

## Against Seizing the Day

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One thing that's striking about us human beings is that we're not prisoners of the present, like goldfish may be. We're not only capable of remembering the past, but also of orienting ourselves to the far future by projecting distant aims and consciously striving for them. Perhaps even more than our vaunted intelligence, it's this capacity for planning agency that is the key to human achievement in good and evil, from going to the Moon to killing off bison. It is no wonder that it is common to think that success in worthwhile projects is what gives meaning and direction to our lives.<sup>1</sup>

But... what are you going to do after you've been to the Moon? Go there again? Go to Mars, and then Venus? While most of our ambitions are not on such a grand scale, many who realize their goals find that getting what they always wanted leaves them cold. Some regret that they let their lives pass by while they were chasing their dreams, *even if they came true*. Perhaps most dramatically, some people reach such conclusions at the end of their lives. For example, Bronnie Ware, a palliative care nurse who wrote a book on the deathbed regrets of her patients, says that "All of the men I nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of a work existence", while missing the youth of their children and companionship of their spouse.<sup>2</sup>

The seemingly obvious cure to the curse of projecting ourselves into the future at the expense of the present is stepping off the treadmill – living in the moment, feeling the power of now, seizing the day, damn the future. This is the stuff of inspirational self-help books for

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Wolf 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying>.

the rich and the beautiful. But there are also serious philosophical arguments to a similar effect. Perhaps most prominently, Kieran Setiya (2014; 2017) has recently argued that there is a distinctive sort of crisis of meaning that tends to arise in midlife for those who realize that completion of their projects only leads to ever new projects. For him, such a crisis amounts to a recognition of the normative defects of a “project-driven life”. The way to avoid them is to turn our attention from ultimately futile “telic” activities to *atelic* ones that are complete in themselves at each point. This, for him, amounts to living meaningfully in the present. From a somewhat different angle, Cheshire Calhoun (2018) raises doubts about the importance of long-term commitments to meaningful life, arguing that they may stand in the way of temporally local meaningful engagement with what one values for its own sake.

These are serious challenges to project-centered views of meaning in life, and there is certainly some truth to them. But I believe that they amount to an overreaction. In particular, in response to Setiya’s positive thesis, I argue that the kind of strongly atelic activities he lauds do not on their own warrant finding our lives meaningful, at least in the sense at issue in crises of meaning. In response to his negative thesis, I explain why when our aims are of the right sort and our projects build on each other in the right kind of way, there is nothing futile about pursuits that beget others. However, I agree with Setiya that midlife crises of a sort do show the limitations of this form of orientation towards the future. Understanding them requires us to distinguish between different kinds of meaning-giving ground projects. According to my diagnosis, these crises of meaning tend to arise when it becomes difficult to make large-scale progress in our lives towards new *prospective* aims for future states of affairs. The kind of reward we get from sustainable progress is reduced or isn’t on offer any more.

The good news is that ground projects like parenting, running a business, or governing a country can also give meaning to our lives, although their temporal structure is

*reflexive* instead of prospective. They are atelic insofar as they are not oriented toward a point of completion in the future, but not strongly atelic in the sense of lacking an aim external to the activity itself. Instead, reflexive ground projects consist of *weakly atelic* activities performed for the sake of what I'll call a *practice-dependent value*, like friendship or good governance, which can be realized only in and through such activities and only for as long as they persist. Importantly, it is only in the context of an ongoing *commitment* that individual actions realize genuine value that makes them meaningful. In this way, even reflexive projects retain a distinctive orientation to the future. On this picture, meaning isn't to be found in the here and now, in seizing the day. It is instead a deserved reward of bending the arc of one's life in the direction of the good by building on past efforts or by keeping a good thing going even when the going gets tough.

### **1. Living in the Moment?**

A good place to start thinking about the challenge of living in the moment is Schopenhauer's pessimism. He says:

Absolutely every human life flows between willing and attaining. The nature of every desire is pain: attainment quickly gives rise to satiety: the goal was only apparent: possession takes away the stimulus: the desire, the need re-emerges in a new form: if not, then what follows is dreariness, emptiness, boredom, and the struggle against these is just as painful as the struggle against want. (Schopenhauer 2010, 340/370)

Schopenhauer thinks that we're caught in a bind: either we engage in an endless cycle of pursuing momentary satisfaction, or end up listless and bored with nothing to do. We labor in expectation of a future reward under the illusion that getting what we want, whether it's a

scientific discovery or a bunch of ‘likes’ on social media, will bring relief, but in reality any such achievement will only feel good for a brief while, leaving us hungry for another hit:

“Every goal that is achieved is once again the beginning of a new course of action, and so on to infinity.” (ibid., 188-89)

### *1.1 Setiya on the Problem*

Kieran Setiya (2014; 2017) has recently picked up the Schopenhauerian argument. He argues that a crisis of meaning sets in when we reflect on the nature of a project-driven life. Here is how he illustrates the point with his own midlife crisis:

I love the profession of philosophy but not with the fire I had ten years ago. The novelty of accomplishment is gone: first publication, first lecture, first day of class. I will finish the paper I am writing; it will eventually be published; and I will write another. I will teach these students; they will graduate and move on; I will teach more. (2017, 22)

Setiya’s crisis results from coming to think that pursuing success in his projects is ultimately pointless, since it only leads to the next round in the cycle. The problem, as he sees it, is that we come to have a sense of “repetition and futility”, of “an apparent absence of meaning or significance in life” (2014, 3) regarding our own pursuits, even if we’re not skeptical about value in general, and even if we succeed at realizing our desires.

