Having the Meaning of Life in View[1]

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Abstract:

The paper aims to clarify the role of the meaning of life in Anselm Müller's philosophy. Müller says that the ethically good life is the life of acting well, and acting well requires at least a rough conception of the meaning of life, or a conception of what makes a life go well. But why is such a conception required and what does it mean to have such a conception? I argue that such a conception cannot provide us with ultimate ends in our practical deliberations. Nor can its role be merely to provide a standard against which practical reasoning can be assessed. Rather, our conception of the meaning of life is, in the first instance, that which allows us, in our practical reasoning, to see certain considerations as good reasons for certain actions and to weigh reasons for and against different options. One upshot of my interpretation is that Müller should be more optimistic about philosophy's ability to answer the question of the meaning of life than he allows himself to be.

1. Introduction

Anselm Müller introduced me to contemporary philosophy. This is one of the things in life for which I am most grateful. Knowing Müller changed my conception of not only philosophy, but also the meaning of life, which will be my topic here. In particular, Müller showed me what it means to think for oneself, while appreciating old insights.

Unlike early analytic philosophers such as Ayer (1947), Müller does not reject discussion of the meaning of life.[2] He appeals frequently to it or similar notions, such as the *telos* of life or living well,

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2   The topic of the meaning of life is less prominent in Müller's English texts. One of my goals is to highlight some aspects of Müller's German work for an anglophone audience.

and holds that "it is ethically required that I give my life a considered overall direction" (Müller 1992a, 48).

> A meaningful life belongs to the flourishing of humans; to the good life in the sense of flourishing belongs especially, however, an ethically good life as a meaning-providing component.[3] (Müller 2008, 125)

This ethically good life consists primarily in acting well, or *eupraxia*, which is the *telos* of acting. And Müller agrees with Aristotle that "I cannot act well without having the *telos* of acting in view" (Müller 1982, 67). Indeed, Müller holds that becoming virtuous requires a conception of a good human life.

> Someone who has been taught the virtues has acquired at least a rough conception of the fact that and how the virtues help us humans to live. (Müller 1998, 185)

Unfortunately, Müller never tells us in any detail why we need a conception of the meaning of life in order to live and act well, nor exactly what kind of conception is required—only that it is "rough," "general," or "vague." The main exegetical goal of this paper is to clarify Müller's position.

I also have a non-exegetical goal. In a forthcoming paper, Müller (2016) points out that there are two things we can mean by a "good life." According to the standard of perfection, one's life is going well if it doesn't include any defect or privation, as measured by the form of life characteristic of one's species. According to the standard of well-being, one's life is going well if one is free of suffering, illness, hunger, etc. Müller thinks we cannot choose rationally between these two *tele* of life because they both purport to be the ultimate criteria for choosing anything. Thus Müller reaches a pessimistic conclusion:

> "What is the right *telos* on which to base one's practical thinking and acting?" – this question seems to be one of those that can be meaningfully asked, but not argumentatively answered by philosophers. (Müller 2016, sec. 11)

I will argue for a more optimistic conclusion. Once we consider what role the meaning of life plays in our practical reasoning, we can see that this role is played by the standard of moral perfection, under the guise of practical rationality. I will argue that, according to Müller's overall view, one's conception of the meaning of life is manifested primarily in how one weighs conflicting considerations in practical reasoning. It follows that our most basic cognitive grasp of the meaning of life is not a belief or judgment but rather what Müller calls acceptance. Put differently, to grasp the meaning of life in the right way is to realize it. If I do my job right, these cryptic remarks will become clear.

The paper is structured as follows: In Part I, I introduce the topic of the role of the meaning of life in practical reasoning. In sections 2 and 3, I reject the view that Müller follows Aristotle regarding the

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3   Throughout the paper, I quote German texts in English translation; all these translations are my own. Unless otherwise noted, italicizations are in the original.

meaning of life; sections 4, 5, and 6 show that it is not obvious why Müller insists that acting well requires a conception of the meaning of life. Part II presents my positive interpretation: sections 7 and 8 explain that realizing the meaning of life is what Müller calls a "background motive"; section 9 connects this idea to Müller's version of the unity of the virtues; and in sections 10 and 11, I argue that the basic mode by which one grasps the meaning of life is not forming beliefs or judgments but rather "acceptance" of practical inferences. Section 12 concludes.

Before we start, three clarifications are in order. First, by "the meaning of life" I mean that thing whose realization or non-realization determines whether a life is going well, whether it is a success or a failure. I will assume, without argument, that there is a single standard that determines this; the content and role of this standard will be my topic. Second, Müller (2008, 134) reminds us that we should distinguish "leading a good life" and "having a good life" (Aristotle's *eupraxia* and *eudaimonia,* respectively). Leading a good life is the part of having a good life that depends on one's actions, rather than luck or external forces, and this will be my topic. Third, we should distinguish the objective meaning of life, which is the condition a life must meet to be a good life, and the subjective meaning of life, which is an agent's conception of the objective meaning of life. My focus will be on the subjective meaning of life. I ask whether, and if so why, we need a conception of the meaning of life in order to lead a good life.

Part I

2. The Meaning of Life as an Ultimate Goal?

In this section, I sketch the Aristotelian doctrine of the meaning of life and highlight similarities with Müller's views. I will argue in the next section that Müller nevertheless disagrees with Aristotle in crucial respects.

In the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle famously writes:

> If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. […] Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ [...]. (Aristotle, EN 1094a18-20, 1095a15-19)

Here Aristotle suggests that we do or should aim at an ultimate goal in all our actions, namely happiness. Thus, good practical reasoning consists in finding the appropriate means to achieving

happiness (Müller 1982, 40-41). This suggests that, according to Aristotle, a virtuous life is guided by practical reasoning about what is conducive to the meaning of life, viz. happiness.

