommensurate, but he is wrong in concluding that meaning is, therefore, a polyvalent concept. Rather, Mawson has observed that we confuse a variety of different and distinct *values* which we commonly confuse with meaning, such as fulfilment, significant, purpose, etc. Meaning, however, remains a coherent concept.

I agree with Mawson’s observations that many of the questions and ideas we think about when we invoke ‘meaning’ and ‘life’ are, to a considerable extent, incommensurate. For example, when we think about meaning in life with regards to cosmic significance, we do not take ourselves to be asking about the meaning of life with regards to individual lives or personal interest; these questions appear unique, requiring different answers. From this Mawson draws the conclusion then that meaning must be polyvalent.

However, an alternative proposal - one offered in this thesis - is that these questions are best understood as addressing different evaluative dimensions which often overlap with, but are

distinct from, meaning. For example, questions with regards to the meaning of life in terms of cosmic significance are perhaps best understood as questions pertaining to *purpose*, while questions about what is meaningful to or for someone might be best understood as questions about *fulfilment*. The ontology provides access to an alternative explanation for Mawson's observations - an explanation that allows us to admit he is importantly correct without sacrificing the status quo. We can have a neat compromise between monism/pluralism and polyvalence.

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