

Meaningfulness and Time

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At the tender age of 24, the newly graduated doctor Ernesto Guevara faced a momentous choice. He could stay in Buenos Aires and open a lucrative practice catering to the Argentinean upper class. Alternatively, he could join his friend in Venezuela to work on a clinic for the poor and agitate for social reform. Propelled by a thirst for adventure, he chose the latter option, which led him on the path to become El Che, a key player in the Cuban revolution and the most famous guerrilla of his time – and to a violent death at the age of 37. Now, suppose he would have instead remained an ordinary Ernesto, living a comfortable, unremarkable life until dying of cardiac arrest at 45. This Ernesto, we may stipulate, would have enjoyed more pleasure in his life than Che, satisfied more of his desires, achieved more of his goals, and perhaps even made equal use of his essential human capacities at work and in pursuits like kite surfing. The question is: would it have been unquestionably better for the young doctor to choose this life with his own best interest in mind? Would Ernesto's life necessarily rate higher on well-being than Che's life? Most current theories of well-being imply so. I disagree. It is at least possible that Che's choice led to a more *meaningful* life, and such a life may be worth choosing for one's own sake even if it involves fewer other goods.

In this paper, I will present a theory of meaning in life that accounts for the difference between Che and Ernesto, as well as a number of other fictional and real life cases.

Meaningfulness is a central but, at least in contemporary secular moral theory, hitherto relatively

neglected aspect of well-being.¹ It is a commonsensical idea that it is better to lead a meaningful rather than a meaningless life. But what exactly is meaning in life, and what makes a life meaningful? I will propose a new analysis, according to which we should understand meaningfulness in terms of appropriateness of feelings of fulfilment and admiration. What makes a life meaningful is what makes these emotions appropriate. This turns out to be a relatively complex issue. If we restrict our attention to a single chapter of an agent's life, characterized by a particular hierarchical configuration of activities, its meaningfulness is determined by the objective value of the goals that organize its core projects, the degree to which pursuing them challenges the agent's abilities, the potential there is for others to replace the agent in them, and the prospect of success. All of these are key features of what I will define as the narrative shape of our life at any given moment.

When we look at the meaningfulness of a life as a whole, whether it is our own or someone else's, further features are highlighted. In particular, we can see that in particularly meaningful lives, the goals achieved have *lasting* rather than fleeting value, both within a life and beyond it. Within a life, I will argue that this means that past efforts increase the success of future goal-setting, goal-seeking, and goal-reaching so that the life forms a coherent whole without being dedicated to a single aim. Beyond a lifetime, achievements have lasting value when they impact on the lives of others and even future generations, whether it is by way of artistic or scientific innovation or moral excellence. At the risk of sounding like a PR agent, I will sum this up in the following slogan: life is ideally meaningful when challenging efforts lead to lasting successes. (Once the terms are correctly understood, this will look a lot less like a Hollywood plot description.) This is a narrative shape that is shared by the life stories of our paradigms of

¹ The most striking exceptions are David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 62 (1976): 332–378, Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explorations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), and Susan Wolf's recent work, which I will discuss below.

meaningfulness from Pablo Picasso and Marie Curie to Martin Luther King. I will call this account the Teleological View of meaningfulness.

The Teleological View explains a number of interesting phenomena of prudential value, including the value of achievement and reaching goals. Since coherence, as defined by the view, is a holistic property of a life, the view entails that the contribution of an individual action, event, or experience to meaningfulness, and consequently well-being, depends, not just on its intrinsic properties, but on what has gone on before and what will go on to happen. This amounts to a rejection of the sort of additive or averaging view that has been recently defended by hedonists like Fred Feldman and Ben Bradley. The Teleological View thus joins the debate about the importance of the shape of a life on the narrativist side of Elizabeth Anderson, David Velleman, and Jeff McMahan.² I will argue that the debate between critics and defenders of holism has been, to a degree, miscast in terms of the *hedonic* shape of a life, which is indeed irrelevant.

I will make the case as follows. In the first section, I distinguish between local and global value, and present four cases that suggest both that global value can vary independently of the sum or average of local value, and that this cannot be accounted for by the hedonic shape of a life. Next I introduce the feature that I take to make the difference, namely the meaningfulness of lives, and give a brief overview of traditional conceptions after offering a Fitting Attitudes Analysis of the concept of meaningfulness itself. In the third section, I briefly present the narratological framework in terms of which I propose to analyze the trajectory of a life. Section four employs the framework to identify those features of the shape of a life that contribute to its meaningfulness, and the final section applies the theory to explain, among other things, why

² See Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 34–35, David Velleman, “Well-Being and Time,” reprinted in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), pp. 56–84, and Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 174–182.

global well-being is not a function of local well-being. It also locates the Teleological View among other accounts of prudential value and argues that it can incorporate what is attractive about a number of competitors, since meaningfulness is the final good of active agents.

1. Well-Being Over Time

I will talk about *local* value (or, equivalently, well-being or utility) when focusing on how an individual is benefited or harmed by something considered in isolation from the rest of her life, and *global* value when discussing the well-being of the individual over time, including a whole lifetime. It is hedonists, both in philosophy and psychology, who have been the most explicit in claiming that global value is a function of local value. (No doubt this is because unlike other good things, pleasures and pains have an unambiguous temporal location and duration.) As Fred Feldman puts the claim:

The intrinsic value of a life is equal to the sum of the intrinsic values of the minimal episodes of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure and pain contained in the life.³

On this view, an experience's contribution to global value of a life thus depends only on its intrinsic quality, not on the events that give rise to it or its relations to other experiences. The order in which things take place makes a difference only causally – as Daniel Kahneman puts it, it is better to play tennis before lunch than after lunch, since it is less pleasant to play with a full stomach. To calculate the value of a life, the effects of order must be “incorporated into moment-

³ Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 129.

utilities”, so that anticipation of future events or regret about the past is included among the factors constituting present moment-utility.⁴

Many people, however, share the intuition that there is something wrong with this picture. Franz Brentano, A.C. Ewing, and Michael Slote, David Velleman, and Frances Kamm, among others, believe that *order matters* independently of regret and anticipation.⁵ As Brentano puts it,

Let us think of a process which goes from good to bad or from a great good to a lesser good; then compare it with one which goes in the opposite direction. The latter shows itself as the one to be preferred. This holds even if the sum of the goods in the one process is equal to that in the other.⁶

Brentano terms this the principle of *bonum progressionis*. If the shape of a life is such that things improve for the individual, it is better for her than if things get worse, even if it contains the same amount of goods. If something like *bonum progressionis* is true, a person’s well-being over a period of time is *not* just a function of local benefits, but depends also on their trajectory. Assuming an identical base level of psychological contentment and identical native talent, contrast the following two lives:

Sheer Luck

James is born into a lower middle class family and does badly at school. After dropping out, he takes up a position as a night janitor at minimum wage. One night he happens to see a drug deal gone badly wrong in the parking lot: two dealers shoot each other just before money is about to change hands. There are no police around yet when James cautiously steps forward to check what is in the suitcase, and discovers \$10 million in unmarked notes. He takes the money, leaves the drugs, and takes a Greyhound to Manhattan. He buys a new suit, opens up a bank account, and leases a penthouse by East River. Over the next decade or so, he uses it as a base for many successful escapades into Manhattan nightlife, living it up big time.

⁴ Daniel Kahneman, “Experienced utility and objective happiness: A moment-based approach”. In D. Kahneman and A. Tversky (eds.), *Choices, Values, and Frames* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 678.

⁵ Franz Brentano, *The Foundation and Construction of Ethics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), A.C. Ewing, *Value and Reality* (London: Allen and Unwin), p. 219, Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), Velleman, “Well-Being and Time,” and Frances Kamm, *Intricate Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶ Brentano, *Foundation*, pp. 196–197.

Deterioration

Harry is born into wealth and privilege. He goes to the finest private schools, where his manifest lack of academic interest matters little – he still walks out with excellent connections to the best families. After school, holidays spent sailing at the Bahamas with drinking buddies and aspiring models alternate with wild Manhattan nights with aspiring buddies and drinking models. Then one night Harry’s father gets caught for running a pyramid scheme. There is no more allowance for Harry, and his calls to friends are no longer returned. Soon the mortgage on his bachelor pad catches up on him. An old friend of his father takes pity on him, and arranges a job as a night janitor. Here Harry spends the next decade or so, cursing his bad luck and reminiscing with the bottle.

In Sheer Luck, things start out badly and end up well. Deterioration is the opposite. I am stipulating that the average levels of local utility in the early and late parts of the lives are mirror images of each other, which naturally involves the incorporation of whatever effect delight or disappointment have on how each life goes. *Bonum progressionis* says that Sheer Luck is better in virtue of the temporal distribution of benefits within it.