It’s worth highlighting what is new and distinctive about this worry. First, unlike other kinds of crisis of meaning, the issue Setiya identifies is not premised on thinking that nothing is really worth doing, or that we lack sufficient reason to act in certain ways (2017, 38). It’s not that Setiya thinks his philosophical work is worthless, for example. Nor does he assume that we’re bound to fail in our pursuits. Rather, and this is the second point, he

claims that “somehow the succession of projects and accomplishments, each one rational in itself, falls short” (2014, 2). This is not just a psychological thesis about why people as a matter of fact have a crisis of meaning when they come to regard their lives as just “one damn thing after another”. Basically, Setiya argues that realizing one’s aims in a “project-driven life” does not *warrant* finding one’s life meaningful when it’s viewed from a wide angle, a perspective that is detached from particular projects, because striving to realize aims is a “normative defect” and a “self-destructive” way of engaging with value (2014, 16, 12). This is because “In pursuing a goal, you are trying to exhaust your interaction with something good, as if you were to make friends for the sake of saying goodbye” (ibid.) Even if an aim is valuable, it doesn’t follow that it is worthwhile *for me* to bring it about, if achievement only exhausts my engagement with the value and begets another project. This challenge is interestingly different from run-of-the-mill skepticism about meaning.

### *1.2 Setiya’s Solution*

The remedy Setiya proposes to the futility of a project-driven life is switching to a different type of activity, or alternatively viewing our projects under a different guise. Drawing on linguistics, he labels the two different kinds of activity *telic* and *atelic*. Telic activities “aim at terminal states, at which they are finished and thus exhausted” (2017, 133-134). Writing and publishing a philosophy paper is an example of telic activity, as is walking to work. In contrast, atelic activities “do not aim at a point of termination or exhaustion, a final state in which they have been achieved. As well as walking from A to B, you can go for a walk with no particular destination.” (2017, 134) (Linguists test for atelic uses of verbs by asking whether you can only “stop” the activity, but not “complete” or “finish” it.) Midlife crises result from realizing, however dimly, that “there is a normative defect in your life if the activities that give it meaning, the ones that matter most to you, are telic ends” (2015, 16),

because such pursuits are indeed self-defeating. But what Schopenhauerian pessimism misses is the possibility of atelic activity. As Setiya has it,

We can escape the self-destructive cycle of pursuit, resolution, and renewal, of attainments archived or unachieved. The way out is to find sufficient value in atelic activities, activities that have no point of conclusion or limit, ones whose fulfillment lies in the moment of action itself. To draw meaning from such activities is to live in the present[.] (2017, 144)

The crucial thing is that since atelic activities do not aim at a temporally distinct endpoint, the question of what to do once I get there doesn't arise: "What I care about is fully present, not deferred; there is no sense of emptiness or self-defeat." (2017, 141) When you value going for a walk and you're wandering through the park, "You are not on the way to achieving a goal. You are already there." (ibid.) I'll label activities that are somehow automatically complete or fulfilled whenever we engage in them *strongly atelic*. They have no further *telos* or aim beyond the activity itself.

In advocating for (strongly) atelic activities like hanging out with friends, Setiya isn't saying that the best kind of life for us to live involves no projects. He grants that telic activities have final value and that they structure our lives. But he tells us to turn our attention from the project to the process, to find the atelic in the telic:

But atelic activities correspond to each of the projects that structure your life. Take me, writing this book. In doing so, I am writing and thinking about philosophy: an atelic activity. This matters, I think, not just as part of finishing the book, but in its own right. (2017, 140)

So even when we do engage in projects, what meaning there is to be found is not in them, but in the atelic activity they involve. Note that Setiya isn't saying that we can distract or manipulate ourselves by focusing on the atelic. Rather, he's arguing that atelic activities or aspects *warrant* finding one's life meaningful. This normative thesis distinguishes philosophy from mere self-help, though coming to accept it should also help with our sense of futility.

### *1.3 The Problem with Setiya's Solution*

What should we make of this proposal? Do activities that have no further aim yield sufficient warrant for finding our lives meaningful? I don't think so.

I think it is instructive to begin by asking why centering one's life on strongly atelic activities would not suffice for meaningfulness, though Setiya himself doesn't recommend doing so either.<sup>3</sup> To get a good handle on this, it's good to pause for a moment to consider the implications of someone's life being meaningful. For my purposes, I only need here the assumption that if someone's life is meaningful, then attitudes like sense of purpose, agential pride, fulfilment, agential admiration, and elevation are merited by it (see Metz 2001, Wolf 2010, Kauppinen 2013). The problem with throwing projects to the wind and focusing one's life on strongly atelic activities, then, is that they don't warrant such attitudes.