As many have noted, this doctrine seems implausible on at least three counts. First, Aristotle seems to have no good reason to think there is a single ultimate goal that we pursue or ought to pursue. If he provides any argument at all, he seems to commit the logical blunder of reasoning from "for every action, there is some goal" to "there is some goal, that is the goal of every action," as Anscombe (2000, 34) notes. Second, it seems wrong, as a matter of psychology, that we have a conception of this ultimate goal and decide what to do by reasoning practically about how to achieve it. As Anscombe (1981a, 67) puts it, "people's 'ends' aren't in general nearly as definitely one thing or another as Aristotle makes out." Third and most importantly, the view that we ought to do whatever is conducive to the realization of the meaning of life clashes with our basic moral convictions. If you, e.g., help the needy because this is conducive to your realization of the meaning of life, your action is *prima facie* of dubious ethical quality. Whereas you are *prima facie* acting well if you help the needy out of genuine concern for their well-being.

As will become clear, Müller fully appreciates the force of these objections. But he nevertheless agrees with Aristotle that "I cannot act well without having the *telos* of acting in view" (Müller 1982, 67). And this *telos* of acting is acting well, i.e., the meaning of life in the sense of *eupraxia*. How can Müller claim this and avoid the objections to Aristotle?

Perhaps even more puzzling is that Müller suggests that the *telos* of one's acting is not a goal one sets oneself. Rather, humans have this goal necessarily, simply in virtue of being humans. He appeals to this idea when he argues, against Wittgenstein, that we can make sense of absolute requirements.

> The conception of absolute requirement […] might be expressed as follows: I am, by constitution, meant to lead a certain sort of life, I cannot, therefore, be true to my innermost tendency unless I do this, and so I must, whatever particular aims I may have, and on pain of losing myself, live this sort of life. (Müller 1989, 238)

To sum up, Müller seems to hold that we necessarily have a conception of the meaning of life, and in order to act well, we must aim to realize it. This reading of Müller, however, cannot be right, for he also rejects that we pursue any single, ultimate goal in our (good) practical reasoning. As I will show in the next section, for Müller, our ultimate reasons are often occasions, not goals.

3. Occasion-Oriented Motives

In order to see that the reading of Müller sketched so far is at best misleading, it suffices to note that Müller rejects the notion of a single motive, i.e., a last element in a chain of reasons, that must move us

in order to act well (Müller 1998, 88-92). Rather, he considers it an advantage of his version of virtue ethics that it leaves room for a plurality of ethically important motives. In particular, he holds that at the end of many chains of reasons (where *A* is done in order to do *B*, and *B* is done in order to do *C*, etc.) we find backward-looking motives. Müller sometimes calls these motives "occasion-oriented", in contrast with "purpose-oriented", because he includes motives where the occasion is present and not past.

> Not all practical rationality is means-end rationality. If someone acts out of revenge, e.g., and has nothing in mind but revenge, then he doesn't want to *achieve* anything with his action. There is no purpose in this case. […] Justice is a virtue that is occasion-oriented like gratitude but not always literally backward-looking. […] The difference between purpose-oriented and occasion-oriented virtues concerns their rationality-profiles and, hence, the *motive* that guides the virtuous agent in their concrete practice. In the case of justice, as with gratitude, this motive must be something "given"; the virtuous acting or refraining must not depend on the prospect of achieving anything, in contrast to benevolence, which is a typical purpose-oriented virtue. (Müller 1998, 113-114)

Here Müller endorses a version of the third argument against Aristotle above, i.e., the claim that sometimes acting well requires that one's ultimate reason not be the pursuit of the meaning of life. In the case of justice, it may be that I am not acting virtuously in giving you *X* unless my ultimate reason for doing so is that you have a right to *X* and not, say, that it would make me happy. Since the requirements of justice are sometimes unconditional, it follows that there are unconditional ethical requirements such that the reasons that guide the virtuous agent to meet them are not purpose-oriented and, hence, not reasons that derive from an ultimate goal of life.

    In addition, Müller raises the second objection against Aristotle, namely that it is psychologically implausible that our practical reasoning should start with a conception of the ultimate goal of life.

> How does the wise reasoner infer *what to produce* from a conception of *how to act*? How does he get from a conception of *eupraxia*, the virtuous life, to baking bread or sharpening a pencil? (Müller 2004a, sec. 3.3)

Müller suggests there is no plausible answer here. The virtuous life simply doesn't seem to figure in our practical reasoning as the first premise and ultimate end. But if that is Müller's view, then in what sense must we have the meaning of life in view in order to act well? Before discussing possible answers, I want to sharpen this question in the next section by asking it against the background of Müller's account of acting well.

4. Acting Well and Practical Reasoning

In this section, I sketch Müller's theory of acting well in order to highlight that it is not obvious why acting well should require that the agent have a conception of the meaning of life. In particular, I want to show why the subjective meaning of life can seem superfluous for Müller's account of acting well.

One of the things we want from an ethical theory is an account of acting well.[4] Müller (2004a, 19) holds that, in performing or omitting an action, one is acting well just in case one is performing or omitting the action for (all things considered) good reasons. Here "good reasons" crucially include good ultimate reasons, i.e. motives, and there are cases in which no reason for doing something is a good reason, such as when I am idly playing with my hair or following an arational impulse while I have no reasons not to do so. The notion of a good reason should, in turn, be understood in terms of good reasoning. Thus, we arrive at the following view:

> The judgment "In Φ-ing one is/would be acting well" […] is true if *some valid pattern of practical inference takes you from true premises to Φ-ing*. (Müller 2004a, 32)

In order not to oversimplify this view, we should note that sometimes the reasons on which I do *not* act are as important for acting well as the reasons on which I act. This is the case, e.g., when I act courageously. In doing so, I rightly don't take some danger to be a decisive reason not to do what I do (Müller 2004a, 24-25).