But *why* should it matter when good things happen in a life? While Brentano is content with a brute appeal to intuition, David Velleman suggests that this is because of the “narrative significance of the events with which they are associated”⁷, though he does not explain what narrative significance is or why it matters. But if he’s on the right track, it is possible for two lives with the same temporal distribution of momentary utilities to contain a different amount of well-being, if the underlying stories differ. Consider this:

Hard Work

Maria is born into a lower middle class family with an alcoholic father and ailing mother. She is not a particularly popular child, but takes refuge in schoolwork. After a science fair prize, she is offered a stipend for an exclusive prep school, but has to turn it down to stay home and take care of her large family. A few years later, she is able to attend night classes at a local community college, and does so well that she is offered a job as a laboratory assistant at a nearby medical school. Surprising a professor with her intelligence, she is eventually offered a position in a research group. Working night and day, she comes up with a new way to synthesize proteins and becomes the lead author of a breakthrough paper. Soon afterwards, she is rewarded a PhD and a scholarship. Quickly promoted into a

⁷ Ibid., p. 72.

full professorship, she buys a house for the whole family and gets her parents into the best treatment available. Now able to focus on research and teaching, she achieves more important breakthroughs and receives a number of teaching awards, being known for being particularly supportive of students from poor backgrounds.

Holding local utilities fixed, my intuition is that Hard Work as a whole is a better life for the agent than Sheer Luck, though both involve the same pattern of increasing pleasure. To be sure, this is not a simple evaluation to make. We must ignore the benefits the life may bring to *other* people. Nor should we simply ask ourselves which life we would prefer to lead for our own sake. Insofar as we are evaluating the life as a whole, the best form of the question might be “Which life would it be better to have lived?” (Imagine, if it helps, that the characters in the vignettes die in a random accident at the point where the story ends.) Posing the question in this form makes it clearer that Hard Work is the best of the lives considered so far.

Assuming, then, that Hard Work is better for the agent than Sheer Luck, it looks like how people get their pleasure and pain makes an independent contribution to the value of a life for the individual. A plausible hypothesis is that an event does not make your life better just by causing pleasure (or some other local benefit), but also by moving your story ahead. This is something Velleman notices, as I’ve said.⁸ But he still seems to think that the mere temporal ordering of local value, the good following the bad, makes an independent contribution.⁹ But consider the following life with the same temporal distribution of benefits as Deterioration, but a different narrative structure:

⁸ See, for example the following passage: “How the value of one’s life is affected by a period of failure combined with a period of success, for example, cannot be computed merely from the timing of these periods and the amounts of well-being they contain. Their impact on the value of one’s life depends as well on the narrative relations among the successes and failures involved. (Ibid., p. 72)

⁹ For example, the passage quoted in the previous footnote lists ‘timing of these periods’ as one factor affecting the value of one’s life.

Noble Failure

Joan is born into wealth and privilege. She receives the best schooling that money can buy after a childhood of innocent play. She graduates at the top of the class in her medical school. As a popular and resourceful campaigner, she is successful in raising sufficient funds for a major charity project, a clinic for the poor in Africa. For a while the clinic thrives under her leadership. Then one night the soldiers arrive, drawn by the newfound prosperity of the village. It is unclear whether they represent the corrupt government or the corrupt rebels, but they systematically rape and kill the staff and patients and raze the building to the ground. Joan watches the rampage from a nearby hut, until she is transported into safety against her will. Dejected, she withdraws from aid organizations and her old circle of friends. Eventually she takes a low-paying and repetitive night job at a downtown clinic, whose many traumatized refugee patients are a daily reminder of her failure.

Is Joan's global well-being lower than that of Harry in Sheer Luck? Remember that the sum total of momentary utilities is the same by stipulation. Joan is just as happy at first as Harry is at the end, and just as unhappy at the end as Harry at the beginning. I believe that once we focus on which is the better life to have lived, we see that Noble Failure is better, in spite of moving from good to bad rather than vice versa. This suggests that the temporal ordering of benefits as such makes negligible or no difference. Rather, the progress of the life seems to favour Noble Failure over Sheer Luck, for reasons that we will examine. The total utility ranking for the four lives I have discussed is then Hard Work > Noble Failure > Sheer Luck > Deterioration.

What the preceding considerations highlight is that there are in fact two rival conceptions of what makes for the shape of a life. First, there is what we may call the *hedonic shape* of a life, the temporal distribution of good and bad experiences within it. When Feldman responds to the Shape of a Life objection to hedonism, it is clear from his examples (and talk about 'hedonic trajectory'¹⁰) that it is the hedonic shape that he has in mind, and the same goes for Kahneman. But as the above cases suggest, it is not really the *hedonic shape* that makes the difference, but the *narrative shape*. But what exactly is narrative shape, and why does it matter? What sort of

¹⁰ Feldman, *Pleasure*, p. 131.

narrative structure is good for the protagonist? These are the questions I will try to answer in the following. In short, what I want to say is that Noble Failure is a better life than Sheer Luck because it is more *meaningful*, and meaningfulness is a function of the structure of the agent's goal-directed activities, in other words, the narrative shape of one's life. In the last section, I will argue that this explanation is superior to other alternatives currently on offer.

2. The Concept and Conceptions of Meaningfulness

What we are saying of a life when we say it is meaningful – that is, what the *concept* as opposed to a conception of meaningfulness is in the context of talking about lives? This question has, unfortunately, been neglected in contemporary discussions of meaning in life, and not clearly distinguished from the question about what *makes* a life meaningful, with the result that it is hard to see exactly what it is that people proposing alternative conceptions disagree about. (Compare Rawls's distinction between the concept and rival conceptions of justice.) To begin with, someone who has meaning in her life has a reason to go on living. Her life has a purpose, a direction, a kind of depth as opposed to shallowness. These conceptual connections, I hope, are mere platitudes that serve to delimit our topic and distinguish it from other senses of 'meaning' that are not relevant to someone's life going well.¹¹ The problem with these platitudinous characterizations is that they are fairly uninformative, and so not very helpful in deciding between competing conceptions of meaningfulness.

It is therefore worth attempting a more informative and no doubt controversial analysis of our talk of meaning in life. I will reject one surprisingly popular approach out of hand. Clearly,

¹¹ Indeed, they distinguish it from a broader question that is also sometimes discussed under the heading of 'the meaning of life': why is there something rather than nothing? This metaphysical or cosmological question of meaning need not deter us here.

life doesn't have a meaning like words or signs do. It does not signify anything, and it would be misleading to look for meaning of life in this direction.¹² Instead, we should begin with what people are concerned about when they worry about whether their lives are devoid of meaning and what they celebrate when they rejoice in the dawning of new meaning in their lives. A clue for this can be found by thinking about what we mean when we say that an object or a place is meaningful for us. A monetarily worthless brooch inherited from a grandmother is meaningful for us when it is such as to give rise to affectively charged memories and emotions. We are not indifferent to it, but find it unique and irreplaceable. In the same vein, we say that a fling is meaningless if it does not engage our emotions, even if it is pleasurable. Its object is fungible: if it could just as well have been anyone else, the affair means little.

Along these lines, I will say that someone's life is meaningful in the relevant sense when certain emotions and attitudes are not out of place. This is a kind of Fitting Attitudes Analysis, which has been very popular in value theory lately. Emotions and attitudes that are conceptually linked to meaningfulness seem to include pride, joy, a kind of hope, self-esteem, even elevation on the part of the agent, and admiration and inspiration on the part of others. For short, I will talk about *feelings of fulfilment and admiration* being appropriate. They would be out of place if the person lacked a reason to live, if anyone could replace her, if her life was going nowhere. There is thus at least an extensional equivalence between meaning in life and the appropriateness of emotions of fulfilment and admiration. I will mostly speak in stronger terms and say that meaningfulness is *constituted* by the appropriateness of these reactions, but as far as I can see, nothing much hangs on whether the stronger thesis is accepted.

¹² For recent examples of this sort of effort, see Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), *passim*, and John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London, Routledge), pp. 21–22. Syntactic evidence for this being a different sense of 'meaningful' is that the adjective is not gradable when it comes to signs or words: either a sentence is meaningful or it is not. (See below for gradability.)