But why should we think that meaningfulness in the relevant sense merits this sort of agential attitudes? One simple reason is that if we think of people who have led paradigmatically meaningful lives – say, Cesar Chavez or Anna Akhmatova – we do tend, as a matter of fact, to have third-personal attitudes like agential admiration towards them, and to be inspired and elevated by their lives, in virtue of the very things that plausibly make their lives meaningful, such as fearless insights and exemplary acts for the good of the many.

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<sup>3</sup> While Setiya himself expresses caution about atelic activities at the expense of telic ones (2017, 143), it's not entirely clear why, if meaning is supposed to come from atelic activity alone.

Similarly, when we find our own lives meaningful, we do tend to take agential pride in what we've done and feel not just pleased but fulfilled. This is just what we'd expect, given that meaning in life is strongly associated with having a reason to live – and to have lived, and to go on living. If there's a point to your being around, various positive agency-based attitudes towards you are merited, at least to some degree.

To be sure, we sometimes use the language of meaning in other ways as well. For example, we may describe certain experiences, events, people, places, or objects as meaningful for us. What this kind of talk says is that these things *resonate* with us – they give rise to some deep feelings, not just pleasure, for example. There is some temptation to think that a life is meaningful to the extent that it contains such meaningful encounters.<sup>4</sup> But I want to keep this sense of meaningfulness separate from having the kind of sense of purpose or point to our lives that wards off existential concerns (Why am I here? What does it matter if I die tomorrow? What's the point of all this toil? So what if I'd never existed?). If the angel in *It's a Wonderful Life* had reminded George Bailey that he will have a deep experience if he goes to see the Sistine Chapel or dances with his wife, it would have done nothing to stop him from jumping off the bridge – his concern wasn't that nothing resonated with him, but that he had failed those who depended on him. Focusing on the aptness of meaning-relevant attitudes should help make clear we're addressing the right question.

My claim, then, is that strongly atelic activities on their own won't suffice to make meaning-relevant attitudes fitting. Consider the Slacker Solution to midlife crisis, which involves giving up on projects like building a career and centering one's life instead on strongly atelic activities, like going for walks with no destination, smoking weed, and hanging out with people, #YOLO. I submit that this does not help with the problem of futility that arises when we view things from a bigger perspective. A future revolving around

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<sup>4</sup> Cheshire Calhoun (2018) may succumb to something like this temptation, as I'll discuss below.



atelic activities is far from a rosy prospect, precisely from the perspective of meaning. Such a life is fundamentally repetitive and futile. The thought “I’m just going to hang out with the lads, and then I’ll die” is not really a cheerful one. It’s not that someone couldn’t find such experiences meaningful in the resonance sense. But if we focus on the question of whether our lives have a point, or whether they merit pride or fulfilment or elevation, the outlook is negative for the slacker. It’s true that atelic activities don’t aim at a terminal state at which they’re exhausted, but that doesn’t mean they’re not exhausted when they’re over. That nothing was supposed to be achieved doesn’t change the fact that nothing was achieved. If a “succession of projects and accomplishments” somehow falls short when we look at the big picture, as Setiya puts it, so does a succession of non-projects and non-accomplishments. If you weren’t around tomorrow to keep paddleboarding, well, that really would make no difference at all.

As I noted, Setiya himself doesn’t find the Slacker Solution attractive. His main recommendation is to find the atelic in the telic, so that we can find meaning in spite of the ultimate futility of telic pursuit of aims. My second argument against seizing the day is directed against it. My basic claim is that the meaningfulness of strongly atelic activities piggybacks on the meaningfulness of the telic activities whose aspects or counterparts they are, so that they themselves remain insufficient for meaning. We can see this if we consider cases in which the telic activity is meaningless, or is considered such.

Let’s start with the latter, which leads to the problem of *double consciousness*. Say you’re writing a book about epistemology. Evidently, what you’re doing is not like going for a walk with no particular destination – rather, you’re trying to solve, say, the New Evil Demon problem. In doing so, you’re philosophizing. Now you’re meant to realize that solving the New Evil Demon is futile and will only lead to seeking a solution to yet another clever puzzle, and at the same time rejoice in the thought that in trying to solve the New Evil

Demon you're engaged in a superlatively valuable activity. Even if this is psychologically possible (which is not a given), it's not a coherent combination of attitudes. To engage in philosophizing for the sake of philosophizing, a valuable atelic activity, you must take the problem you're trying to solve seriously, which means you can't simultaneously think that it is a matter of indifference whether you realize your aim of solving the problem.<sup>5</sup> From your own perspective, you can't be both a pessimist about the telic and an optimist about the atelic, if you're a rational agent.

