

MEANINGFUL LIVES, IDEAL OBSERVERS, AND VIEWS FROM NOWHERE

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ABSTRACT: In recent discussions of whether our lives are or can be meaningful, appeals are often made to such things as “a view from nowhere,” or “the viewpoint of the universe.” In this paper I attempt to make sense of what it might mean for a being to possess such a perspective, and argue that common appeals to such perspectives are inadequately developed; crucially, they do not adequately account for the character of the beings taken to possess these viewpoints. In the second half of the paper I turn to an alternative proposal, one that focuses on the attitudes of virtuous ideal observers in determining the normative statuses of our lives and activities, and argue that it provides a plausible account of meaningfulness.

In discussions of whether our lives are or can be meaningful, appeals are often made to such things as “a view from nowhere,” “the viewpoint of the universe,” or looking at our lives *sub specie aeternitatis* (see, for example, Hanfling 1987; Murphy 1982; Nagel 1986, 2000; Quinn 2000; and Singer 1995; see Metz 2002 and Cottingham 2003 for discussion; and Schmidtz 2002 and Cottingham 1996, 1998 for criticism). And both Nagel and Singer appeal to such perspectives more broadly in attempting to understand morality (Nagel 1986; Singer 1995; see also Sidgwick 1874). It seems that from such a perspective, we (or some other being) could objectively assess the value of our lives and activities, “in the grand scheme of things.” Our reactions while inhabiting such a perspective could determine whether our projects are worthwhile or trivial, meaningful or meaningless.

In what follows I attempt to make sense of what it might mean for a being to possess such a perspective, and to evaluate whether simply possessing such a perspective would lead to assessments that could plausibly be taken as determining the status of our lives and commitments as meaningful or not.¹ I argue that common appeals to such perspectives or viewpoints are inadequately developed; crucially, they do not adequately account for the character of the beings taken to possess these viewpoints. In the second

half of the paper I turn to an alternative proposal, one that focuses on the attitudes of virtuous ideal observers in determining the normative statuses of our lives and activities, and argue that it provides a plausible account of meaningfulness.

I. HARE AND THE BASIC PROBLEM

R. M. Hare tells the story of a Swiss student who stayed with him and his wife (2000, 277). The student, upon reading Camus' *The Stranger*, becomes thoroughly depressed, believing that "nothing matters." Hare's response is to show the student that many things clearly do matter to us. Succeeding in our profession, spending time with friends, maintaining our health—all of these things, and many others, matter to us. Of course, some things matter to some of us and not to others; we are not all identical. But the student's worry is misguided—obviously things do matter to people, including the student; the claim that nothing matters reflects a confusion.²

Still, while there is something to Hare's response—and the idea that things do matter to us if we just get on with our lives—many of us will feel that the student's worry is not yet fully-addressed. Perhaps we could put the point this way: true, people care about many things and these things thus matter to people. But—and now our worry returns—*should* they matter to people? For some people, having the latest designer fashions matters to them. Hare seems to have provided us with a true descriptive claim about people—things matter to them. But the student's question is a normative one—*should* people care about the things they do? Are there any things that are worth striving for—things worthy of caring about? And the student's worry is that ultimately there are no such goods, that nothing truly matters.

II. NAGEL, SINGER, AND APPEALS TO THE VIEW FROM NOWHERE

Thomas Nagel articulates, in a rather different fashion, why we do not find Hare's response satisfying:

[H]umans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and the view is at once sobering and comical. (Nagel 2000, 179; see also Hanfling 1987, 22–24)

In taking this reflective step backwards and examining our lives, the mere fact that things matter to us is hardly satisfying. If anything, this is precisely the problem:

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always a point of view [that of the universe] outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. (Nagel 2000, 178)

The problem, as now articulated by Nagel, is that from the point of view of the universe (or *sub specie aeternitatis*), our projects—and the seriousness with which we pursue them—seem arbitrary and idiosyncratic.

An appeal to the viewpoint of the universe in determining whether our lives and activities matter or are meaningful is attractive. Notice how we often look back upon our past projects and activities, and, with the benefit of greater experience and knowledge, reconsider what we once took to be meaningful. An appeal to the viewpoint of the universe might capture such a reflective perspective—one that could also be applied to our present projects; after all, might we not also reassess these with greater information? Intuitively, it might seem to be an appeal to an objective, fully-informed point of view. And as such it would seem to capture our concern with whether, objectively, in the grand scheme of things, our lives are meaningful. Nagel suggests that

[t]o acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object. In other words, we place ourselves in the world that is to be understood. The old view then comes to be regarded as an appearance, more subjective than the new view, and correctable or confirmable by reference to it. The process can be repeated, yielding a still more objective conception. (Nagel 1986, 4)

Ultimately, with sufficient iterations, we would arrive at an objective view from nowhere.³ When we ask whether our projects have meaning, we could be understood as asking how a being that sees the entire universe through all time would assess them—would such a being find them to be worthwhile?