These emotions admit of degree, as does meaning in life. When we say that a life is meaningful, period, we take it to be meaningful to a degree that surpasses a contextually determined threshold. ‘Meaningful’, as applied to lives, is a gradable adjective like ‘flat’ or ‘tall’. For such adjectives, it is common to take the comparative to be semantically basic, and understand non-comparative uses in terms of being located at least as high along the relevant dimension as a contextually determined standard of comparison.¹³ In the case of ‘tall’, the dimension is height, and “X is tall” is true if and only if X’s degree of tallness is at least as great as that of the contextually determined standard of comparison, often thought to be determined by some percentage of the salient comparison class (e.g. other five-year old boys, if the salient feature of X is being a five-year old boy). I will not go into the intricacies of the semantics of gradables here, except to note that applying the standard model requires some way of understanding degrees along the dimension of meaningfulness. One way to do this is in terms of distance from an optimum (cf. ‘flat’).¹⁴ So for persons A and B, we can say that ‘A’s life is more meaningful than B’s life’ is true if and only if A’s life more closely approximates an ideally meaningful life than B’s. The positive form ‘A’s life is meaningful’, in turn, is true if and only if A’s life is more meaningful than the contextually determined standard of comparison, which could vary from the life of an average person similar to A to the life of someone the participants in conversation consider successful, all depending on the context.¹⁵

¹³ See e.g. Christopher Kennedy, “Vagueness and Grammar: The Semantics of Relative and Absolute Gradable Adjectives,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30 (1): 1–45.

¹⁴ So, for ‘flat’, we might say that ‘x is flatter than y’ is true if and only if x approximates an ideally flat surface more closely than y. ‘X is flat’, in turn, is true if and only if for most (or the large majority of) surfaces c in the contextually salient comparison class C, x is flatter than c. For example, ‘Kansas is flat’ is true when the salient comparison class is other American states, since its surface more closely approximates an ideally flat one than those of the large majority of other states, and false if the contextually appropriate comparison class includes ice hockey rinks, tabletops, and the like.

¹⁵ As with other gradable adjectives, we sometimes explicitly state a comparison class, as in “Steve’s life is meaningful for a homeless person”. Keith DeRose points out in “Gradable Adjectives: A Defence of Pluralism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1): 141–160 that this still leaves open many issues, such as what percentile

Methodologically, this semantics has two important consequences. First, to understand comparative judgments of meaningfulness, we must articulate what kind of life would be ideally meaningful, and lay out dimensions along which actual lives can more or less approximate that ideal. Second, we have to be careful with intuitions concerning non-comparative judgments, since they involve a standard of comparison that is usually left tacit. In particular, the fact that we judge a life to be meaningful (by implicit comparison to some other lives) even in the absence of some feature *f* does not entail that *f* is not required for an ideally meaningful life. The important question to ask is whether adding *f* would make the life even *more* meaningful.

The analysis of meaningfulness in terms of appropriateness of emotions fits common intuitions well. Think about someone whose life is paradigmatically meaningful, say Martin Luther King. Would it not have been appropriate for him at the end of his life to take a kind of pride in the path he had taken and what it had led to, whether or not he actually did feel it? Would it not be proper for anyone to be inspired by his story, whether or not they actually are? I wager that the same goes for anyone whose life we think as meaningful. By contrast, meaninglessness goes together with the absence or inappropriateness of such reactions. This is manifest, for example, in the lines of Robert Frost's poem describing the sad existence of a dying ranch hand: "And nothing to look backward to with pride/And nothing to look forward to with hope"¹⁶. If there is no room for such emotions in the hired hand's life, there is nothing much at stake in his going on living.¹⁷

with respect to meaningfulness the relevant standard of comparison is – it's probably not sufficient that Steve's life is more meaningful than the average homeless person, but does it have to fall, say, in the 95th percentile for the non-comparative claim to be true? I must ignore these concerns here.

¹⁶ Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man," online at <http://www.bartleby.com/118/3.html>.

¹⁷ If human life in general is meaningless, we're all in that predicament, whether we think so or not – feelings of fulfilment and admiration are never merited. This is one way to understand what metaphysical absurdity of life would be. These core emotions would always and necessarily be inappropriate, ridiculously incongruous with reality.

Conceptions of Meaningfulness

What, then, *makes* a life meaningful, such as to merit feelings of fulfilment and admiration?

Answers to this question are *conceptions* of meaningfulness. Before moving on to my own view, I will very briefly introduce three classic rivals. One traditional conception appeals to serving a larger purpose, such as carrying out one's part in God's great plan. I will call these *Higher Purpose* views. My account of the concept of meaningfulness makes it readily intelligible why such a view is a response to the question. If Abraham furthers God's plan for the world through his actions, it makes sense to think that feelings of fulfilment and admiration are appropriate reactions to his life. It has a purpose as a part of a greater purpose, like a cog in an engine might have a purpose as a part of a whole.

The basic problem with Higher Purpose accounts is a Euthyphro-style dilemma. Either the higher purpose is good by some independent criterion, in which case the reference to a God is superfluous (we might as well just talk about actions serving a *valuable*, rather than *higher* purpose), or it is not good, in which case serving it would not make life any more meaningful. Working for an evil demon would not make pride or admiration appropriate.¹⁸

One response to the absence of Higher Purpose is to give up. There is nothing but the vast, indifferent universe, untouched by our brief moment of existence. Not only are we thrown into a world we did not choose, but soon we and all whom we love decay and die. So, the thought goes, all striving is ultimately pointless. But it is a hard thought even for an existentialist, and there is a tempting alternative nearby, for we can, after all, still make choices and perhaps *create* value and meaning in the face of the void. So, for example, on Richard Taylor's well-known *Voluntarist*

¹⁸ Sometimes advocates of Higher Purpose views talk about 'connection to something larger' (see Nozick, *Philosophical Explorations*, p. 599 ff.), but if this is meant to be something different from the above, it merely postpones the question – why should connecting to something larger make one's life meaningful? The metaphor is badly in need of cashing out, as Wolf points out. I will make an attempt below.

view, our lives are meaningful when our heart is in what we do, for whatever reason.¹⁹ He goes as far as to suggest that the life of Sisyphus, the Greek mythological character, who was condemned to roll a rock up the hill until it rolled down and then begin again, would be meaningful if only the gods were merciful enough to make him want to roll the rock. But the Voluntarist view is far too permissive, once we remember to disambiguate the notion of a life being meaningful *for* someone. Just as a food can be unhealthy for a person even if she thinks it is healthy, a life can be meaningless for someone even if she thinks it is meaningful.²⁰ It may be that the Willing Sisyphus *finds* his life meaningful, but in truth it is the same old pointless drudgery.

So what are we left with? According to a third kind of view, both Higher Purpose and Voluntarist views are flawed, but there is something right about each – it is no accident that they have historically had so many supporters. The Voluntarist is right in thinking that meaning in life requires some kind of subjective endorsement. If I am entirely alienated from what I do, there is not much point for *me* to keep doing it, even if it is otherwise valuable. Feelings of fulfilment would hardly be appropriate if my heart was not in what I was doing – in a sense, it wouldn't really be *my* action to take pride in. What the Higher Purpose view, in turn, gets right is that meaningful activity serves an objectively valuable purpose. As Susan Wolf notes, the paradigm of meaningless existence is a blob who “spends day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies”²¹, that is, engaging in activities that involve no objective or even interpersonal value. What Higher Purpose gets wrong is that such a purpose can only be supernatural. As long as there are objectively valuable things without

¹⁹ Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

²⁰ See Richard Kraut, *What Is Good and Why* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), §21 for a discussion of the different senses of ‘for’ in the context of goodness.

²¹ Susan Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives,” manuscript, p. 6.

a higher being – and most contemporary metaethical theories from expressivism to naturalism and non-naturalism agree that there are – no such assumption is needed.

I will call the sort of view that combines subjective endorsement with objective but non-supernatural value the New Standard View, since it is embraced by most non-theistic philosophers working on the issue. As Neil Levy points out, its elements can be found in the work of Wolf, David Wiggins, Robert Nozick, and even John Kekes.²² Wolf's account is no doubt the most fully developed. Going through a number of cases, she draws out a list of key contrasts: in a meaningful life, there is activity rather than passivity, objective value rather than mere subjective investment, loving engagement rather than alienation, and success in central projects rather than failure. As Wolf summarizes it, “a meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value.”²³ As her slogan goes, in a meaningful life *subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness*. In what follows, I will be building on Wolf's account.

3. The Narrative Shape of a Life

The problem with the New Standard View is that even though it gets much right about meaningfulness, it doesn't get *life* quite right. It is silent on how meaningfulness builds over time, focusing only on activities at a time. Here a remark by Alasdair MacIntyre is apt. He notes that when someone complains that her life is meaningless, “it lacks any point, any movement toward a climax or a *telos*.”²⁴ A meaningless life is one that is not going anywhere or moving

²² Neil Levy, “Downshifting and the Meaning of Life,” *Ratio* 18 (2) (2005): 176–189, at pp. 179-180. Joseph Raz's views on well-being are closely related.

²³ Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives” and Tanner Lectures on Human Values 2008 (manuscript).

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p. 202.

forward. This is not sufficiently captured by talk of successful engagement in projects of positive value. As I will argue, it is possible for two agents at a time to engage in the same activities with the same level of success and yet for one's life to be more meaningful than that of the other, insofar as the overall plots of their lives differ. In short, we need to understand life in temporal, dynamic terms to best capture our intuitions about meaningfulness. I will call the resulting account the Teleological View of meaning in life.