Second, and more fundamentally, just as you don't have a reason to take the means if you don't have a reason to realize the end, you don't have a *reason* to engage in an atelic activity if you don't have a reason to engage in the telic activity whose aspect it is. Futility, it seems to me, is contagious. This point is reinforced if we consider scenarios in which someone engages in a potentially valuable activity like doing complex mathematics in the service of a worthless aim, like scamming old-age pensioners. If an accountant engaged in such activity begins to have doubts about the meaning of his life, it provides little consolation tell her to focus on what she's doing at each moment and ignore the *telos*. It won't help her on her deathbed.

## **2. In Praise of Progress: Meaningful Prospective Projects**

So far, I've rejected Setiya's positive argument for living in the moment as a straight solution to a sense of futility occasioned by realizing that projects will always lead to new projects. What I'm going to do in the rest of the paper is explain why acknowledging the core Schopenhauerian insight is compatible with certain kinds of projects warranting a sense of meaning. In this section, I'll argue that when ground projects governed by prospective

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<sup>5</sup> Gwen Bradford pointed out to me that Setiya's solution has some commonalities with Thomas Nagel's (1971) well-known ironic response to what he regards as the absurdity of our lives. Insofar as Nagel suggests that we should keep doing what we do while simultaneously bearing in mind that it's ultimately pointless, I think his suggestion does suffer from the same problem.

aims link up with each other in the right way to give one's life as a whole a progressive shape, there's no reason for a sense of futility. This is to reject Setiya's negative argument – but only in part, as we'll see.

To begin with, consider again how Setiya sees the issue. He holds that in a project-driven life, “The way in which you relate to the projects that matter most to you is by trying to complete them and so expel them from your life.” (2014, 12) As he sees it, if our activities are performed for the sake of a future aim, they're forever done and dusted, once the aim is reached. I think that this description fits some projects, like trying to reach some milestone just for the sake of doing so. Maybe you want to have visited Paris or have seduced a married man. Once you succeed, you can carve another notch somewhere – great, but then what, and so what? For telic activities of this kind, Setiya's descriptions and worries seem apt. The same goes for what Hannah Arendt (1958) called labour, activities that serve our recurring physical needs. If our lives revolve around such activities that produce or realize nothing of lasting value, we're right to find them fairly pointless when we reflect on them from a perspective that takes our life as a whole into account.

Alas, it's not *necessarily* the case that telic activities are exhausted when their aim is realized. Most of our projects do not aim at our having done, or being done with, something, and many result in something that bears fruit for the future. If I want to get a professorship, it's not for the sake of having become a professor, but for the sake of the decadent lifestyle it affords. The activities we engage in when we pursue such aims can reverberate across time. What is of particular interest here are what Bernard Williams labeled our *ground projects*, the aims around which we organize the rest of our lives while we have them. Many ground projects, like getting a college degree or building a better spaceship, involve a prospective aim, an outcome we strive to realize at some point in the (possibly distant) future.

In earlier work (Kauppinen 2012; 2015), I suggested that there's various ways in which earlier efforts can contribute to later ones to make for large-scale progress by improving the selection, pursuit, or chances of completion of future aims. The simplest one is that they can result in better *goal-setting*, that is, aiming for valuable goals we wouldn't otherwise have appreciated. This could be because they help us see what's worth pursuing, or just because they put us in a position to pursue something we otherwise couldn't have. Before you studied philosophy, you didn't know that the implications of utilitarianism for integrity merit sustained investigation. Your success in your aim of getting a degree in philosophy put you in the position to appreciate why this is a worthwhile project, and your success in a job search put you in a position to pursue it. When you completed those projects, you didn't 'archive' them, but they still bear fruit for you, and if things work out, your current efforts will have the same impact in the future.

The second reason why completed telic activities are not necessarily "expelled" from our lives is that they can result in better *pursuit* of aims in the future. Things that I've done in the past may and often do have the result that I can make more use of my capacities, or realize my potential better than I could have otherwise, and this, in turn, tends to improve chances of success. Think back on the time you spent in college. What did you do? You read, you debated, you argued, you slept late, you missed class, you pursued romantic attachments, you made friends and lost friends, you pulled pranks, you cried in your pillow, and more or less surprisingly, walked out with a degree in your hand. Some, perhaps surprisingly many, of these things are apt to equip you to handle the challenges of your later life better. You may not *think* about them, but they're not expelled from your life, but inform the way you go about doing things right now, in the good case for the better. Had you not done what you did, you wouldn't do what you do now. If you're lucky, what you do now in pursuit of your present prospective aims will have the same effect in the future.

Thirdly, sometimes our aim is explicitly improvement over time, reaching the next stage in a process towards an inexhaustible goal, an open-ended ideal whose content may not be definable or knowable in advance, as Neil Levy (2005) emphasizes. Practicing an instrument is an example of this. We want to learn a certain technique or play a certain thing, and once we've completed that project, there's always more. While the structure of this process is of a string of projects building on one another, and it's hard to see how any talk of self-defeat would get a purchase.