This view accounts beautifully for the role of reason in ethics while leaving room for bodily drives, emotions, and idle actions. According to Müller, emotions are partly constituted by dispositions to reason practically in accordance with certain patterns. What we desire on the basis of bodily drives can serve either as the goal in good instrumental reasoning or as the basis of actions that count as good simply because one doesn't have reason not to do them; this is also how Müller accommodates idle actions.

This view also opens the door to the most plausible account of the virtues that I know. According to Müller, the virtues are dispositions to take or not take certain things to be reasons for certain actions. Each virtue is characterized by a certain pattern of what is (or isn't) a reason for what: benevolence is, roughly, a disposition to take the needs of others as a reason to help; justice is a disposition to take facts regarding who has which rights as reasons to respect these rights; courage is a disposition not to take certain dangers as reasons not to do certain things. For Müller, the virtues are characterized by their

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4   As is routine since Kant, we can get an account of what we ought to do (legality) from an account of acting well (morality) as follows: You may do *A* iff you could act well in doing *A* (if you were to do it for good reasons). Kant's shopkeeper, e.g., may charge the child fairly because he could act well in doing so if he did it for good reasons. If his reasons are actually bad, the shopkeeper still acts permissibly but he does not act well. To say this, we need not agree with the rest of Kant's ethics.

"rationality-profiles." Now, the paradigmatic way of taking *P* to be a reason to Φ is to reason practically from the consideration that *P* to the action of Φ-ing. Hence, we can think of the virtues as dispositions to engage or not in certain kinds of practical inferences. A characteristic practical inference (schema) of a benevolent agent, e.g., is an inference from the consideration that NN is in need to the action or intention to help NN.

The natural virtues are non-rational tendencies to act in accordance with such inference patterns in the (approximately) right circumstances. *Phronesis* turns these into genuine virtues by converting non-rational tendencies into dispositions to engage in the corresponding pieces of practical reasoning. This process happens via the agent's habituation and introduction into the "practices of reason" (Anscombe 1981b, 103).

At this point, we may ask: But what is a genuinely good reason for what? Here Müller agrees with Foot:

> [Foot's] view can be summarized by saying: *Good reasons are the ones that have to be acted on where a society of human beings is to get on well* – a view that I believe to be correct. (Müller 2004a, 29)

The notion of a "society of human beings getting on well" is an appeal to human nature. The idea is that an animal's nature sets the standard for determining whether that animal is doing well or poorly. Thus, human nature provides the standard for determining whether something is a good practical inference, i.e., whether the premises are jointly a sufficient, all-things-considered good reason for the conclusion.

Note that we can accept this last point without (implausibly) saying that we have reason to do something in a given situation just in case such behavior has been selected for evolutionarily. This would be as silly as the suggestion that because evolution has shaped us into creatures that tend to eat as much sugar as they can get, it must be healthy (or otherwise good) to maximize our sugar consumption. Our nature includes tendencies that undermine our ability to live in accordance with that nature. It is part of the function of human reason to shape and check such tendencies.

Now, I used to think that what I just presented was an admittedly rough sketch of a complete account of acting well. But this account does not incorporate the idea of the agent having any subjective conception of the meaning of life. So why does Müller appeal to this very idea? If we really need a conception of the meaning of life in order to live well, then this conception must play a role in the account just sketched. And it is not at all obvious what role that should be. One might try to sidestep my question by saying that an act can be for the sake of a particular goal, such as the meaning

of life, without the agent engaging in that act in order to achieve that goal. Let's look at this idea in the next section.

5. Non-Intentional Teleology

Müller (1992b) holds that acts can be directed at a goal without the agent intending to achieve that goal. Can we find a place for the subjective meaning of life in this non-intentional goal-directedness?

Let's consider Müller's claim that acts can be goal-directed without being done with an intention to achieve that goal. Intending, for example, is done for the purpose of its end. When I intend to go shopping, my intending happens for the purpose of going shopping, just as my walking to the store does. We can plausibly say that my walking serves the purpose of going shopping because I walk with the intention of going shopping, but that doesn't work for my intention. If I require a second intention to direct my first intention at shopping, we are launched on an infinite regress. I cannot have infinitely many distinct intentions. So, at some point, I must have an intention that is directed at a goal without this being the result of any further intention. To put it differently, intentions can be for the sake of something (namely of what is intended) without anyone conceiving them as being for that sake. Are our lives perhaps directed at the meaning of life in this non-intentional way? Müller (2011a, sec. 5) suggests as much when he writes: "In order for the virtuous life to be the *telos* of your conduct, it need not be the *purpose* of the way you act."

Indeed, Müller argues that a key defect of the Aristotelian ideas with which we began is that Aristotle runs together intentional and non-intentional teleology. More specifically, Müller argues that we need to distinguish two notions of *praxis*, dependent on whether the teleology of the *praxis* is intentional or non-intentional.

> The first of the two notions of *praxis* that I think must be kept apart is defined by an immanent teleology. This means: The *telos* that it is meant to achieve is not anything other than the *praxis* itself, but rather the *praxis*' being of a certain shape or structure. [...] This notion of *praxis* is defined, and completely defined, by its teleology. So, it applies to whatever can be said to achieve the *telos* or to fall short of it. Suppose now that the *telos* is identified as agreement with the virtues. Then anything that sane adult persons voluntarily do is *praxis*. For all of it can be judged to be in conformity, or not, with the demands of virtue. But the appellation '*praxis*' is conferred on it under a specific perspective, viz. insofar as it ought to conform to the virtues. […] The *telos* of *praxis* in the sense I am trying to explain does not need to be intended in order for the *praxis* to take place. […] On a revised Aristotelian teleology of action, in saying of *praxis* that *eupraxia* is its *telos* we are just saying: Qua *praxis*, it ought to be (or instantiate) *eupraxia*. In this respect the teleology of *praxis* resembles natural teleology. *Eupraxia* can play the role of *telos* without being anyone's purpose. Hence I call the teleology of *praxis* in the present sense nonintentional. (Müller 2011a, sec. 4.2)

If the meaning of life is *eupraxia*, then, according to this passage, to say that anything sane adult persons voluntarily do necessarily aims at the meaning of life is merely to say that their voluntary actions fall under the standard of *eupraxia*. In other words, whenever we act voluntarily, we should be acting well.