Understanding the concept of meaningfulness in terms of the appropriateness of feelings of fulfilment and admiration buttresses the case for the thesis that the direction of the life matters. It should not be controversial that these are *narrative emotions* – they are clearly tied to goal-seeking, success, effort, and ability, as well as bringing about something valuable. For example, though pride in general is a broad notion that allows for many sources, there is also a recognizable kind of pride, call it *agential pride*, which one cannot feel unless one sees oneself as the protagonist of a particular kind of story, in which one has successfully overcome a difficult challenge in the pursuit of a valuable goal. (The relevant kind of admiration and inspiration need to be similarly restricted.) Such an emotion is not merited, of course, unless one has actually done so – unless the story is a true one. Understanding meaningfulness in terms of merited feelings of fulfilment and admiration thus suggests that it is linked to the story of one's life.

But, one might object, this is too quick: stories are one thing and life is another. There is a traditional argument, put forward by Sartre, among others, to the effect that all stories we tell of our lives are false.²⁵ They retrospectively impose form and coherence on the chaos of living,

²⁵ As Roquentin, the narrator of Sartre's *Nausea*, puts it: "There are no beginnings. Days are tacked onto days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. ... That's living. But everything changes when you tell about life; it's a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly

selecting some events as important and leaving out others. Perhaps our *sense* of the meaningfulness of our lives is linked to the stories we tell ourselves, but, the objection goes, meaningfulness itself could not be. To avoid this, we need to distinguish between the structure of a narrative and the structure of its object, life itself. What I will argue is that the life of a rational agent is *essentially narratable*. We can tell true stories about lives, and employ narratological concepts to analyze certain features of our lives, because lives are already organized in a suitable way. That is, even before any storytelling, a life has a *plot* or (more unambiguously) a *fabula*.²⁶ It consists of a sequence of connected events of which true stories or narratives could be told, by oneself or another. When I talk about ‘narrative shape’, I refer to the properties of the strictly chronological sequence at the level of the lived plot or fabula – the path that a life takes – rather than to any of the multitude of stories that could be told of a life. (Hence, the term ‘narrative’ shape is slightly inaccurate.)

Since Aristotle, narratologists have recognized certain basic elements of plot in stories about real life. There are, of course, many kinds of plot, but on a sufficiently abstract level of description, we find many folk tales, classical tragedies, novels, movies converging on the so-called Aristotelian structure. An episode begins with a state of *equilibrium*. Then something happens that upsets the balance, and the protagonist has to do something to resolve the conflict. Undertaking this effort amounts to what is called *rising action*. Some theorists distinguish between various elements within rising action: there is an *attempt* to reach a goal by a protagonist, which leads to a *consequence*, another event or someone else’s action that may be

be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite direction.” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions, 1938/1969), p. 39; translation modified)

²⁶ See Mieke Bal. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 5. A story, in her terms, is the fabula presented in a certain way – from certain perspective(s), with a certain temporal ordering, rhythm, description of characters, and so on. Confusingly, some narratologists use ‘story’ for fabula, opposing it to ‘discourse’ or ‘sjuzet’.

wholly or in part unexpected and in turn calls for a *reaction* on the part of the agent.²⁷ This cycle may repeat itself, until it culminates in a climax, a decisive turning point. This is followed by a denouement, reduction of tension and return to a state of equilibrium, or, if things go badly, a decisive failure.²⁸ As Aristotle himself suggests when he talks about tragedy being “an imitation (*mimesis*) [...] of actions and of life”²⁹, this basic plot structure non-coincidentally corresponds to the structure of temporally extended human action, which no doubt explains its popularity in stories that are about the doings of human beings. We undertake projects in response to changes in our circumstances, try to carry them out with more or less co-operation from the world and other agents, and succeed or fail. This is why episodes of real lives have Aristotelian plots.

Of course, we are hardly ever engaged in just one project, but many overlapping ones, some more central than others. At a given time, the projects that one is engaged in form a particular hierarchical configuration, which may remain essentially the same for a long time, particularly at the top – consider attending graduate school, being a tenure-track professor, and so on. The same sort of aims and activities are central to the agent for the period. Typically, the relationships and the environment which form the background for the activities also remain largely the same – major changes in the environment (say divorce or a job in another country) tend to mean changes in the array and configuration of one’s projects as well. I will call a relatively stable combination of activities and settings a *chapter* of a life. Life as a whole consists of a variable number of such chapters, related to each other in different ways.

²⁷ See Dan McAdams, *Stories We Live By* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), p. 25–26.

²⁸ Aristotle summarizes this basic arc in the *Poetics* as follows: “Every tragedy consists of a complication and a resolution. [...] By *complication* I mean everything from the beginning up to and including the section which immediately precedes the change to good fortune or bad fortune; by *resolution* I mean everything from the beginning of the change of fortune to the end.” (*Poetics* 55b)

²⁹ *Poetics* 50a.

The parameters of the narrative shape of a life are thus essentially the following: What kind of goals does the agent adopt in her core projects? How does she pursue the goals? How successful is she in reaching the goals? And how do the agent's long-term projects relate to each other? Other people, as I see it, figure in this teleological structure in various narrative roles defined in terms of goal-directed activity – as sources of motivation, as helpers or opponents or bystanders in pursuit, or as targets of activity, its beneficiaries or victims.

4. Ideally Meaningful Lives

I argued earlier that we need a conception of an ideally meaningful life that could serve as a point of comparison for assessing actual lives. To arrive at it, I will begin with a simple case and work toward a scenario closer to a full human life, trying to figure out what the best settings for the narrative parameters are, as it were. As is standard in normative theorizing, my goal is to find a reflective equilibrium between our intuitions about meaningfulness and the account I am constructing. To make these intuitions more concrete, I am going to discuss first what appears to me to be a paradigmatically meaningful real life chapter, the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott led by Martin Luther King.³⁰ I will examine, in turn, what makes for most meaningful projects, relationships, and whole lives.

Meaningful Projects

We undertake projects when we perceive a negative change or feature in our environment or ourselves, or perhaps an opportunity. There is injustice, ignorance, unhappiness, physiological or

³⁰ My account will be largely based on Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), chapters 4 and 5.

psychological disturbance, or maybe unexplored possibilities for improvement. So we set ourselves a goal to reach. From the perspective of meaningfulness, the most important goals are those embedded in the core projects that define a chapter, since it is such projects that determine what our life is about, so to speak, at any given time. The first question, then, is whether such goals are worth the effort to reach them, or a waste of time. A worthwhile goal will be a state of affairs that has lasting value of one variety or another. I take it that one condition for lasting value is that the goal is *objectively valuable* – bringing it about is good independently of what I think of its value, or of what anyone else thinks.³¹ Other things being equal, the more valuable the goal, the more meaning it promises. If nothing is objectively valuable, nothing is worth our while, as the New Standard View, too, notes. (I will set aside concerns about value nihilism here.)

In the case of the Montgomery bus boycott, the goal was ending segregation and thus bringing racial equality closer to reality. Had it been merely enriching the participants, it would hardly have conferred much meaning on their lives. The objective value of the goal may be moral, as in King's case, but need not be such – creating beauty or discovering how the world works, for example, may give meaning to an activity. The essential thing is that it has value that goes beyond pleasing the agent herself. Further, if the goal is set from without, and the agent does not wholeheartedly embrace it and make it her own, the project will not be as meaningful for her. The goal may be valuable, but the value will not be connected to the agent herself in the right way.

³¹ It is sometimes objected that having a valuable goal cannot be necessary, since Hitler's life was meaningful (see e.g. John Kekes "The Meaning of Life," in Peter French and Howard Wettstein (eds.), *Life and Death: Metaphysics and Ethics. Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 24, pp. 17–34, at p. 30). I deny the presupposition; Hitler's life was, in fact, meaningless. To be sure, he *thought* it was meaningful, at least as long as things were going well. But his projects gave him no reason to live, or anything to be proud about and celebrate.

The next step in the Aristotelian plot sequence is ‘rising action’, carrying out the plan. Here, it seems, meaningfulness aligns with perfectionist views of the good life that emphasize the full use of our powers.³² There’s no pride or self-esteem to be had for doing something that is trivial for us, something that requires no special skill or effort. This is part of what is bad about jobs that require a lot of effort but little skill – cleaning latrines day after day is far from a paradigm of a meaningful life. For something to be an accomplishment, reaching it must require the exercise of our capacities, the fuller the exercise the more meaningful the life. Practical reasoning plays a central role here, since it is involved both in choosing the goals to begin with and in breaking them down to subtasks that are within our immediate reach. Moreover, meaningful action will often involve intelligent revision of original plans in response to negative feedback. But practical reason, even with its allies imagination and will power, is not our only perfection. The pursuit of valuable goals may gain meaning from emotional engagement and physical effort as well.