When we take the possibility of large-scale progress of these kinds into account, there's no reason to think that taking a wide-angle perspective on a project-driven life necessarily results in a warranted sense of futility. Unlike what Schopenhauer and Setiya seem to think, it's not as if we always go back to square one every time we complete a project – rather, if we choose our aims wisely and get lucky, we get to a new place, better equipped for its challenges. Realizing this should be an antidote for despair. Suppose your project was reading *Being and Nothingness*, not in order to have done it, but because you'd been told it's stimulating. You've now completed it, and your head is indeed full of new ideas, and you're ready to take your research in a new direction. It's no surprise if you don't have a 'now what?' feeling. Instead, you may well experience *the joy of progress* (which, incidentally, would be the title of my first self-help book, if I ever wrote one). It's worth emphasizing that this is not something you could enjoy if you engaged in an atelic activity – without an aim there's no such thing as progress towards the aim, or progress in your life overall.

How might one object to this sort of cautious optimism about meaningful telic activity? Setiya himself claims that the answer to midlife crisis “does not lie in the construction of a larger story into which the episodes fit” (2014, 11). I suspect part of the reason for his skepticism about narrative unity is that he conceives of it on the model of “a

consuming goal” that would make for “an overarching narrative” (ibid.). Having but one pursuit in life would indeed result in a “now what?” problem once you realize the aim, or alternatively ultimate failure. That’s why it’s important to emphasize that there is also a *sustainable* kind of progress that consists in projects building on one another. Then you never need fear either that what you’ve worked on is going to be discarded nor that there will be nothing left to do.

### **3. Two Kinds of Ground Project and a Midlife Crisis**

I’ve just argued that leading a project-driven life doesn’t as such warrant feelings of futility, though of course there are projects we are unwise or unlucky to embark on. But that’s not to say that Setiya is all wrong. Midlife crises of a sort *do* show the limitations of relying on large-scale progress for meaning, and highlight the importance of atelic activity – although as we’ll see, I’ll argue that the important kind of atelic activity isn’t one that is essentially oriented towards the present and complete in itself.

So, what do we learn about meaningful lives from thinking about midlife crises? If what I’ve just said is on the right track, being successful at projects isn’t itself a cause for any kind of crisis, as long as they make for progress in our lives as a whole. Alas, there’s the catch. Midlife is precisely the time for many people – and this includes, in particular, the privileged and successful who may have no other concerns about meaning in their lives – where it starts to look like any progress they make is at best peripheral. When it comes to the important things, it’s as if their efforts won’t take them any further than they’ve already come. They feel stuck, caught up in their obligations and commitments, defined by choices and mistakes they’ve already made. If you’re an academic, once you’ve become a full professor, what’s there left to achieve career-wise, really? Your third and fourth books may contain big advances in your field, but as for your life, their significance is diminished by

their being the third and fourth of their kind. So it might start to look like what's up ahead isn't something radically new, except for gradual weakening of capacities, illness, and death. (You might, of course, lurch to the side and start another career, but that would be subject to similar worries, and have diminished significance in a life that is already partially defined.)

It's no wonder, then, that the structure of our ground projects tends to change at this point. After all, as developmental and narrative psychologists like Erik Erikson and Dan McAdams have emphasized, we face different challenges at different stages in our lives (at least in contemporary Western societies).<sup>6</sup> In midlife, they say, the distinctive kind of challenge is not so much to figure out who we want to be or be with, but what to contribute to something beyond our own life.<sup>7</sup> And that may well require not only new aims but a new *kind* of aim, or at least putting a different sort of aim in the center stage of our life.

To understand this transition and why it might occasion a crisis of meaning, we need to examine the difference between what I've called prospective and reflexive ground projects in some more detail. In the former, we face a challenge that forces us to set ourselves a temporally distant and initially open-ended aim, whose realization requires us to do our best over a longish period of time to overcome various kinds of obstacle, and whose specification often requires us to come to understand ourselves better. Here the challenge could be finding a long-term partner, or it could be getting a degree, or getting tenure, or finding a long-lost buried treasure. Typically, the resolution of one challenge paves the way

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<sup>6</sup> To be sure, this is not the only kind of midlife crisis – for example, sometimes we use the term to refer to the experience of encountering our finitude, or the first unmistakable signs of bodily or psychological decay, or the realization that some of our dreams will never be realized. Such crises call for a different kind of response, perhaps of a Stoic or Buddhist variety.

<sup>7</sup> Erik Erikson (Erikson and Erikson 1997) argued that adolescents face the challenge of avoiding role confusion by carving their own identity and young adults the challenge of avoiding isolation by forming intimate bonds with others in self-chosen relationships, and more broadly a social role. Interestingly for our purposes, the challenge that Erikson identified for middle age was the choice between generativity and stagnation. As Dan McAdams characterizes it, generativity is a matter of leaving something for future generations, of “[taking] care of matters that people care about” (2005, 52). Stagnation, in turn, involves feeling stuck, useless, or like a failure.

for another, making possible the kind of overall progress in life I discussed in the previous section.