This is certainly part of what Müller believes. Note, however, that according to this view, the role of the meaning of life coincides with the role of human nature that I sketched in the previous section. The meaning of life, *eupraxia*, serves as a standard for measuring quality of conduct, and it does so by telling us what is a reason for what. To do so, the meaning of life need not be grasped in any way by the agent. As a result, the view that our actions aim at the meaning of life via a non-intentional teleology cannot justify Müller's claim that we need a conception of the meaning of life in order to live well.

6. The Meaning of Life Doesn't Justify Morality

We have seen that the objective meaning of life functions as a standard of evaluation but we haven't found any role of the subjective meaning of life. In this section, I will present another unsuccessful attempt to account for the agent's conception of the meaning of life before moving on to a more successful strategy. The idea I want to discuss here is that an agent's conception of the meaning of life is a basis on which we can justify to the agent unconditional ethical obligations.

Our question is why the virtuous agent needs a conception of the good life. That Müller thinks she does comes out in, e.g., his claim that education crucially provides a (correct) conception of the meaning of life.

> We expect the educated person to know about [things that are valuable in themselves]. He has a life-influencing conception of what is important in life; he knows, what kind of things are such that although they don't have any purpose and are not useful, they nevertheless give life meaning and are such that the purposes of useful goods ultimately depend on them. (Müller 2002, 29)

Here the meaning of life isn't merely the standard by which a life or conduct can be measured. Rather, "what is important in life" is the content of a "life-influencing conception" of the agent. This also comes out in a passage following an introduction of Aristotle's ideas of practical and theoretical life:

> We could, with an eye to contemporary values, add further conceptions of a good life (which are pursued more or less consciously): exercising power, consumption, the pursuit of status and success, the life of the conformist conversationalist, the life of aestheticism, or of the popular star. Each of these concepts stands for a *praxis* whose *telos* can orient one's whole life and whose actualization then gives this life meaning – or should do so. […] Every way of

> living is a *praxis* and an end in itself in the following sense: it aims at nothing but the respective *eupraxia*. (Müller 2008, 129)

Here, too, what gives a life meaning—or ought to—is something the agent herself has in view. The meaning of life guides the agent. This holds not only for the wrong conceptions of the meaning of life just mentioned, but also for the correct view that the meaning of life is living a life of virtue (Müller 1998, 185). But how does my conception of the meaning of life guide me?

As we have already seen, Müller sometimes says that a non-optional ultimate goal or purpose is needed to make sense of unconditional moral requirements.

> *Either* we continue to think of the "moral ought" as absolute and universally binding – then we must not evade the question what kind of will can be presupposed *a priori* in every normal adult and gives him a binding reason to adopt ethical maxims (or not to jettison them). *Or* we admit that we don't know any such reasons – then we must be prepared to acknowledge that ethical necessity is relative necessity and that the substructure of ethical judgments is such that they don't provide unconditional reasons for everyone to behave in a certain way [...]. (Müller 1992a, 54)

Müller seems to think that we can only understand ourselves as absolutely required to do something if this requirement relates appropriately to our will. A non-optional ultimate meaning of life endorsed by everyone seems like the best candidate for a goal that could secure absolute requirements in this way.

But how should that work? Müller cannot think the goal or purpose justifies the ethical maxims and, hence, the unconditional requirement. For Müller (1998, 183-184) argues repeatedly that "no justification for any theory or practice can give us more certainty than we already possess for the premises on which the justification rests." And he holds that we are already maximally certain of some particular unconditional ethical requirements, so that they cannot be justified.

> The request for ultimate reasons for doing or thinking something necessarily leads to views and attitudes for which no reasons can be given, which manifest themselves in acting without doubts. Basic moral convictions manifest themselves, e.g., in indignation regarding unjust behavior, in contempt for someone who betrays others for personal gain, in admiration for courage and fortitude, abhorrence at cruelty, in avowals like "I don't have the heart to do this" … and not least in feelings of shame and guilt. Not that such reactions *prove* the truth of the convictions expressed in them. They are rather "moral bedrock." Those who recognize themselves in them show thereby what they take for granted and solid and what they use to determine the soundness of alleged proofs of moral judgments. (Müller 1998, 184)

This is, of course, an appeal to Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (Müller 1994a). Müller agrees that our most certain judgments are our unshakable everyday judgments, which are tied to firm dispositions to take them for granted in acting. This applies to moral judgments no less than to other judgments.

Given that the meaning of life isn't something many of us are very certain about, it follows that this purpose cannot justify unconditional ethical requirements.

The upshot of this section is that the meaning of life must play a different role than that of the ultimate justification of unconditional ethical requirements. And we have already seen in the previous section that the meaning of life must be more than merely the objective standard of ethical conduct. With the ground thus cleared I can turn to my positive suggestion for why Müller thinks that we must have the meaning of life in view in order to act well.

Part II

7. Background Motives

We have seen how difficult it is to explain why the virtuous agent needs a conception of the meaning of life. In this section, I take a first step toward a positive answer by arguing that, according to Müller, the meaning of life figures in our practical reasoning as a background motive.