Consider again the Montgomery boycott. From the beginning, King was pushed to his limits. The very night of his election to leadership he gave such a powerful impromptu speech on justice and non-violence at a mass meeting that even his closest friends were surprised. But firing up the crowd was not enough. The non-violent means had to be translated from rhetoric into practice. It meant finding an alternative transportation scheme for those blacks who were for some reason unable to walk to work. With a number of others, King organized a car pool that was kept running through the boycott in spite of repeated harassment by the police. The tactics had to evolve constantly in response to new moves by the segregationists in power, including bomb attacks and arrests. King also needed to hold his own in negotiations and represent the movement in the media. All this creative and challenging activity, I submit, contributed to the

³² See e.g. Richard Kraut, *What Is Good and Why* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

meaningfulness of the episode. Had achieving bus desegregation been easy – as it was in some other cities subsequently – it would not have made King’s life during the period as meaningful. I emphasize this perfectionist aspect of meaningfulness, because it is not captured by the New Standard View.

Finally, the project results either in success or failure. Either the valuable state of affairs is brought about or it isn’t. As we saw, Wolf notes that failure in central projects can render someone’s life less meaningful. I believe this is true, but reaching the goal is not always the only important thing. In some cases, merely having done one’s best is a state of affairs that it is valuable to bring about. As I have pointed out, the outcome of the project is not just changes in the world, but also changes in the agent. Failure to reach the goal can be redeemed from the perspective of meaningfulness if the action leads to a desirable change in the agent, especially if it couldn’t have been reached in any other way. Further, as Aristotle points out, some activities, such as contemplation, are such that their point does not depend on reaching a goal but rather, in a sense, the goal is present in them at every point.³³ In these cases, success consists in doing whatever one does well rather than badly, which renders one less vulnerable to external luck.

As we know, the Montgomery bus boycott ended happily. King was catapulted to regional and national recognition. There was personal change, too; as Taylor Branch characterizes it, “[t]he boycott had touched [King] indelibly – astonished, battered, broadened, and inflamed him.”³⁴ I submit that had the campaign failed, King’s efforts, and his life during the period, would have been less meaningful. The same goes for a possible situation in which he would have failed to learn anything from the campaign. These alternative scenarios highlight the fact that success, and with it meaningfulness, is in part a matter of luck. We cannot control or anticipate

³³ For example in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1176b–1178b. I am grateful to Richard Kraut for emphasizing this point.

³⁴ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 203.

everything, the more so when we aim high and incur risk. But then it should be no part of a theory of meaningfulness, any more than good life in general, that we are alone in charge of our destinies.

Meaningful Relationships

How do relationships to others contribute to the narrative shape of our lives and thereby to its meaningfulness? To begin with, having others in the narrative role of a helper, someone who contributes to reaching one's goal, is both valuable in itself and instrumentally useful for success. Helpers contribute to meaningfulness along perfectionist lines, because having others working with you or supporting you allows you to exercise your social and emotional capacities. This certainly makes a vast difference to our *sense* of meaningfulness, as anyone who is lucky enough to have participated in a demanding and vital project with a dedicated group can attest. This is one place in which the idea of having a purpose as a part of a larger functional system – like a cog in a machine – gains traction. It is surely no coincidence that many soldiers describe their hard and demanding experience as fulfilling and meaningful.³⁵ In addition to helpers, suitably matched opponents, whether people or forces of nature, can also play a positive role. They provide the need and opportunity to engage our wits and other abilities – after all, a life in which good things come easy can easily be a boring life. Again, had ending segregation been a matter of merely sending a strongly worded letter, it would not have contributed equally to the meaningfulness of the lives of the civil rights activists.

³⁵ For example, the former Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee described his participation in World War II by saying it was "more exciting, more meaningful than anything I'd ever done. This is why I had such a wonderful time in the war. I just plain loved it. Loved the excitement, even loved being a little bit scared. Loved the sense of achievement, even if it was only getting from Point A to Point B; loved the camaraderie... the responsibility." (Quoted in David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 712-3.)

It is common to think that love and friendship are crucial to leading a meaningful life. On the Teleological View, loved ones and friends contribute to meaningfulness indirectly, by way of occupying the narrative role of source or target. The sorrow of a friend motivates us to arrange a trip together, and the joy of a partner is the happy outcome of a successful effort. By way of making an impact on lives beyond one's own, an agent can create something of lasting value. This is surely crucial for our judgments about the meaningfulness of whole lives, and looms large in the case of our paradigms of meaningfulness, such as Dr. King. Another important aspect of personal relationships is their link to *irreplaceability*. In contrast to other worthwhile goals, there are goods that only you can confer to people with whom you are in a loving relationship, whether it is your partner, daughter, or grandfather. Someone else can make a wooden assault rifle for your son or daughter, but it will not have the same significance as a handmade gift from a parent. No one else can take your place in such activities. This is important even when the activities in question are valuable as such.

In this way, non-narrative relationships form a crucial part of the background of lived stories, giving a point to activities and so indirectly contributing to the narrative shape of a life. A person who stands only in impersonal relationships to others – as a customer, sales assistant, taxpayer or the like – can be easily substituted for, as long as there are others who share the capabilities involved. There is less reason for precisely her to engage in the activities she does. Apart from extraordinary cases of, say, solitary artistic achievement, relationships are thus essential to meaningfulness on the Teleological View.

I will summarize the main results so far as follows:

Meaningful Projects

A central project contributes to the meaningfulness of a chapter to the degree that a) the goal is interpersonally or objectively valuable, b) the agent adopts the goal as her own, is

irreplaceable, and exercises her essential human capacities in pursuing it, and c) the agent is successful in reaching the goal and is positively changed by this.

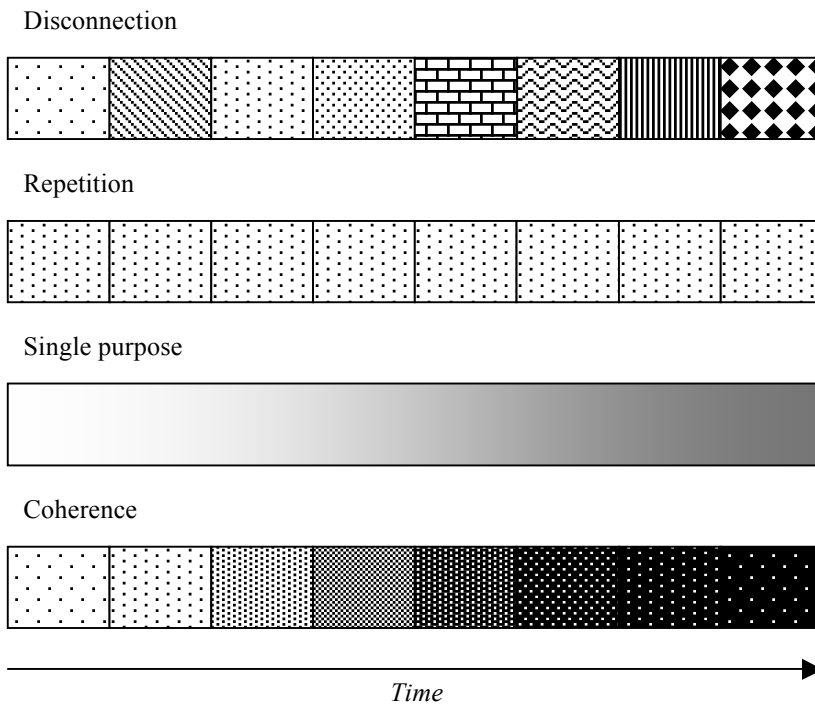
It is easy to see why this is a teleological view: the first conjunct defines the ideal for goal-setting, the second for goal-seeking, and the last for goal-reaching. While it incorporates the insights of the New Standard View, Meaningful Projects also adds to them, especially with respect to goal-seeking. And as we will see, it is designed to fit a larger picture of the progress of a whole life, which will also be relevant to meaningfulness. I do not pretend, however, that Meaningful Projects provides a formula for calculating how meaningful a period of someone's life is. But it does provide help for evaluating lives and deciding between options. This is most straightforward when two (potential) lives differ only on one dimension, such as success in reaching goals. If, as often, there is difference along more dimensions, comparison is straightforward as long as one life rates higher on all of them. Difficulties begin when one life rates higher than another on, say, value of the goal, but lower in terms of capacity exercise. Which is more meaningful? Here we must say with Aristotle (and Ross): the decision rests with judgment. The first virtue of a theory is faithfulness to the facts, and in the case of meaningfulness, assigning lexical ordering or weighting to meaning-conferring properties of lives would distort the facts. The theory tells us which features to look for, but not how to weigh them in particular cases.