Apart from the treasure hunt, these are the kind of challenges that virtually all of us are faced with when we're young or youngish adults. But it's no coincidence, I claim, that the structure of the pursuit of this kind of prospective aim is the same as that of a stereotypical fictional adventure like seeking a treasure. The familiar Aristotelian story arc found everywhere from folk tales to movies and country songs – an initiating event leads to conflict, which leads to efforts to solve the problem, which culminate in a turning point that is followed by denouement – corresponds to the teleological structure of such projects, which we might thus also label *Adventures* in terms of their narrative mode. It's notable here that prospective projects also have a characteristic *emotional* arc, with a big pay-off at the end if we're successful. Generalizing broadly, such projects begin with a desire for the aim and some level of hope of getting there, the pursuit of the aim involves feelings like fear, excitement, and sense of competence, and realizing it offers joy or relief or satisfaction. An additional boost to good feelings is that in the end, you or anyone else can point to the finished product and say with pride or admiration: "There it is!"<sup>8</sup> Even failure may have the silver lining that we at least feel alive when we have big emotions like grief or disappointment, and no longer suffer from uncertainty. In David Velleman's terms, prospective projects come with an emotional cadence that resolves one way or another, whether its "an anxiety relieved or a hope dashed" (2003, 7).

Reflexive ground projects like governing a country, parenting, or monitoring nuclear weapons are different, however. Instead of being directed towards a temporally distant outcome, they aim at an end that is realized to some degree at each moment of the project's duration, insofar as one is successful, but not for good. They are thus *atelic* in the linguistic

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<sup>8</sup> I owe this point to Erik Lagerspetz.



sense that Setiya uses – you can stop governing a country, but you can't “finish” or “complete” governing. But as ground projects, they are not strongly atelic in being somehow done for their own sake (that is, having no further end) or being automatically complete, like Setiya's favourite example of going for a walk with no particular destination – recall his emphasis on “you're already there” when you're just walking. I'll say that they are *weakly atelic* in that while their aim can only be realized in and through some constitutive activity, and only for the duration of some such activity, their aim is nevertheless *distinct* from the activity itself. We don't do these things for their own sake, but for the sake of some value that they realize when they're done well. They have a *telos* that provides them with a standard of success or failure (O'Brien 2019), so you can perform them better or worse.<sup>9</sup>

The values that can be realized only through reflexive projects may be called *practice-dependent*. Consider here friendship, or good governance of a country (or indeed justice), or keeping the flame of atonal jazz alive. These are desirable kinds of relationships, institutions, and practices that can only exist as long as people perform the relevant kinds of actions, and moreover do so in the context of a right kind of commitment that gives them an appropriate significance, as I'll discuss below. A minister might realize the value of good governance (or, equivalently, *govern well*) when reading a white paper on health care in a bathtub or when listening to ordinary people's experiences on the street. Stop doing such things and just boss people around, and you're governing badly.

One distinctive feature of reflexive aims is thus that when you adopt one, you *take responsibility* for something putatively valuable that can't be brought about once and for all, without need for further activity.<sup>10</sup> (In the bad case, such responsibility is thrust upon you.) You can, to be sure, realize the aim at a time and for a time, but not for good, as long as the

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<sup>9</sup> Note that Setiya himself uses examples like parenting and philosophizing, which are in my terms only weakly atelic, and do not in my view fulfil the criteria he sets out for (strongly) atelic activity.

<sup>10</sup> For a congenial account of taking on a responsibility, see (perhaps surprisingly) Calhoun 2019.

task exists. If you have the prospective aim of digging a canal from Lake Saimaa to the Baltic, once you're done, it stays dug. There's no need for you or anyone else to keep digging it, if you were successful. But if you take responsibility for caring for abandoned pets in your community, someone else needs to step in when you stop doing it, no matter how successful you have been (unless of course people stop abandoning pets).

When projects with a reflexive aim dominate your life, I'll say that the narrative mode of true stories about it is one of *Service*, because your activities are not undertaken for the sake of some future outcome that would constitute success, but in service of the putative value you've taken responsibility for. It is a bit of a stretch to even talk about a story here, given how prominent the Adventure variant is in our fictions and histories. Because Service stories don't involve overcoming obstacles to realize an aim once and for all in the end, they are apt to give rise to different emotions. Even in the best case, they won't feature the excitement and thrill of the chase or the joy of finally making it. Uncertainty may never be fully resolved. While you will face external challenges, a lot of them are internal instead (while parenting, you have to find the willpower to make breakfast every damn morning), and there's less drama in overcoming them. The basic story is one of persistence and staying the course, or resignation and giving up.

So here's my diagnosis of a distinctive kind of crisis of meaning that is apt to take place in midlife. Given the key challenges of young adulthood, our lives at that stage may well have the characteristic shape and emotional thrill of an Adventure – at least if we're fairly healthy and wealthy Westerners free to shape our identities, love lives and careers. But as Service projects become more central in midlife, as they often do, the kind of emotional reward we get from success in prospective aims is no longer on offer, except perhaps on a miniature scale – getting a paper accepted feels great, but it's not the same thing as getting a job or tenure, because it's not a life-defining ground project. It's easy to feel that there is

something missing in our lives when we're no longer fighting with light sabers or wooing Mr. Darcy.