Consider, then, the following proposal: an activity or life is meaningful insofar as a being who takes on the viewpoint of the universe would deem it to be meaningful.⁴ To deem a life or activity meaningful would be a matter of having certain positive responses or pro-attitudes towards it; as such the proposal is not circular. Compare: many find it plausible to hold that the color of various objects or wavelengths of light is determined by the visual responses of observers. On this understanding, if there were no beings with visual systems and an associated phenomenology, there would be no colors as such—only various wavelengths of light. It is because humans have the visual systems that we do that we divide various wavelengths of light into colors the way we do. The current proposal, with respect to meaningfulness, would analogously hold that it is the responses or attitudes of a being with a view from nowhere that would determine how meaningful a given life or activity would be; there would be no prior, independent property of meaningfulness outside of this.

Still, what exactly would it be to look upon our lives and the world from nowhere—or from the viewpoint of the universe? We might picture an alien being looking at the universe through a grand telescope—but of course this is merely a simple heuristic.⁵ An observer with a view from nowhere would presumably have full-information about the universe: about what happens on Earth, in our particular lives, but also full-information about every planet in every solar system in every galaxy. From such a viewpoint, our behaviors might obviously seem trivial and

inconsequential, given the grand scope of the universe as it endures over billions of years; as noted above, Nagel believes that this would be the case.

Peter Singer appeals to the point of view of the universe as he describes the attitudes and outlook of various moral exemplars:

These people take the broader perspective that is characteristic of an ethical life. They adopt—to use Henry Sidgwick’s memorable phrase—“the point of view of the universe.” This is not a phrase to be taken literally, for unless we are pantheists, the universe itself cannot have a point of view at all. I shall use Sidgwick’s phrase to refer to a point of view that is maximally all-embracing, while not attributing any kind of consciousness or other attitudes to the universe, or any part of it that is not a sentient being. (Singer 1995, 222)

We seem to have found an objective, impartial, and impersonal viewpoint, one suitable for judging the worth of various goals, commitments, and so forth.⁶ But to whom does this viewpoint belong? Put otherwise: what is the nature or character of the being who views us and our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*?

To see the importance of this question, consider a range of possible observers, each taking on the fully-informed viewpoint of the universe. Suppose we have a wholly malevolent observer, one who loathes acts of love, who delights in suffering, and who despises all other sentient beings. Should we care whether or not such a being would judge our lives to lack meaning? It hardly seems so. Or consider a severely depressed observer looking down upon us, one who fails to value anything; that such a depressed observer would not find our lives or projects to be worthwhile tells us very little, if anything at all. More broadly, we can imagine a range of observers who, while fully-informed about us or even omniscient, would be of no obvious value in assessing the worth of our activities: observers who are manic, hateful, inconsistent, severely biased, stupid, drugged, or so on. Merely possessing information need not cure mental illness or defect.

An alternative possibility is that the observer has no character as such; it simply possesses knowledge of the universe. This would be a fully impersonal observer—it would lack emotions, preferences, hatreds, loves, desires, and so forth. But why concern ourselves with such a being with such a point of view? That is, perhaps an observer that simply possesses knowledge but without consciousness, emotions, preferences, or other attitudes would not find our lives meaningful. But what of it? Such a being, lacking all attitudes (save belief),⁷ seems of an entirely improper kind to *appreciate* or *value* anything at all; and this is precisely what is at stake.

Singer maintains that

From this perspective (the point of view of the universe), we can see that our own sufferings and pleasures are very like the sufferings and pleasures of others; and that there is no reason to give less consideration to the sufferings of others, just because they are “other.” (Singer 1995, 222)

If we take the point of view of the universe we can recognize the urgency of doing something about the pain and suffering of others, before we even consider promoting (for their own sake rather than as a means to reducing pain and suffering) other possible values like beauty, knowledge, autonomy or happiness. (Singer 1995, 232)

Thus, rather than seeing our lives and projects as meaningless (as Nagel suggests), Singer believes that a being who takes on the viewpoint of the universe would make assessments—for example, that the alleviation of pain and suffering is particularly urgent. As such, Singer cannot have in mind a fully impersonal observer. Without antecedent preferences or other attitudes, such a being would lack any basis for coming to deem any activity urgent. Beyond this, without a desire to draw comparisons or make assessments, it is unclear why a being would engage in these activities. Presumably such an attitude-less being would make no judgments or assessments at all; rather it would simply be aware that there are various forms and instances of pain and of pleasure.