Meaningful Lives

We have seen what kind of central projects the most meaningful chapters of lives involve, but what about whole lives? The issue of the meaningfulness of an entire life requires us to look at the relationships among life's episodes and chapters. There are four possible ideal-typical

combinations over a lifetime. First, it could be that the chapters, even if they are meaningful in themselves, are radically disconnected.³⁶ Or, second, it could be that essentially the same episodes, the same tasks and activities in the same environment and calling on the same skills repeat themselves over and over again. Third, the chapters could be unified by a single overarching goal. Finally, there could be a plurality of mutually supporting goals and chapters. These possibilities can be schematically represented in figure 1. Different patterns represent different configurations of projects and relationships:

Figure 1: Possible lives



These scenarios are, naturally, heavily idealized, and not just because all the chapters are the same length – real lives no doubt exhibit various sorts of connections between chapters. But it should pay off to think about the pure cases to understand how the way life as a whole hangs

³⁶ Galen Strawson, in “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio* 17 (4) (2004): 428–452, famously claims that is the case with his life. Since I am not committed to any view about the significance of narrative unity to ethics or identity, I will not take issue with his arguments here.

together impacts on its meaningfulness. For this purpose I will assume, as far as possible, that each chapter is meaningful considered in isolation by the above criteria.

Let us begin with repetition. It is strictly speaking impossible for human beings, given that we grow and change as children and face very different challenges in adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Even if we would like everything to stay the same, it won't. It may be legitimate for accounts of meaningfulness to ignore childhood, on the ground that questions about meaning are out of place before one is in a position to adopt self-governed ground projects, but neglect of other parts of the natural arc of life is less excusable. Still, for theoretical purposes, let us think of an adult life that consists of repetition of similar chapters, each meaningful in itself. I can think of no better example than the life of someone who is stuck in the position of a Visiting Assistant Professor year after year, perhaps only with different institutions to mark the difference between chapters. There is no reason why such a life would not be meaningful on the New Standard View. It can involve the successful pursuit of the valuable goal of teaching, say, American history to undergraduates. One may come away at the end of the year having learned much oneself. But if, after seven years, one nevertheless begins to feel that one's life is going nowhere, this feeling is not inappropriate. If one is fed a selective amnesia pill at the end of each year, or if one is for some reason happy with one's lot, the situation is no better – the feeling is not there, but it would be warranted. Surely this is not the arc of the most meaningful life. Consider, too, the scenario in which Martin Luther King follows up the Montgomery Bus Boycott with a Birmingham Bus Boycott, Memphis Bus Boycott, and so on. Let them all be successful; nevertheless, such a life, though surely not meaningless, would not be as admirable and inspiring as King's actual life was.

So, repetition does not make for an ideally meaningful life. What about its opposite, maximal variety? There is a kind of an appeal of adventure to it, at least initially. But let us recall that for the chapters to be truly disconnected, in such a life success never breeds success and no lessons are learned from failures. Think of a Visiting Assistant Professor who after four years of short-term success leaves academia to train as a registered nurse, quits that to become a business reporter, and so on. Again, for these chapters to be disconnected, it cannot be the case that one's experience carries over. From the perspective of the present, the past might as well not have happened. Were the professor-cum-nurse to look back on her graduate school and teaching years, she would be justified in thinking that they were, to some extent, wasted; were she to think ahead and realize that her present activity, as important as it is, will not bear any fruit for the future, she would be justified in questioning the point of it in prudential terms. This highlights again the importance of lasting value for meaningfulness. If good deeds and hard-earned lessons are just a flash in the pan, here today, gone tomorrow, a kind of futility attaches to them.

One way to avoid the problems with both Repetition and Disconnection would be to say that in an ideally meaningful life all activities are subsumed under one valuable, overarching goal. (This may be MacIntyre's view.) In a sense, the whole life is one long chapter. Sometimes this condition is treated as a descriptive fact about the shape of a life, but that is either false or trivial. Perhaps on an abstract enough level, a life can perhaps always be described as a quest for Happiness or Justice or Wisdom. But with few exceptions, these abstract goals do not organize one's activities. They are not psychologically real ground projects. So I will understand Single Purpose as a life organized around one relatively concrete goal, like constructing a drug that will cure breast cancer. Supposing for the sake of argument that such a life would be possible and successful in terms of the conditions laid out above for single chapters, would it be ideally

meaningful? I think there are reasons to doubt it. There would certainly be an aim and a point to one's activities, but everything would depend on reaching it. Such a life would be most vulnerable to fate and contingency, and its denouement, even if a happy one, would only occur on the brink of death (for otherwise one would go on living aimlessly after reaching the only aim).

Further, for a life to be truly Single Purpose, everything else would have to be organized around it. Finding a partner, for example, could not be an independent goal, but would be subsumed under the Grand Scheme. Surely this would diminish the significance of personal relationships. The same goes for other valuable goals. They are relegated to a supporting role, at best, in Single Purpose – they remain, as it were, underemployed sources of potential meaning. In short, because (or as long as) there is a plurality of valuable goals, both moral and non-moral, that call on our various capacities, and because, as we will soon see, it is possible to pursue a plurality of goals over the course of a lifetime without disconnection, Single Purpose would not be the most meaningful shape of a whole life.

The problems with Repetition, Disconnection, and Single Purpose suggest that an ideally meaningful life contains a plurality of chapters that are centred on different valuable goals requiring the use of diverse capacities, but are nevertheless connected to each other so that efforts and achievements have lasting value for the agent. This will be the case in what I will call a Coherent life, whose chapters *build on* one another without being subsumed under one single goal. This can happen in a variety of ways. In the simplest case, one achievement paves the way for another by making the pursuit of new goals possible, as when finishing a dissertation leads to getting a job. More interestingly, we can learn from past episodes, or just be changed by our experiences in ways that prove fruitful for the future, in terms of the goals we set or the ways in

which we seek them. The time will not have been wasted in any sense when it prepares us for future challenges. This is how even grand failures can contribute to meaningfulness.³⁷ Building on the past gives life a kind of progressive narrative shape without any single overall goal or a ‘life plan’. Life moves ahead – it has a direction, and its activities have a point beyond the value of the goals they themselves embody. In the other direction, the agent’s present activities and relationships are informed by the past that has made her unique, and this means she cannot be replaced by someone else without some significant loss. Thus, in a Coherent life, there is always a ‘connection to something larger’ – activities informed by the long past and fruitful for the long future are in a clear sense connected to the life as a whole. I will summarize this as follows:

Coherence

A life is the more Coherent the more that later activities are positively informed by earlier activities with respect to goal-setting (the agent’s goals are more valuable than they would otherwise be), goal-seeking (the agent exercises her capacities more effectively and/or is more irreplaceable), and/or goal-reaching (the agent is more successful).

Those who defend the importance of narrative unity for well-being often say that a good life is one that ‘improves’ over time.³⁸ Insofar as this means having more and more pleasure, desire satisfaction, or other momentary goods, this is just false on the Teleological View. Rather, improvement amounts to either individual chapters becoming more meaningful (which is unlikely to continue to old age, as our capacities decrease) or an increase in Coherence. When an old veteran visits schools to testify about the evils of war, his activity, considered in itself, is not as meaningful as the daring rescue mission he undertook in his youth. But it is an activity that builds on his past in the right way, and so increases the Coherence and overall meaningfulness of

³⁷ Velleman’s example of a failed first marriage is pertinent here. If it teaches something that makes a second marriage more successful, it turns out to have been “an edifying misfortune”, which is “not just offset but redeemed, by being given a meaningful place in one’s progress through life” (Velleman, “Well-Being,” p. 65).

³⁸ E.g. Velleman, ‘Well-Being’, p. 59.

his life. Notice also that Coherence in the sense I have defined is not based on any kind of story, true or fabricated, that the individual herself tells of her life, but on the strictly factual connection between earlier and later activities. This is why someone like Galen Strawson, who sees his own life as highly episodic and disconnected, can nevertheless lead a life relatively high on Coherence. It suffices that the past chapters of his life inform present and future goal-directed activities in the way I have outlined.

5. Meaning and Prudential Value

Let me recap the main argument of the last three sections. For a life to be meaningful is for feelings of fulfilment and admiration to be appropriate toward it. These are narrative emotions that find their place in the context of successful pursuit of valuable goals. We can assess their appropriateness from different perspectives, either in the midst of life or looking at a life as a whole. The former kind of judgment is essentially a verdict on the present chapter of one's life. On the Teleological View, what makes true a claim like "My life has become meaningless" is that the goals toward which I am working are not valuable enough to give point to the activities I am (perhaps half-heartedly) engaged in, or there is no hope of reaching them, or reaching them does not require me to do what I am capable of doing, or finally that there is no reason for precisely me rather than someone else to do the things I do. The second kind of judgment is expressed by sentences such as 'My life has been meaningful', or more often, 'She led a meaningful life'. In these cases, too, the truth of the claim hangs on the value of the goals and the agent's relation to them, as well as success in reaching them. But here considerations of how the various chapters of the agent's life cohere are more prominent, since Coherence makes for the

difference between something having fleeting or lasting value for one. It also matters whether the value of reaching the goals is lasting beyond the agent's own life – whether they have interpersonal or impersonal value. Thus, to Wolf's slogan 'subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness', I add my own, 'challenging efforts lead to lasting successes'. Or simply: life is the more meaningful the more Meaningful Projects Cohere.