This contrast is nicely illustrated by the difference between Jane Austen's novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Austen's novels are excellent Adventures that end in a joyous wedding. In contrast, Flaubert *begins* with a joyous wedding. The rest of the novel is, among others things, an acute exploration of the difficulty of the transition from Adventure to Service. Without going into the details, the key to the plot is that the titular Emma Bovary can't handle transition to Service, which in her era and for her class meant dedicating herself to the well-being of her children and husband. She was raised on romances, and expected her life to be an Adventure through and through. But romantic fictions end with the marriage celebration and ringing church bells, or with the conquest of the evil enemy. And life doesn't. Emma Bovary hadn't learned from her novels how to live happily ever after. She couldn't adjust to Service with a child and husband (and who can blame her for that?), so she began to seek out the thrill of Adventure in adultery, which turned out to offer only fleeting relief. What she needed wasn't another adventure, but a different kind of worthwhile ground project altogether.

#### **4. Meaningful Reflexive Projects**

The key question at this point, then, turns out to be whether reflexive ground projects can suffice to make life meaningful. After all, some people's lives are always characterized by such projects, either by choice or force of circumstance, and others transition from largely prospective aims to largely reflexive aims in midlife, as I just observed. Initially, we might be pessimistic – after all, I argued earlier that atelic activities do not suffice to make life meaningful, and much of contemporary work on meaning has focused on projects with prospective aims (including my own past work). However, the good news is that it's only the

*strongly* atelic activities that are insufficient. *Weakly* atelic ground projects are a different story altogether. Exploring this will also further clarify the difference between strongly and weakly atelic endeavours.

Let's begin by going back to meaning in life again. I already briefly argued that it is at least a mark of meaningfulness in the most distinctive sense that a person's activities merit attitudes like sense of purpose, fulfilment, pride, admiration, and elevation. So what does it take for people's lives to be meaningful in the sense of meriting such attitudes? Currently most popular views emphasize active and successful engagement with objective value, as Susan Wolf (2010) does. Others have observed that success can't be easy or accidental, but must come from exercising our capacities, perhaps the very ones whose importance perfectionists have traditionally highlighted (Kauppinen 2012; Metz 2015; cf. Hurka 1993). Such views could be supported bottom-up by considering what paradigms of meaningful life have in common, or top-down by considering the nature of the relevant attitudes and thus what makes them fitting (Kauppinen 2015). Here, I'm just going to assume that something in the ballpark of these popular views is the correct account.

Our question is whether our lives can be meaningful if they are dominated by reflexive ground projects. And that turns out to be the question of whether we can bring about something of objective value by successfully exercising our capacities in such projects, perhaps especially if in doing so we have to overcome challenging obstacles, so that the achievement is difficult (Bradford 2015). The good news, then, is that this is undoubtedly the case if what I said above about practice-dependent value is correct. Being successful enough in reflexive aims – and hence doing the sort of thing that this entails, day after day – is how we realize the value of personal relationships or protecting the natural world or a healthy society or keeping the flame alive. Of course, this presupposes that these are inherently valuable relationships and activities, and I can't give a proper defense of that

claim here.<sup>11</sup> For some of them, one could appeal to a recursive principle akin to Thomas Hurka's (2001) claim that loving the good is itself non-instrumentally good: if it is intrinsically good that certain types of art or people or ecosystems flourish, then activities that constitute pursuing or protecting such flourishing are themselves non-instrumentally valuable. Or: if the welfare of a child is intrinsically valuable, then taking responsibility for a child's welfare and successfully carrying it out is valuable. I'm not going to worry too much about making this case, since I take the basic claim that there are at least some genuinely valuable practice-dependent goods to be overwhelmingly plausible.

Since success in reflexive projects of the right kind is a way, and indeed the only way, to realize certain important goods in our lives, it does merit the kind of attitudes associated with meaningfulness. Suppose Lisa has taken responsibility for running the local dog shelter as a volunteer. If she discharges this duty well day in and day out, she's right to feel competent and confident. She can handle difficult people and put mistreated creatures on their paws again, and persists in doing so when there are far easier things for her to do. She can take pride in a job well-done, even if it's not like completing a quest to slay a dragon. There is at least some point to her life, and correspondingly a reason for her to go on living – and indeed one that is not easily exhausted. So whether she *finds* her life meaningful or not, it *is* meaningful, at least to some extent, even though she's not making progress towards the ultimate resolution of a prospective aim – though she can still make progress in a different sense, of going deeper rather than moving on to the next challenge better equipped.