Singer thus does not deny attitudes or consciousness to beings who take on the viewpoint of the universe. He allows such beings to form valuations, and also allows a basis for such valuations, given their pre-existing preferences and other attitudes. But now we face the problem described earlier: there could be hateful beings, depressed beings, and so on, and each could take on the viewpoint of the universe. If Singer is not denying consciousness and attitudes to beings taking on the viewpoint of the universe, we are then left with an infinite range of potential observers, many or most of whom would not, intuitively, be suitable assessors of the value or meaningfulness of our lives and activities. We would need to further refine the character and attitudes of observers to arrive at judgments worth accepting.

Nagel stresses that it is we ourselves who attempt to achieve the viewpoint of the universe; we strive to understand ourselves from an objective, detached point of view, but at the same time we cannot entirely detach ourselves from our day-to-day concerns and projects:

The trouble is that the two attitudes [the engaged, subjective view, and the detached, objective view] have to coexist in a single person who is actually leading the life toward which he is simultaneously engaged and detached. This person does not occupy a third standpoint from which he can make relativized judgments about his life . . . he occupies both of the conflicting points of view and his attitudes derive from them both. (Nagel 1986, 216)

On Nagel's approach, then, rather than having a being without any interests or preferences, or a being with some entirely arbitrary set of preferences, it initially seems that it would be we ourselves, with our characters, who attempt to take on the viewpoint of the universe, and who would assess our lives and activities. But if this were correct, we would run afoul of the initial problem discussed above. In taking on a view from nowhere, we would maintain our preferences, interests, and other traits. If we were to suffer from severe depression, a lack of intelligence, bias, or so forth, these traits would obviously alter and influence our assessments of actions, events, and lives, and in each case we would have grounds to dismiss assessments made from such perspectives, even if fully-informed.

Nagel is sensitive to this potential worry; in further explaining objective viewpoints, he suggests that

A view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the

character of the particular type of creature he is. The wider the range of subjective types to which a form of understanding is assessable—the less it depends on specific subjective capacities, the more objective it is. (Nagel 1986, 5)

Thus rather than importing our personal commitments, virtues, and vices (which require specific subjective capacities—after all, not all beings would share human capacities for compassion, etc.), it initially seems that a genuine, fully objective view from nowhere for Nagel would involve a being without any preferences or interests. But then we would arrive at the other problem discussed earlier: a being without preferences or interests would not value or disvalue anything, and thus could not serve to establish any norms, or provide an assessment of our lives as meaningful or not.

Nagel is also sensitive to this problem. He mentions the risk of seeking too objective, too detached a point of view:

If we push the claims of objective detachment to their logical conclusion, and survey the world from a standpoint completely detached from all interests, we discover that there is *nothing*—no values left of any kind: things can be said to matter at all only to individuals within the world. The result is objective nihilism. (Nagel 1986, 146)

Nagel's solution consists in stressing that, even as we attempt to achieve more detached standpoints, we will be aware of the valuations and desires of all the beings considered from a given standpoint:

And indeed when we take up the objective standpoint, the problem is not that values seem to disappear, but that there seem to be too many of them, coming from every life and drowning out those that arise from our own. It is just as easy to form desires from an objective standpoint as it is to form beliefs. (Nagel 1986, 147)

Nagel thus argues that with a view from nowhere we would understand that a wide range of projects matter to different beings, and we would thus naturally be inclined to form desires, to value various projects, and so on. But every individual's concerns would seem trivial, drowned out by the sheer volume of the desires and values to be found in the universe. Now we again arrive at a dilemma involving the two worries developed above. If those with a view from nowhere possess character traits of any kind, it seems different reactions could result—a cruel agent with a view from nowhere might wish to thwart the desires of all individuals (or even just a select few), and so on. There is no guarantee that they would have the reaction suggested by Nagel. On the other hand, if we eliminate such traits and preferences, we ultimately return to our fully-detached observer who would value (and disvalue) nothing; no assessments would be made, even though the observer would be aware that other creatures do make valuations. This latter fact would simply be more information to a fully-detached observer.