As we have seen, Müller thinks that acting well often requires that one acts for very specific reasons, such as the reason that NN helped one last week, or that this book belongs to NN. Chains of "doing *A* for the sake of *B*" typically end with such occasion-oriented reasons. Hence, one might wonder how a goal such as acting well or the meaning of life play any role in practical reasoning. Müller tells us that this "end" figures into practical reasoning as "background motive."

> [Virtuous actions are not] motivated with a view to promoting human flourishing […]. True, a general conception that and how the virtues influence human life belongs to being virtuous. But such knowledge forms the *background* and not *part* of "moral motivation." (Müller 1998, 90)

Müller draws an analogy between playing a card game and acting virtuously. Playing is done for the ultimate end of having fun. But there are many occasions on which it would be wrong to play a particular card *in order to have fun*. Sometimes your reason for playing the ace of spades, e.g., might be that you had to play spades and the ace was the only appropriate card in your hand. And this is what you ought to do, even if playing another card would result in everyone having more fun. The goal of having fun must remain in the background.

> Card games are just a particularly striking example of a structure that is ubiquitous in life: Everywhere there are institutions and patterns of conduct that serve particular purposes although the actions one is supposed to perform in these contexts are *not immediately directed* at this purpose. Rather, they are subjected to the internal rules of these institutions and patterns of conduct. (Müller 1998, 91)

Elsewhere Müller considers a case in which you refuse to assert the lie that *p* out of the virtue of truthfulness, but you also have the background motive that being virtuous promises eternal rewards in the afterlife:

> Thus, the prospect of eternal rewards isn't your (ultimate) reason for deciding not to say that *p*, if in fact you so decide *because you do not believe that p*. On the other hand we ought not to deny that, if rewards motivate you to treat this fact as a reason, they are in a way responsible for your declining to say that *p* – and, indeed, responsible in the way of a *final cause*. In this sense, but only in this sense, could one say that the *telos* of your policy of Φ-*ing from such-and-such backward-looking motives* also provides your Φ-ing itself with a *telos*; and that your immediate backward-looking motivation, in virtue of mediating the connexion between your Φ-ing and its forward-looking background motive, serves the purpose of achieving those rewards, which provides that background motive. (Müller 2011b, 253)

Here Müller suggests that one can be guided by a background reason, without it thereby becoming one's foreground reason.

This allows us to accommodate the meaning of life in practical reasoning. We can now say that acting well, or whatever the meaning of life might be, figures as a background motive in the practical reasoning of virtuous agents. That thesis has some intuitive plausibility. After all, I can aim to lead a good life and be a good person by being grateful, respecting the rights of others, or caring for my relatives, and I can have this aim without treating it as my reason for the acts in which I am practicing gratitude, respecting rights, or caring for my relatives. However, we may still wonder what the role of a background motive really is. What would we be missing if we didn't have the right one?

8. The Threefold Goal of Practical Reasoning

In this section, I will argue that the meaning of life is a special kind of background motive because it is built into the structure of practical reasoning as one of the goals we always necessarily aim at.

Müller (1994b) holds that practical reasoning is goal-directed in three different respects. First, goals often figure in the content of practical reasoning. When I am thinking about how I can make coffee, then making coffee is my goal and I am thinking about it. Second, practical reasoning itself can happen for the sake of a goal. Just as for intentions, this kind of goal-directedness cannot depend on the agent's conception of it without leading to infinite regress. Müller concludes from this that the second kind of goal-directedness is intrinsic to the reasoning itself.

> If practical thinking is not a case of natural teleology, does this mean that it is a means towards ends much like the means it is concerned to discover or to present to one? […] My thinking 'in the service of practice' then seems to *presuppose* a separate insight into *its* usefulness, i.e. a thinking concerned with that thinking in the service of practice. [… P]ractical thinking is thinking both intrinsically for the sake of an end and about this end […]. (Müller 1979, 97)

To characterize this second kind of goal-directedness, Müller says that practical thinking "involves consciousness of its own practical function" (Müller 1979, 98). This is not a case of natural teleology because practical reasoning occurs for the sake of a goal set by the agent herself, not by nature. The teleology is nevertheless non-intentional because I don't reason practically as the result of another piece of practical reasoning—that way lies regress.

There is a third way in which practical reasoning is goal-directed, according to Müller: it is directed at good practical reasoning. This goal is not chosen by the agent; rather, in reasoning practically, one necessarily aims at reasoning well—just as one necessarily aims at judging truly if one judges at all. It is with this third kind of goal-directedness that the meaning of life makes its proper appearance. We had already realized that the good life sets the standard of good practical reasoning, but Müller now suggests how this standard of getting on well shows up in practical reasoning from the perspective of the reasoner:

> [T]he practicality of practical reason [… is] responsible for its defeasibility. All practical considerations of one agent relate to the shaping of one and the same *life*; *it* is the 'practice' which practical reasoning ultimately 'serves'. Hence a piece of practical reasoning can be defective, even though its practical conclusion is related to the premises in the right way, if practical premises have been neglected which concern a further end of the reasoner's and present it as incompatible with his practical conclusion. (Is this why Aristotle, at least in theory, considers *the* (over-all) end as the starting point of practical reasoning? [...]) (Müller 1979, 105)

To be a piece of good practical reasoning, my thinking must take into account not only local relations between some considerations and a potential action, but also the global situation of potentially relevant considerations. Müller's thought is that the global balancing and weighing of considerations can be performed only if I have a conception of how my various pieces of practical reasoning should fit together to form a whole of practical thinking that constitutes my leading a good life. My conception of the meaning of life is what allows me to unify my various pieces of practical reasoning while attributing to different considerations their appropriate weight.