Evidently, reflexive success that suffices to make someone's life meaningful can't be a fleeting encounter – indeed, objectivists about meaning sometimes talk about bringing about something of *lasting* value (e.g. Kauppinen 2012). This could be an achievement

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<sup>11</sup> What Joseph Raz (2003) says is at least congenial to my view.

whose value endures, like a landmark painting, but it could also be a matter of taking responsibility for a practice-dependent value for a long duration. The fact that such lasting value is realized bit by bit poses something of a challenge for intersubjective recognition, however, which may explain in part why it is harder for us to see the worth of our own activity. The fact that, say, Lisa rescued and found a good home for Mira, a Labrador abandoned by the side of a highway, is something worth celebrating a little bit, but on its own it doesn't yet merit much admiration. The same goes for any token realization of the practice-dependent value. It's therefore not a coincidence that there is often a genuine outpouring of appreciation when someone like Lisa, say, retires after 20 years and passes the responsibility on to someone else. The deep importance of a coach, teacher, departmental secretary, or drummer often only becomes clear in people's eyes when they stop carrying the responsibility. And if no one else is on hand to take on the task, or do so equally well, the often hidden importance of the practice-dependent value itself to our lives is also brought to light.

It's worth emphasizing, too, that many prospective projects simply can't end well unless they result in successful reflexive projects. It's not worth pursuing the hand of the man or woman of your dreams if you end up failing at the myriad mundane activities on which the value of a loving relationship depends. Or suppose you struggle for years and finally make it to the Iron Throne. After the fireworks are over, you're faced with the never-ending task of governing the Seven Kingdoms. If you make a mess of it, there was never much point in your becoming the king or queen in the first place. *Mutatis mutandis* – and there's not that many things that need to be changed – the same goes for becoming a professor. As I briefly suggested, this may have something to do with the deathbed regrets of those who just worked and worked – if you did for the sake of your family but never took up your part in the family, it's no wonder if you doubt if it paid off for you.

Emphasizing that reflexive projects contribute to meaning in life via realizing practice-dependent values and constituting the success condition of many prospective projects also further highlights the difference between weakly and strongly atelic activities. Taking responsibility for a practice-dependent value is not “living in the moment”, even though it is not future-oriented in the same way as pursuing a prospective aim. Take another of Setiya’s favourite examples, hanging out with friends. Think of just what is involved. Say that what you actually do is have a barbecue and bull session. Does this activity realize the value of friendship? Well, it *may*, or it may not. The *significance* of this activity depends on how it fits into a broader pattern of intersubjective interaction, and not just on what happens right now. Would the people you’re hanging out with be there for you, if you got fired from your job? Would they call you up, if they had an extra ticket for a show? Is this a bunch of people who have shared the good times and bad times with you in the past? If not, it’s misleading to even talk about hanging out with *friends*. The significance of an activity depends on such facts about what has happened, what will happen, and what would happen in certain contingencies. And crucially for my purposes, the value and meaningfulness of the activity supervene on its significance.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the point could be put this way: while the significance of strongly atelic activities that don’t aim at anything beyond themselves is exhausted by what happens in the here and now, weakly atelic activities that realize practice-dependent values always point beyond the present. Otherwise they wouldn’t realize those values right now either.

Thinking about significance helps understand the distinctive way in which reflexive projects, too, remain future-oriented (and thus merit being called “projects”). True, they don’t aim at an endpoint. But in taking responsibility for some practice-dependent value, we *commit* ourselves beyond the present, whether the commitment is open-ended or temporally

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<sup>12</sup> I defend related claims in Kauppinen (forthcoming).

bound. As Cheshire Calhoun (2018) rightly stresses, commitment in the relevant sense goes beyond merely planning to do something – after all, plans are easily revised – in involving various attitudes towards its object and being resistant to change. Calhoun herself questions whether such commitments are necessary to or even conducive to meaning, given that carrying out commitments may well on balance require us to do things we do not value for their own sake on a moment-by-moment basis. After all, Lisa might not be particularly into dealing with managing the accounts of the dog shelter or scrubbing the floor clean after one of the animals has had an accident.

Calhoun describes this as a conflict between temporally local and global meaningfulness (2018, 112). But I think this way of talking obscures what is going on. It is true that commitment will often entail doing things that don't in themselves *resonate* with us. But to capture that truth, we don't need the language of 'local meaning'. From the perspective of meaning in life, we *do* need to distinguish between doing the accounts of the shelter just as a means of making money (as a hired hand might) and doing so as a part of caring for animals. Given Lisa's commitment, her action can be thought of under the latter description. That's why it, too, contributes to the meaningfulness of her life in spite of not resonating with her. (Indeed, she can be proud of doing the accounts in part just because of that.) There is a prudential conflict from her perspective, all right, but it's not a conflict between 'local' and 'global' meaning, but rather between meaning and other goods like enjoyment. So here, once again, the meaningfulness of what we do right now depends on how it fits with a broader temporal context, even if the project doesn't aim at a terminal point.

## **5. Conclusion**



Schopenhauer and Setiya rightly remind us that success in individual projects does not suffice for a warranted sense of meaning in life. But that's not because they only beget yet further projects, so that we'd be better off living in the moment. Rather, meaning is to be found in the various ways of making large-scale progress, from building on what we've learned to deepening our understanding, and in the various ways of taking responsibility for valuable tasks that are never completed but can be performed better or worse. Whether our ground projects are prospective or reflexive, what we do at each moment contributes to leading a meaningful life only when it's connected in the right way to what we do at other moments. Fortunately, that is something we can come to realize and rejoice in right now.<sup>13</sup>

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