We are now in a position to see how the Teleological View explains a variety of intuitions about prudential value. In the first section, I gave vignettes of four possible lives. Let us begin looking at the influence of narrative shape in the two lives with a downward hedonic arc, Deterioration and Noble Failure. Both protagonists, Harry and Joan, start out with all the advantage in the world, and enjoy it. But Harry's goals are of little objective value and require little of him, though he is initially successful in his pursuit. When misfortune calls, it turns out that his relationships, too, were shallow, and he is easily replaced by the next prey. The later chapter of his life is no more meaningful by itself, and entirely disconnected from the first. Joan, by contrast, undertakes a project of great objective worth, achieving initial success by drawing on a variety of skills and abilities. Yet for reasons beyond her control, the project ends in a miserable failure. She does become unhappy, just as much as Harry, but returns to important work in which she is able to redeem part of the catastrophic experience she underwent by being able to provide better care for refugees. She is building on her past, and making an impact beyond her own life. So the narrative shape of her life is very different from Harry's. By the criteria of the Teleological View, Joan's life is far more meaningful, which explains why she is better off.

Comparing the narrative shapes of Sheer Luck and Hard Work yields a similar picture. In Sheer Luck, James starts with nothing, and keeps it that way. His aims do not go beyond day-to-

day survival with the least effort possible. When he gets lucky, his social and physical environment and opportunities change dramatically. But in narrative terms, the change is not that dramatic. He still pursues short-term goals with the least effort possible, even if the yield in terms of pleasure is now much higher. The first part of his life is not only hidden but also forgotten as far as possible. His earlier life bears no fruit for the later life, and neither bears any for anything beyond his momentary pleasure. So it is unsurprising that his life rates low on meaningfulness. In *Hard Work Maria*, by contrast, always aspires for more, and not just for herself. Her life is difficult for a long time, and early hopes are squashed. But she keeps trying against the odds, and employs all the capacities she has. When her career finally takes flight, it is a richly deserved reward. Her success is anchored within continuing family relationships, and consists in inventions that have great value both as disinterested knowledge and applied science. Moreover, when she passes her skills and knowledge on to students, she benefits from her difficult past, and so do they. Given its progress, her life as a whole is the most meaningful of the four we have examined.

I did not just claim to explain why the deeper lives are better than the shallower ones with the same hedonic trajectory, but also why *Noble Failure* could be a better life to have lived than *Sheer Luck* as well as *Deterioration*. This is not surprising if we note that while *Sheer Luck* and *Deterioration* have opposite hedonic shapes, their narrative shapes are actually not that different. Sure, one features a turn for the worse and the other for the better, but the chapters before and after contain neither challenging effort nor in any sense lasting success. In *Noble Failure*, by contrast, both are present to a degree, given that the failure is partially redeemed by Joan's later work. Since Joan's life is more meaningful than James's in *Sheer Luck*, and both are by stipulation of equal hedonic value, there is little reason to hesitate in saying that Joan's life is the

better life to have lived. So, the Teleological View explains why the four lives are ranked Hard Work > Noble Failure > Sheer Luck > Deterioration.

Meaning and Other Values

The four cases support the thesis that how meaningful a life is makes a difference to how valuable it is for the person. Meaningfulness is, I claim, non-instrumentally or finally valuable. It would be odd to say that meaningfulness is the *only* finally valuable thing, so I am committed to some form of pluralism about prudential value. My working hypothesis is a dualist one, though a full defence lies beyond the scope of this paper: the two finally prudentially valuable properties of a life are meaningfulness and happiness (or pleasure in a broad sense³⁹).⁴⁰ I have directly argued against strict hedonism above. What about other theories? My bold hypothesis is that other things that are commonly said to have prudential value, such as exercise of human capacities, desire satisfaction, and achievement, are valuable only insofar as they instrumentally contribute to meaningfulness. This should be initially plausible. For example, it is a problem for perfectionism that it seems to entail that even pointless and unsuccessful capacity-exercise is good for one. The Teleological View avoids this handily. Achievementism, the view that achieving goals is itself valuable, perhaps in proportion to effort spent or sacrifices made, can potentially explain some of the same intuitions as the Teleological View.⁴¹ But achievementism does not account for how the value of an achievement for a person depends not only on the effort

³⁹ The most convincing theory of happiness I know of is presented in Daniel Haybron's *The Pursuit of Unhappiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For Haybron, happiness is the stable emotional condition of psychic affirmation, comprised of positive mood propensities and central affective states rather than superficial pleasures, whether sensory or attitudinal.

⁴⁰ A similar claim is made on different grounds in Wolf's 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of a Good Life', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14(1) (1997), pp. 207- 225.

⁴¹ For varieties of achievementism, see Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Thomas Kelly, 'Welfare and the Achievement of Goals', *Philosophical Studies* 121 (1), and Douglas Portmore, 'Welfare, Achievement, and Self-Sacrifice', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* vol. 2 no 2, 2007.

expended and its success, but also on the how valuable the goal is, how the pursuit is integrated in the whole life of the individual, and whether the individual is expendable or not. And while it is somewhat puzzling why we should value achievement for its own sake, no comparable question arises for meaningfulness.

Similar considerations apply to the best desire-satisfaction theories. And though the Teleological View lists a number of features contributing to the goodness of a life, this list has a clear rationale, unlike in the case of an Objective List ‘theory’. Indeed, it is easy to see why such perennial Objective List favourites as autonomy and health are good for people in a broadly instrumental sense – they are necessary for most meaningful activity. Hence, there is at least some justification for the ambitious thesis that for any life L that another theory of well-being identifies as best, we can conceive of another life L’ that differs only with respect to features referred to by the Teleological View, so that L’ is even better than L, and the converse doesn’t hold (except for the emotional condition of happiness).

One challenge to accounts of well-being that acknowledge more than one kind of final prudential value is to explain why just the sort of things the theory singles out are valuable for us.⁴² My answer to this challenge, too, must remain conjectural here: prudential value comes in two fundamentally different kinds, because human nature itself has a dual character. We are both active agents and passive subjects of experience. Meaningfulness, I claim, is the final good of agents, and happiness the good of experiencers. Choosing the right goals, stretching our abilities in pursuit of them, and finally reaching them is agency at its best, we might say, and it is predictable that it calls forth admiration and inspiration in other agents. Happiness, in turn, is experience at its best. It is thus far from arbitrary to distinguish between two different kinds of final value.

⁴² See e.g. Bradley, *Well-Being*, p. 16.

The Teleological View defended here avoids criticisms raised against simpler narrative structure views. Feldman, for example, contrasts Uphill, a person whose life consists in moments of steadily increasing pleasure, and Downhill, whose life consists in moments of steadily decreasing pleasure, and argues that as long as the hedonic sum of their experiences is the same, the fact that one's life is an improving one makes no difference to its prudential value.⁴³ Whatever one makes of his arguments, the conception of shape employed by the Teleological View is emphatically not one that has to do with momentary benefits of any sort, much less hedonic ones, so Feldman's objections do not apply.

Bradley's criticism of the 'James Dean Effect' is more pertinent. He refers to a psychological study according to which most people think James Dean was better off dying in a car accident at 24 than living on several years, during which he "stars in *Giant 2: Electric Boogaloo*, then quits the movies business to make a living as an Elvis-style nightclub entertainer"⁴⁴. Bradley argues that people's judgments in this area are systematically mistaken, perhaps influenced by irrelevant aesthetic considerations about pleasing endings to a story. Surely, were we to consider the situation just before the car crash, we should agree that an additional ten mildly pleasant years would be better for Dean than imminent death. And wouldn't it be prudentially rational for Dean to want to survive, even if he knew he will never accomplish anything worthwhile again?

The dualist hypothesis allows us to see truth both in ordinary people's and Bradley's judgment about the Dean case. For convenience, I will call the actual Dean James and the alternative schlock-producing one Jimmy, and use 't' for the time of James's crash, at which point the two lives diverge. For a hedonist like Bradley, there is no respect in which James is

⁴³ Feldman, *Pleasure*, p. 129 ff.