My interpretation here can accommodate the idea that the meaning of life is an overall aim that can ground absolute requirements:

> All my striving would be towards this aim, whatever my particular purpose in a particular action, [...] very much as the tendency of someone having a question on his mind is for truth whatever the content of the particular judgment he is about to form [...]. (Müller 1989, 236)

The meaning of life is not optional because it comes with our aim of reasoning well, and we necessarily have this aim whenever we reason. We can, of course, have different conceptions of this aim, but this is like having different conceptions of the truth that we all aim at necessarily when we form judgments.

And the requirement to reason well is absolute and unconditional because we cannot pursue any intentional goal without aiming to reason well. However, the aim of reasoning well isn't the end that is the topic of our practical reasoning. Hence, we need not follow Aristotle in thinking of the meaning of life as the first goal and ultimate justification of ethical requirements.

To further confirm this interpretation, let us look at Müller's *Produktion oder Praxis?*, in which Müller distinguishes between two kinds of *praxis*: those that orient one's whole life toward them and those that are merely partial. He calls the former "ways of life" and explains them as the lives (*bioi*) that Aristotle has in mind when he talks about the life of virtue, of theorizing, or of pleasure.

> Every way of life is a *praxis* and end in itself in the following sense: it aims at nothing but the respective *eupraxia*. […] Just as the nature of each *praxis* is given by the nature of its *telos*, so every way of life is characterized by the nature of its *telos*: by the meaning that it gives life as a whole. By naming such a meaning of life one answers the question: What is it that ultimately matters in your life? The answer may claim to name a *eupraxia* that matters in general in human life. By doing so, the concept of a way of life becomes the concept of an exclusive *praxis*. (Müller 2008, 129)

He goes on to distinguish two aspects of this exclusivity: objective and subjective. Objective exclusivity is the claim that other ways of living are wrong, of which Müller says:

> What matters is that some other options are deemed wrong. – Only if there is right and wrong here is the talk of a "well-lived life" more than a fashionable thoughtlessness. (Müller 2008, 130 fn. 3)

Subjective exclusivity is the fact that someone who endorses a way of life orients their life toward the corresponding *telos*.

Müller also acknowledges the existence of non-exclusive but partial *tele* and *praxeis*. But, crucially, he holds that such partial *tele* can always come into conflict and, hence, need a way of life to be integrated and harmonized.

> Because of the competition of partial *tele* the subject needs something like a life-plan: a more or less clear conception of what weight the particular kind of *praxis* should have and how they can be integrated in a guiding way of life. (Müller 2008, 132)

We need a conception of the meaning of life in order to give each of the things we pursue for their own sake (our partial *praxeis*) their proper weight and to integrate them into the whole of one's practical thinking. This explains why we need an exclusionary *praxis*: insofar as our *praxeis* leave open alternatives, they don't provide guidance regarding the integration of our practical thinking. In an earlier paper, Müller criticizes Aristotle on precisely this point:

> Besides virtuous *praxis* he [Aristotle] mentions self-sufficient theorizing as the meaning of life. […] And even with respect to this dichotomy Aristotle left us with two incompatible

> claims: In the *Nicomachean Ethics* the life of theorizing is presented as the in principle most desirable goal […]. In the *Eudemean Ethics*, by contrast, the goal of life is a combination of the two kinds of activity. – One might think that both answers are compatible with the concept of *praxis* (a legitimate broader concept). However, such tolerance isn't compatible with the view that the conception of acting has a constitutive teleology, unless the analysis of this concept itself brings to light an alternative in the internal teleology of acting. (Müller 1982, 64-65)

As it happens, Müller thinks that virtuous *praxis* is the true meaning of life (if the two *bioi* are not part of one larger meaning of life). And we can now see that this *praxis* is shaped by a unifying principle. Virtue, acting well, doesn't consist simply in dispositions to make practical inferences in which the premises support the conclusion, as our discussion above might have falsely suggested. Rather, these inferences must be part of a virtuous life.

> We have to realize that this concept [of practicing virtues] does not mean a particular action on given occasions or at a particular time. "To practice generosity, justice, temperance, …" does not mean: to occupy oneself occasionally in such and such a way, but rather: to lead a life in which the respective rationality profiles [of these virtues] get their say in an unrestricted way. (Müller 1998, 120)

As we will see in the next section, this interpretation fits beautifully with Müller's conception of the Aristotelian unity of the virtues.

9. The Unity of the Virtues and the Unity of a Life

According to Müller, the virtues are united in virtue of the fact that they limit and support one another. If you stand your ground in the face of danger, you are courageous only if your reason for standing your ground, say protecting your *polis*, outweighs the danger. Thus, in order to be courageous it does not suffice to be undeterred by danger. You must give danger its proper weight in your practical thought; and this means doing so relative to the weights of other considerations, such as considerations of patriotism, justice, loyalty, benevolence, etc. Müller summarizes the point thus:

> [I]n an attempt to comply with the demands of any given virtue, you must be ready not just to activate its characteristic response [the action disposition that a virtue shares with the corresponding natural virtue] but to do so in accordance with what right reason demands with regard to the various critical dimensions [e.g. when, how, because of what, etc.]; and for this, in turn, you must be guided by the claims proper to other ethical virtues. (Müller 2004b, 38)

It is the function of *phronesis* to unify the virtues in this way by giving every consideration its proper weight, relative to all other considerations. This is what is lacking in merely natural virtues.

This view implies that practical reason forms a unified system. This is so because, and insofar as, (correct) practical reason can (correctly) weigh any considerations against each other (Müller 2004c).

Although there are good reasons to think such weighing and balancing cannot be characterized mathematically,[5] it is nevertheless an exercise of practical reason, which comes out in the fact that we can criticize people as "unreasonable" or "acting for bad reasons" if they fail to weigh different considerations correctly. In this (limited) sense, practical reason makes all considerations commensurable within a unified system, which extends as far as potential rational conflicts between reasons extend.