We thus arrive at the following: to better understand what we mean when we speak of the *viewpoint* of the universe, or a *view* from nowhere, we should more fully consider the nature of the being to whom this viewpoint belongs. And when we do so, we soon recognize that there is an infinite variety of beings who could

possess the same information, but who would react in very different ways to it; a sociopath with a view from nowhere is simply a very well-informed sociopath. On the other hand, if we try to move away from a viewpoint, we instead seem to arrive at something like a complete list of information about the universe possessed by a mechanical, emotionless entity. But such an entity, precisely insofar as it lacks emotions, desires, preferences (and other attitudes) would hardly seem capable of valuing or appreciating anything that occurs in the universe.

These considerations undermine our initial intuition that a being possessing a view from nowhere would necessarily deem our lives and activities to be meaningless or unworthy of the seriousness with which we approach them (pace Nagel). Still, on the other hand, we also have reason to question Singer's position—that in taking on the point of view of the universe one would necessarily come to deem ending suffering as urgent, and meaningful. The character of the being possessing this viewpoint comes into focus as essential to the judgments that would be made.

III. TWO FURTHER PROBLEMS FOR NAGEL

There are further worries for Nagel's approach insofar as he proposes that we attempt to detach ourselves to take an objective and impartial view of our lives. As Nagel himself notes, humans are finite beings; we cannot step out of our skins, we cannot truly achieve full-information about the universe or look at ourselves from outside. And there is a worry that if we finite humans simply attempt to imagine ourselves with a view from nowhere (or even some lesser, but still broadly "objective" point of view) then we will engage in a highly speculative and unreliable procedure in attempting to assess our lives, even if we are not confused, and do not assume that we have actually achieved a view from nowhere. That is, this procedure may be little more than playing pretend—we try to imagine ourselves with a God-like or detached perspective on our lives. Nagel suggests that

Reference to our small size and short lifespan and to the fact that all of mankind will eventually vanish without a trace are metaphors for the backward step which permits us to regard ourselves from without and to find the particular form of our lives curious and slightly surprising. By feigning a nebula's-eye view, we illustrate the capacity to see ourselves without presuppositions, as arbitrary, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants of the world, one of countless possible forms of life. (Nagel 2000, 183)

Given that we merely have our imaginings of what possessing a view from nowhere would be like, we have little reason to believe that any appraisals we make of our lives as meaningless or arbitrary would hold, were we in fact to achieve such a viewpoint. The same concerns would apply to other viewpoints that could be construed as "highly objective," even if not yet a view from nowhere.

Relatedly, notice the images and references in the above passage from Nagel—that humans are tiny creatures, who live ridiculously short lives, and that we can see such things when we feign the viewpoint of a nebula. These metaphors

encourage us to understand the viewpoint of the universe on the basis of a literal, visual-perception-based model. Individual planets (let alone human beings) seem tinier and tinier as we move further and further out into space in order to achieve a more encompassing viewpoint. By thinking of the viewpoint of the universe in terms of human vision, we are naturally led to see “objective” viewpoints as cold and detached, further and further removed from human life as they become more objective and encompassing.⁸

Imagine instead a being with very different, perhaps infinite cognitive capacities. It is one thing to give a human being with our limited cognitive capacities a view from nowhere; it is quite another to give a god or any other being with much more powerful cognitive capacities the same viewpoint. Compare a dog with a view from nowhere. It is not at all clear that the dog could do much with it, given his rather restricted cognitive abilities and interests; perhaps he would find some nice places to hide some bones. Similarly, it is not clear that humans could really grasp, even in imagination, possessing a view from nowhere. Furthermore, even if we could, it would be of very limited utility if we were to possess only our limited human capacities to process all of the available information.

More broadly, when we (humans) imagine ourselves taking on a view from nowhere, part of what might lead us to discount the meaningfulness of our activities is that the scale of all that occurs in the universe overwhelms us. Nagel writes of our values being ‘drowned out’ by all of the other beings and their values, desires, etc. We start imagining what happens in distant galaxies, other possible life forms, and so on. And we do so with rather limited cognitive capacities—we can only focus on so much information at a time, and we become distracted by all that is occurring outside of our usual spheres of concern. But where we would be distracted, confused, and overwhelmed by the massive potential information available to us with a view from nowhere, beings with much greater cognitive capacities could take-in all of the information just as easily as we humans can take-in and process the information we read in a novel, or while looking across an ordinary room.