⁴⁴ Bradley, *Well-Being*, p. 157.

better off than Jimmy. Even if we agree with his overall judgment, this is clearly counterintuitive. With suitable assumptions, the Teleological View, in contrast, can explain the sense in which James indeed is better off dying at t at the peak of his powers. Jimmy's activities after t are, let us assume, meaningless (or close enough), in virtue of lack of objectively or interpersonally valuable achievement (among other things). It is thus true by default that the pre- t chapters do not contribute to post- t success in goal-setting, goal-seeking, or goal-reaching. Consequently, Jimmy's life is less Coherent than James's. Instead, it combines Disconnection and Repetition. Since the pre- t chapters of James's and Jimmy's lives are equally meaningful in themselves and James's life is far more Coherent, James's life as a whole is more meaningful. The narrative structure of his life is not just aesthetically more pleasing, but also closer to the prudential ideal defined by the Teleological View.

It does not follow, however, that Jimmy's life is worse *overall* than James's. On the dualist account, the overall intrinsic value of a life depends both on its meaningfulness and the totality of momentary intrinsic value, which may be just hedonic value, or happiness understood more broadly. Jimmy's life may thus be better overall, if the extra hedonic value exceeds the deficit in meaningfulness. (Making the comparison between meaningfulness and hedonic value is no trivial task, but the problem is the same for any pluralist theory of value.) So, it may be prudentially rational for Dean to want to live beyond 24, even if he knows that everything he does afterwards will be worthless failure cushioned with pleasure. Hence, Bradley's objection to narrative views does not meet the present account.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ It is an interesting question whether the dearth of meaning can ever be so severe that it becomes better to die rather than live a comfortable life. The present account is not committed either way, but notice that the degree of Coherence of a life decreases the longer pointless activities go on. Imagine Jimmy living not ten years beyond James, but a thousand or a million years, churning out more trash each year, yet maintaining a moderate level of comfort throughout. Would he really not eventually reach a point at which it is rational to welcome death?

Holism about Prudential Value

As the discussion of the James Dean example shows, the Teleological View is clearly holistic: the prudential value of a life is not a function of how well an individual does at particular moments of time (or even during particular chapters). Correspondingly, how much an event contributes to the value of a life depends not only on its effects at the time, but also on its relation to the past and the future. This is a welcome consequence from a commonsense perspective. How good is a promotion for someone? The natural thought is: depends on how much she worked for it and what it meant for the future (and not merely in the instrumental sense). This is exactly what the Teleological View says. We cannot add up the values of events considered in isolation and reach the total prudential value of an individual's life. Focusing on an event's 'moment utility' necessarily means missing out on its significance and thereby its net contribution to the life's value.⁴⁶ And this is not merely an epistemological difficulty. The fact that we can, in principle, assign a value to particular moments when we have the whole life in view does not mean that the arrangement of the parts ceases to matter constitutively.

It follows that how well off somebody is at a time does not just depend on how things are with her then. This might be a cause for protest: shouldn't intrinsic value supervene on intrinsic properties, as Bradley argues?⁴⁷ I don't think we have much use for such a notion of intrinsic value. Something can be valuable for its own sake or non-instrumentally just because of its relational properties. This is why I have been using the language of final value. We can, to be

⁴⁶ Since narrative significance of an event can change even after one's death, the meaningfulness of a life may be influenced posthumously. What if Martin Luther King's campaigns eventually turn out to have led to catastrophic consequences for African-Americans? Shall we think of his life as have been as meaningful, or to have been as good for him as we now do?

⁴⁷ Bradley, *Well-Being*, p. 17–19.

sure, talk about the final value of something considered in isolation (call this local value). This might be just happiness, if the dualist hypothesis is correct. My claim is that local value does not exhaust how well someone is doing at a time. Instead, how well someone is doing at a time supervenes in part on the relations between events at that time and other times. Call this the *contributory value* of an event. The global value of a life is then, by definition, a function of the (in principle) retrospectively assignable contributory values of the events that constitute it.⁴⁸

Here I differ from Velleman, who says that “when subsequent developments alter the meaning of an event they can alter its contribution to the value of one’s life, but they cannot retroactively change the impact they had on one’s well-being at the time”.⁴⁹ On Velleman’s view, then, we could not say that how well, say, Dostoevsky’s life was going when he was struggling to make it depends on how good his work turned out to be. This is to bow too deeply to hedonism. Surely he would have done worse at the time if his miserable years would have produced nothing better than *The Da Vinci Code*. At the very least, it seems that contributory value is what we often target in our assessments of well-being at a time.⁵⁰

Meaning and Reason

Assuming that prudential reasons and rationality are linked to what is good for a person, the Teleological View has consequences for practical reasoning as well. I will finish with a look at two interesting implications. First, once it is accepted that what happens now can influence the

⁴⁸ These issues are clearly related to the question of organic unities (see G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903/1993)). For reasons of space, I will not discuss the relationship between variations of Moore’s thesis and the view defended here. The suggestion in the text is compatible with the account defended in Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Velleman, ‘Well-Being’, p. 68.

⁵⁰ Velleman’s views on this are rooted in his metaphysics of value. He thinks that what he calls ‘synchronic’ and ‘diachronic’ values are of a fundamentally different metaphysical kind, both being “constituted, in part, by a point of view” (‘Well-Being’, p. 79), one representing successive momentary viewpoints and the other a view of one’s whole life. Though I cannot discuss it here, I reject Velleman’s metaphysics, and thereby his distinction. (See also McMahan, *Ethics*, p. 180.)

value of what happened in the past, it is no longer obvious that it is always irrational to take what economists like to call ‘sunk costs’ into account in decision-making. Sunk costs are expenditure that cannot be recovered. The idea is simple: if Barry just paid \$1000 for a 1999 Daewoo that is now broken and worth \$0, and it would cost \$1500 to fix it, while he can get a functioning car of the same kind for \$600, it would be irrational for him to get the old car fixed. There is no way he can get the \$1000 back, so he should not keep throwing good money after the bad, but instead get the other car and save \$900. While this is no doubt correct in the car case, things look different when it comes to important personal projects. It may be rational for someone who has invested twelve years of her life in studying philosophy to prefer a job as a philosopher even over a somewhat more satisfying (and in all other respects equally good) life as a lifeguard *just because* those past twelve years would otherwise be wasted. If this is the case, honouring sunk costs is rational whenever it maximizes (or can be reasonably expected to maximize) the global value of one’s life, perhaps by retroactively increasing the contributory value of past activities.⁵¹

The second interesting consequence is that the line between prudential and moral reasons is a lot more blurred than one might have thought. If, say, helping indigenous people is objectively valuable, and thereby contributes to the meaningfulness of someone’s life, and so to the value of her life has for her, it seems she has a prudential reason to help the indigenous. This kind of prudential reason is parasitic on there already being a moral reason for her to help indigenous people. I take them to be distinct reasons nevertheless, as shown, for example, by the fact that the moral reason would exist even if helping the indigenous did not make the person’s life more meaningful (perhaps it would frustrate an even more important and longstanding project). Still, this phenomenon does provide some qualified support for the ancient thesis that

⁵¹ Elizabeth Anderson endorses a similar view about the rationality of sunk costs, with explicit reference to (undefined) narrative coherence in *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 34–35.

happiness requires virtue, at least as long as we read ‘happiness’ as well-being. If the virtuous person is someone who can tell what is objectively morally valuable and is wholeheartedly motivated to pursue it, there is a good chance that such a person’s life will be meaningful. Nevertheless, insofar as we are pluralist about objective value and include things like aesthetic beauty and scientific achievement in our list, the converse implication fails to hold: one can live a very meaningful life without being particularly moral, as long as the pursuit of one’s aesthetic or scientific goals makes use of one’s capabilities, is successful, and builds on the past. This vindicates the intuitive view that a morally questionable artist like Gauguin may lead a meaningful life nonetheless. But it also suggests that for us ordinary folk who are not particularly talented in art or science, morality may be our best bet for a source of meaning: we cannot all exceptionally gifted, but we can all aspire for moral excellence.⁵²

⁵² Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Subjective Measures of Well-Being and the Science of Happiness workshop at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, February 2008, and at the Northwestern Ethical and Political Theory Conference at Northwestern University, May 2008. I thank the audiences for their comments, and Douglas MacLean for his response at Northwestern. I also want to note discussions with Erik Angner, Ben Bramble, Sarah Broadie, Mike Kaufman, Tim Mulgan, David Sobel, Valerie Tiberius, and Krushil Watene. Lilian O’Brien, Russ Shafer-Landau, and Jussi Suikkanen each read several versions of the manuscript and provided truly invaluable feedback. Finally, I owe a large debt of gratitude to Susan Wolf and Richard Kraut for extensive discussions of the material in person and in writing, and for running the seminar on well-being that inspired the initial sketch of the paper at Chapel Hill in Fall 2006.