> Only a comprehensive, in a broad sense ethical, system guarantees the unity of practical reason. The teleology of the concept of acting ["Handeln", which is Müller's German for *praxis*] points to such a system. In light of these considerations, I cannot see any more in the separation thesis [of morality and ethics] than a fashionable, though understandable, misinterpretation of distinguishable aspects of an actually integrated system of ultimate orientations of our actions and omissions. (Müller 2003, 348)

What is the unifying principle of this system of practical reason? There are two kinds of situations for which we must weigh different considerations for and against an action. First, the action we are considering might be a means to an end. When weighing considerations in such cases, we must consider how important the end is and how efficiently the means will bring about the end compared to alternative means. Moreover, we must consider whether the means interferes with any of our other goals.

> Our behavior is almost always guided by more than one goal, […] and usually our primary, action-motivating goal is accompanied by several limiting goals, which, as it were, filter out the means and ways to the primary goal that frustrate them. (Müller 1992a, 42)

Müller adds that we don't have any way to list all the limiting goals in any systematic way and, hence, we cannot survey the totality of these limiting goals in the premises of our practical reasoning. Since morally relevant goals often figure as such limiting goals, Müller describes ethical evaluation as a "non-terminating filtration of practical inferences" (Müller 1992a, 43).

This brings us to the second case: we might not be weighing the considerations for and against performing an instrumental action but rather those for and against endorsing a certain *praxis* (in a particular context) and, hence, a certain end for its own sake. This happens, e.g., when we consider a potential conflict between two ultimate goals, such as when a doctor's diagnosis leads to a conflict between truthfulness and benevolence. As we have seen, it is precisely in such cases that Müller thinks we need an "exclusive" *praxis* and way of life that we endorse. Müller puts the point thus:

> The *telos* under consideration [which Müller says is, for Aristotelians, the good life]...unifies within the ethical system the many relevant considerations. That means three things: First, the

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5   At least, it is reasonable to doubt that a mathematical model could be substantially more efficient than just listing out the good pieces of practical reasoning in each situation. Even modest projects involving logical connectives or probabilistic notions are incredibly difficult, as, e.g., Ross's paradox brings out for disjunction.

> *telos* allows us to see the point of the guidance by different reasons on which they agree. Secondly, it requires *consistency* among the ethical norms. And thirdly it, as it were, sees to it that this consistency holds. For in cases of doubt, *ethical reflection* must appeal to the *telos* in order to determine which weighing of competing considerations takes proper account of the *telos*, or even to evaluate this or that particular pattern of justifying actions. (Müller 2004c, 401)

So, the objective unity of practical reason appears subjectively in our practical thinking as the meaning of life, i.e., as our answer to the question, "What is it that ultimately matters in your life?" (Müller 2008, 129).

   To sum up, our conception of the meaning of life is the subjective side of the unity of practical reason: it provides unity to the way in which we rationally lead our lives. In doing this, it unifies our lives themselves. We could summarize the thought thus: My life has a coherent overall shape because it is shaped by my way of weighing various considerations against each other, i.e., by my conception of the meaning of life.

10.   Is the Meaning of Life Acknowledged or Accepted?

We have seen that the meaning of life allows us to weigh different considerations and, thereby, live a unified life. We are guided by the meaning of life by aiming to reason well in all our practical reasoning. This goal-directedness of our practical thought isn't optional or intentional. Since good practical reasoning must be sensitive to all possible considerations that might bear on the options one considers, aiming at good practical reasoning is aiming at reasoning that gives all possible considerations their proper weight. And the unity of the virtues is this proper balancing of all considerations. In this section, I will argue that our primary grasp of the meaning of life, as it shows up in practical reasoning, doesn't take the form of a belief or judgment. Rather, we endorse it through what Müller calls "acceptance."

   Why should the proper weighing of competing considerations require a conception of the meaning of life? Isn't it enough that we are suitably sensitive to the goodness or badness of different pieces of practical reasoning? Müller acknowledges that we need only some vague, general, and rough conception of the meaning of life. So what is this vague, general, and rough conception? I have argued that the meaning of life is the principle of unity of good practical reasoning, which is the standard by which practical reasoning is measured. The question thus becomes: In what way, exactly, must we aim at reasoning well when we are reasoning? In what way must we take our practical reasoning to be good in order to engage in it? Fortunately, Müller addresses this question:

> Now, recognition of a certain pattern of inference as valid may take the form either of judging that it is valid, or of applying it – i.e. of drawing the conclusion when the premises are satisfied. Let us call the first: theoretical recognition or *acknowledgment*, and the second practical recognition, or *acceptance*. […] We may interpret Lewis Carroll's famous dialogue on theoretical inference in terms of the distinction […]. Achilles allows the Tortoise to agree to yet another premise instead of insisting that the recognition of validity be manifested 'practically', by agreeing to the inference itself – by accepting it, by *inferring*. (Müller 2004a, 32-33)

Müller recognizes that it is acceptance, and not acknowledgment, that is fundamental.[6] This is one sense in which Müller follows Wittgenstein's following Goethe: *Im Anfang war die Tat*. Or, as Müller puts it:

> [T]he language of recognition […] ('good reason', 'sound inference', etc.) is made for use by a community of speakers who recognize by accepting […]. Hence, *mere* acknowledgment is a *defective*, or *deviant*, form of recognition. (Müller 2004a, 34)

Müller thinks that we acquire the concept of a reason and of good reasoning by learning to perform practical inferences, which are suggested to us by our caregivers using words like "so" or "therefore" when they present us with what they take to be good reasons. It is by this introduction to the practice of reasoning that we acquire a grasp of reasoning well and, thus, of weighing different considerations correctly, i.e., a grasp of the meaning of life.