In this section, then, we have brought out two additional problems with Nagel’s approach. First, in treating the view from nowhere as something that we directly attempt to imagine ourselves achieving (while recognizing that we cannot escape our own subjective viewpoint) we do not actually achieve such a viewpoint. Instead, we simply have our limited imaginings of what it would be like, and there is little reason to think that we are accurate in doing so. Second, if we are tempted to believe that we would see our lives as arbitrary or meaningless as we pretend to take on the viewpoint of the universe, this could well be due to limits to our imagination and cognitive capacities. We see a mass of information far beyond the scope of what humans can readily work with, and so our concerns and projects seem to be trivial and lost in all of the activity of the universe. But beings with greater cognitive capacities need not be overwhelmed in the same way; they could focus directly on the details of our lives, even while being aware of what is occurring across the universe.

IV. AN APPEAL TO VIRTUOUS IDEAL OBSERVERS

We have not yet arrived at a satisfactory understanding of how an appeal to a view from nowhere could establish a standard for determining whether our lives and commitments are meaningful. The crucial issue is the character and nature of the being who takes up this point of view. Consider, then, the following proposal, which explicitly addresses this point:

A life (commitment, activity, etc.) is meaningful for an agent *S* in a given set of circumstances *C* iff an unimpaired, fully-informed, fully-virtuous observer would deem it to be meaningful.⁹

Essentially, whether a life or activity is meaningful is determined by the attitudes that would be taken toward it by a virtuous being who is fully-informed; so long as at least one such ideal observer would deem it meaningful (where this is ultimately a matter of approving of the life in some way, or having some similar pro-attitude), then the life or activity *is* meaningful. Note that this is a metaphysical claim: meaningfulness is dependent upon the attitudes of the ideal observers; the ideal observers are *not* simply good epistemic guides to an independent, prior meaningfulness.

We can consider the traits of the relevant observers in greater depth. First, they must be fully-informed. Unlike Nagel's project, which focuses on our human attempts to make sense of an objective view of our lives (and which thus falls victim to the problem that humans can only imagine being external to themselves, or processing vast amounts of knowledge), we are considering the attitudes of observers who would indeed have full-information in assessing our lives and activities. There is no assumption that such observers would be human. Possessing and processing full, vivid information about complex situations would often require cognitive capacities beyond those of ordinary humans. Treating the observers as fully-informed captures what is crucial to appeals to such things as "the point of view of the universe" (i.e., having full knowledge, and an external perspective on our lives), but avoids the misleading visual metaphor. Instead, the virtuous ideal observers would have a detailed, intimate knowledge of us, our circumstances, our emotions, our relationships, our commitments, and so on. The knowledge proposed here would be akin to that which many theists would attribute to a god—a being who can clearly and vividly grasp a wide (indeed infinite) range of truths, without being confused or overwhelmed by them. It would be a personal knowledge, as of a friend, the knowledge of someone who knows us and our projects well (indeed fully—better than we know ourselves). Full-information thus should not be seen as arising from a distant, detached perspective; a better model is knowledge of a friend, or of something we have studied closely.¹⁰

The observers to whom we appeal must not be impaired in any way that might influence their judgments. We thus exclude observers who are under the influence of hallucinogens, or are being coerced, or are suffering from an illness that impairs their ability to concentrate and reason, and so forth. The presence of any such influences could obviously result in flawed assessments, even given full-information.

In addition, the observers must also possess fully-virtuous characters to draw upon in interpreting and assessing the action (commitment, life) before them. This

includes both moral and intellectual virtues. Ultimately, of course, this would require an account of the virtues, a project that lies rather beyond the scope of the current paper. Still, we might appeal to standard accounts of the virtues embraced by virtue theorists. Thus we might hold that the virtues are those traits that lead to and are (partially) constitutive of human flourishing.¹¹ If there are different ways to lead a flourishing human life, we allow for a range of virtuous ideal observers (henceforth ‘VIOs’).

With this shift to VIOs, we directly address the issue of the character of the beings taking the view from nowhere. The current proposal excludes observers who are hateful, stupid, cowardly, dishonest, unjust, or otherwise vicious or less-than virtuous. It avoids appealing to ordinary, flawed humans—and our attempts at imagining a view from nowhere, unlike Nagel’s proposal. The proposal also does not have us appealing to cold, emotionless beings who (lacking preferences, desires, and other attitudes) would fail to value or approve of anything at all. Instead, we appeal to fully-informed beings whose attitudes towards our lives would seem to have normative traction: beings who are benevolent, just, honest, and so forth. With these traits, we at last arrive at beings whose opinions can plausibly be taken to determine whether or not our lives and activities are meaningful.

An objection could be raised here—it might be suggested that to the extent that VIOs deem various activities and lives to be meaningful, they must be responding to properties of these lives and activities. This, in turn, suggests that it is these very properties that make lives and activities meaningful, not the responses of the VIOs. Otherwise put, the objection would be that the VIOs would be doing no real work here, and that instead that they would simply be sensitive to the properties of these activities that in fact render the activities meaningful. Suppose, for example, that VIOs tend to deem activities that involve helping others to be meaningful. The objector would hold that this shows that it must be the property of helping others that renders such activities meaningful, regardless of the attitudes of VIOs.

In response, note that the mere fact that certain properties might tend to be approved of by VIOs does not show that it must be these properties as such that are constitutive of meaningfulness. On the current proposal, these properties are of interest only insofar as they are of interest to beings who are fully-informed and fully-virtuous. That is, these properties need not have any special status in themselves. What makes them relevant to meaningfulness is the very fact that beings who are fully-informed, compassionate, honest, just, and so on, would find them to be of interest in assessing activities, lives, and so on, in terms of meaningfulness. It is because beings with such traits—traits that render them ideal judges—concern themselves with such properties that they are of interest. If the ideal observers were instead to focus on other properties, then these other properties would be the ones relevant to meaningfulness.

The objection could be pressed further with the suggestion that we only care about knowledge and virtue in this context as they allow us to pick out the important properties in the world—to pay attention to the world properly. In other words, while the proposal being defended in this paper would hold that various properties are relevant (to meaningfulness) only insofar as they would be of interest to VIOs,

the objection instead now holds that there are properties (perhaps such as helping others) that render activities meaningful, and we care about full-information and the virtues only insofar as these traits allow beings to recognize and focus upon these properties. Thus helping others would render an activity meaningful, and the special traits of the ideal observers would simply allow them to recognize this; after all, it would strike many that helping others is meaningful, regardless of the attitudes of VIOs.

In response to this further claim, notice that while there might be certain properties that seem clearly important to us, we need to remember that ordinary, decent humans are at least somewhat informed and somewhat virtuous; as such, what strikes us as obviously meaningful is also the result of us being akin to ideal observers, if only to a limited extent. In particular, the apparent obviousness of the importance of these properties is a result of our virtues and being informed. That is, for example, if we see the project of helping to end the suffering of others as obviously, immediately meaningful (with no obvious appeal to the attitudes of ideal observers), we must keep in mind that our attitudes here are shaped by our own virtues and knowledge—it is because we possess these traits (even if imperfectly) that such projects will strike us as meaningful; there is no need to posit a prior meaningfulness to which we are responding.¹² We are not responding to the world as mere blank slates.

Returning to the ideal observer proposal, we should expect ideal observers to agree in their assessments in most cases, given that they are all fully-informed and fully-virtuous. Still, to the extent that there is not a singular, unique way of being virtuous, there will be some differences among the ideal observers, which opens up the possibility that they may disagree over the meaningfulness of some lives or activities. For example, consider two virtuous humans—perhaps Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer. While both are virtuous, presumably their reactions to some moral problems could be quite different even if they would agree in most cases, and at least of some of these differences in reactions would remain even with fully-informed and fully-virtuous beings akin to them (given their different virtuous characters). As such, it seems that there could also be cases where VIOs would disagree over the meaningfulness of a given activity or life.

Why is it enough that some VIO would deem an activity or life meaningful to make it such? After all, if other ideal observers would deem the life meaningless, why not instead take this to show the life to be meaningless, or at least as requiring us to find some further standpoint from which to adjudicate between the competing assessments? In response, notice that each ideal observer would possess a fully-informed, and fully-virtuous (both morally and epistemically) standpoint. There would be no basis for criticizing the judgments made from any of these standpoints in terms of being ill-informed, or reflecting vicious attitudes, and so on. They are as good as they possibly can be. The differences in assessments by the VIOs at this level are thus akin to mere differences in taste, and an agent need not satisfy all such tastes with respect to meaningfulness. That other ideal observers would disagree with the assessment of meaningfulness would not yet give us reason to reject the original assessment as these assessments are in no

way better-grounded, nor would they demonstrate a flaw in the approving ideal observer's assessment.

At this point an alternative position could be proposed: that a life or activity is meaningful for an agent *S* if and only if an idealized, virtuous version of *S* herself would deem it to be meaningful. On such a view, a person's life would be meaningful insofar as an idealized version of her would suitably approve of it; the assessments of other VIOs, who might be quite different in their tastes and personalities (even while also fully-virtuous and fully-informed), would not be treated as relevant here. But there are problems for such an approach.