11. Going Beyond Müller's Texts

I want to conclude, in this section, by going beyond what Müller says in two respects. First, I suggest that "accepting," in Müller's sense, a conception of the meaning of life is genuinely a way to have this (alleged) meaning of life in view. Second, I argue that, given what we have established so far, the meaning of life must be the *telos* of perfection and not of well-being.

A critic might object that when I am aiming at reasoning well in weighing different considerations, I don't have anything like the meaning of life in view. Rather, I am simply establishing which considerations are outweighed or strengthened by which others, and I aim to arrive at the action or intention that is best supported by the overall balance of reasons. I accept the premise of this objection, namely that in reasoning practically I aim to determine what to do in light of the overall balance of reasons. I deny, however, that this means I don't have the meaning of life in view. It is like with jazz improvisations. The musician must focus on what the current situation requires or invites, but doing so in the right way is a way of aiming at an overall good jazz piece. After all, playing the right note

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6   Given the primacy of acceptance, it is an interesting question what role acknowledgments might have. Müller doesn't answer that question. Perhaps one could here appeal to some of Robert Brandom's ideas about making one's commitment to the goodness of inferences explicit. Pursuing this idea here would lead me too far afield.

(which may be a wrong note by the standards of other musical styles) at every point and playing a good jazz performance are the same thing. Similarly, acting for good reasons at every instant and realizing the meaning of life are the same thing. In both cases, one must have the overall aim appropriately in view in order to do the right thing at every point. For the meaning of life, this consists in viewing the facts of the given situation in an appropriate light, as requiring *x*, excluding *y*, inviting *z*, etc.

It might help to note that "acceptance" of an inference is a very peculiar act of the intellect. In reasoning from the consideration that *P* to Φ-ing, I must see *P* as a good reason to Φ. This "seeing" is not merely a disposition to move from the consideration that *P* to Φ-ing. If it were, we couldn't explain why it is incoherent to say, "I Φ for the reason that *P*, but *P* is not a good reason to Φ." However, the "seeing" also cannot be a belief or judgment. For, I may believe or judge that *P* is a good reason to Φ on the basis of testimony without myself seeing any connection between *P* and Φ-ing. In this case, I cannot Φ for the reason that *P*. At most, I can Φ for the reason that *P* together with the extra premise that *P* is a good reason to Φ. So, what Müller calls "acceptance" is neither a mere disposition nor a belief or judgment. Rather, as Müller says, one accepts an inference by inferring. Making the inference and seeing the premises as supporting the conclusion in the relevant sense are a single act of the intellect. In this act, one has good reasoning in view: one sees one's premises as supporting one's conclusion.

At this point, an opponent might further object that, while it may be that in reasoning practically one necessarily has good practical reasoning in view, this doesn't mean one has the meaning of life in view. Note, however, that in taking one's reasoning to be good, one must take oneself to be balancing potentially countervailing considerations correctly. Hence, one must take oneself to identify all the relevant considerations and weigh them correctly. This is the same as having an appropriate grasp of the meaning of life, insofar as this grasp is relevant in practical reasoning. Therefore, in all practical reasoning, one takes oneself to have an appropriate grasp of the meaning of life, under the guise of taking oneself to be balancing all relevant considerations correctly.

Of course, mature agents can not only accept a conception of the meaning of life by reasoning practically in certain ways, but also form explicit beliefs about the meaning of life. We may even occasionally try to correct the way in which we weigh competing considerations in light of the meaning of life that we acknowledge, as when I try to enjoy my life more because I think that my parents instilled in me a problematic "work ethic." Such explicit judgments are distinct from the conception of good practical reasoning that is internal to our practice.

The practice-internal conception of the meaning of life is not distinct from our attempt to realize it. For, in making a practical inference, I am accepting (in Müller's sense) that the inference is good (and hence can be part of a well-lived life), and at the same time I am realizing a life that includes this

practical inference. Thus, accepting a particular conception of the meaning of life and realizing this meaning of life coincide. We can put this by saying, somewhat pretentiously, that practical reasoning is the self-conscious realization of the meaning of life.

This brings me, finally, to the non-exegetical aim of this paper. I want to argue that Müller is too pessimistic in his assessment that philosophy cannot answer the question of the meaning of life because we cannot rationally choose between the *telos* of perfection and the *telos* of well-being. We are now in a position to give a more optimistic answer. The meaning of life as it figures in our practical reasoning is that which allows one to correctly weigh competing considerations against one another. But that is just the unity of a life spent acting well—a life lived in such a way that the agent doesn't show any defect in her capacity for practical reasoning. Hence, the relevant standard is that of perfection for practical reasoning, which is part of the standard of perfection. Well-being certainly has a legitimate place as one of many goals of practical reasoning in the first and second of its three kinds of goal-directedness. However, it isn't tied in any intimate way to the third kind of teleology that Müller ascribes to practical reasoning, viz. its aiming at good practical reasoning. If this third kind of teleology is the proper place for the subjective meaning of life, as I have argued, then the meaning of life must be perfection.

12.   Conclusion

The official exegetical aim of this paper was to explain what role the meaning of life plays in practical reasoning according to Müller. My answer is that it allows one to weigh competing considerations against one another, and thereby ensures the unity of one's practical reasoning as constituting the leading of a life. This means that our primary grasp of the meaning of life is acceptance and not acknowledgment, and, in turn, that accepting a conception of the meaning of life *just is* attempting to realize it. Thought and reality coincide in this case.

I suggested that one upshot of my interpretation is that Müller should be more optimistic about philosophy's ability to answer the question of the meaning of life. If Müller is right, the meaning of life is acting well, which is acting for good reasons. The meaning of life is the perfection of practical reason, which is part of living up to our human nature.

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