An initial worry is that it is highly unlikely that there is a unique idealized version of any given agent; we can surely imagine many, many different ways in which an agent might grow and change, developing different aspects of her character in different ways, and thus yielding different idealized versions of the agent. If so, to which idealized version of the agent ought we appeal on the proposed alternative, and why? One could perhaps claim that so long as at least one idealized version of an agent would deem her life meaningful, then it would be so. This leads us to a more fundamental problem with the alternative proposal. Consider the position of many, perhaps the vast majority of theists. They are quite willing to embrace the judgments of a being, even if this being is not an idealized human, let alone an idealized version of themselves. The alternative proposal seems insufficiently motivated—we can find the viewpoints of other beings worthy of our attention, even if they are not our own, nor the viewpoint of an idealized version of ourselves. For many people, if God were to deem a life meaningful, they would accept this as determining that this life would be meaningful, even if God is a very different being from themselves. If a being is fully-informed, loving, just, familiar with human practices, our particular personal relationships and abilities, and so on, it possesses traits that render the being's attitudes worthy of our attention. There is no obvious need to restrict the potential ideal observers to idealized versions of the agent herself to determine meaningfulness. What is more important, as illustrated with the example of theists, is that the ideal observers would possess traits that would render their attitudes worthy of our attention.

Finally, notice that the proposed characterization of a meaningful life does not require there to actually exist such VIOs; a life or project's status (as meaningful) is determined by how a VIO *would* assess it. The current proposal captures certain intuitions which lead some to embrace theistic accounts of life's meaning—particularly in the appeal to the judgments of fully-informed or omniscient, virtuous beings. Thaddeus Metz has recently stressed that one could embrace a theistic account of meaningfulness even if one did not believe that a god exists; if there were no god, the result would simply be that none of our lives would be meaningful (see Metz 2000, 295; and 2002, 784–785). On the current account, given that there is no assumption that any VIOs actually exist, we avoid this result. Instead we are asking—counterfactually—*if* there were such beings, how *would* they respond to and assess our lives and activities, even if no such beings exist in the actual world.

V. WHAT LIVES WOULD BE MEANINGFUL AND HOW COULD WE KNOW?

The current proposal is, in part, akin to a metaethical position. As such, like moral realism, divine command theory, and so on (*mutatis mutandis*), it tells us what determines whether a life is meaningful at a meta-level, but does not obviously address the question of what factors will determine whether a given life is, in fact, meaningful. Put otherwise: granted that whether a life or activity is meaningful is determined by the attitudes of VIOs, can we say anything about what sorts of lives and activities such observers would actually approve of as meaningful, if any? Through a consideration of examples we can begin to answer this question.

Albert Schweitzer was an intelligent, and by all accounts, virtuous (though not flawless) man. He undertook many projects, becoming both a respected theologian and organist. He is perhaps best known for his work as a doctor in the hospital he established in Lambaréné, Gabon; he won the Nobel Peace Prize for 1952. Notice then, that we have a well-informed, virtuous being who obviously took several commitments to be worthwhile and meaningful. He did not look upon the suffering of those he helped as trivial or absurd; he saw it as significant, and took it upon himself to help as he could. He also endorsed or saw value in intellectual activity (writing several books and articles), and in aesthetic activity (performing in various concert tours, etc.). Schweitzer was not omniscient, nor a perfect saint, but surely his life and attitudes provide good evidence that the projects he undertook would be meaningful on the current account. It seems rather unlikely that with more information, or with a still better character, that Schweitzer would somehow have come to deem these commitments meaningless. Similar cases could be made for other virtuous, intelligent, well-informed persons and their commitments.

Next, consider discussions of various thought examples in recent analytic ethics—perhaps Bernard Williams’s cases of Jim (who faces a dilemma of either shooting one innocent person himself, or refusing to do so, and having a group of soldiers kill twenty) and George (a chemist in desperate need of employment, who is offered a position in a chemical munitions plant—and who has long committed himself against such weapons) (see Smart and Williams 1973, 108–117). The details of the examples do not matter. What is relevant to our purposes is that intelligent, well-informed people of at least decent character take the decisions faced by Jim and George to be significant, and as mattering. There is no actual Jim, no actual George—we are not biased, they are not our friends nor our enemies, and so on. Instead, from an objective, impartial point of view we see their predicaments as difficult and worthy of reflection. True, we are human philosophers discussing humans facing problems that arise in human ways of life. But surely any compassionate, honest, just, informed observer would see these as significant decisions, regardless of species (just as virtuous humans, when properly-informed, could see various decisions facing Martians with very different ways of life as significant).

It is true that there are possibly billions of other beings who face or who have faced equally significant problems. But that does not diminish the importance of each individual instance. The suffering of a person who has endured severe burns is still intense and morally significant, even if one hundred others were also similarly injured in an accident. We might be tempted, misled by our visual metaphor of a view from nowhere, to lump all of the victims together (as we look at them all from a distance), and to treat each individual's pain as less significant as we find ourselves further and further removed from it. But as stressed in the previous section, we need to think of ideal observers as having a vivid knowledge of each particular individual's suffering, not some general awareness that a group of people has been injured. And with genuine virtues of compassion and benevolence, each individual's suffering will be treated as significant; we are justified in claiming this because these are precisely the reactions that we actually find among those who, like Schweitzer, are intelligent, well-informed, and virtuous. Schweitzer would have been well aware that there were hundreds of millions of people suffering around the world, yet this suffering did not "drown out" the importance of each individual—he still took it upon himself as meaningful and significant to help where he could.

On the other hand, consider the case of a talented mathematician, Claire, who has an overriding desire to merely count the blades of grass on some particular lawn, and who pursues this desire throughout her life.¹³ While some with highly subjectivist sympathies might hold that such a person would have a high level of well-being, it is hard to find such a life *meaningful*. It is worth noting that Richard Taylor who, in early work may have granted that this person had a meaningful life, later came to reject this view.¹⁴ We thus have grounds for holding that there is a wide range of lives and commitments that fully-informed virtuous observers would reject as lacking meaning. At the very least, a wide range of philosophers who are well-informed, have considered the issue in-depth, and have generally decent characters dismiss lives like those of the grass-counter as lacking meaning; we can take this as good *prima facie* evidence for the attitudes that would be taken by VIOs.

Still, an objection might be raised to these epistemic claims. Presumably the VIOs will have knowledge of the long-term consequences of the commitments and actions of agents, knowledge that would be unavailable to ordinary humans, and that could have a significant impact upon the observers' attitudes. For example, suppose a pillaging barbarian, in a moment of mercy, decides to spare the life of a young woman. We might initially assume this is a morally good and meaningful action on his part. But suppose this woman is an ancient ancestor of Hitler—the barbarian is helping to bring about the existence of Hitler. The worry, then, is that the VIOs, given their full information, would know of such long-term consequences and this would shape their assessments in ways that would be far beyond our reach as ordinary humans.¹⁵

Notice how far the problem might extend—suppose that you buy the last chocolate bar in a supermarket one day. This might seem trivial. But unbeknownst to you, your purchase leads to another shopper (who would have bought that chocolate) instead buying an apple, which reinforces his desire and efforts to get in better

shape, which in turn gives him confidence to become more open and vocal in large groups (as he is less self-conscious about his appearance), ultimately leading the person to take on a role in politics, and eventually becoming the exemplary leader of a vast, powerful nation. Could it be that your apparently trivial purchase of a chocolate bar is instead an incredibly significant, meaningful episode in your life, as you set in motion an extraordinary political career? All of our actions, no matter how apparently trivial, will have ramifications throughout the rest of time, in conjunction with the impacts of billions upon billions of other actions and events. If the fully-informed VIOs take a knowledge of these long-term consequences into account as they make their assessments, it seems there might be a vast epistemic gap whereby we (humans) cannot have an accurate sense of how the ideal observers will assess actions, projects, and so on, given our limitations.

Two main points can be made in response. First, we must simply acknowledge that in some cases we would make mistakes—there will be cases where our limited human knowledge and virtue would not be sufficient to give us an accurate sense of how VIOs would judge. There can be a gap here—but on the other hand, why assume that humans should always be able to accurately assess such matters? We are finite beings, and we can make errors here, as in other areas of life. This does not yet show that in most cases our judgments concerning the assessments of VIOs would be inaccurate.

Second, it is unlikely that ideal observers would typically change their assessments in light of such long-term consequences. For example, in the example of saving Hitler's ancestor, notice how difficult it is to assign responsibility. True, if the barbarian did not save the young woman who grew up to be Hitler's ancestor then Hitler would not have been born. But questions arise if we imagine the barbarian choosing not to spare her: (i) what other impacts might result instead (would different and possibly more lives be lost in the future)? (ii) might there not simply have been another leader who would have climbed to the top of the Nazi heap? and (iii) crucially, why focus on the act of saving Hitler's ancestor? After all, why not focus instead on the ancestor's having a child—or Hitler's other ancestors and their having children as the crucial actions leading to his existence? Beyond this, perhaps if someone had simply delayed Hitler from attending an early nationalist rally, he would not have become interested (or perhaps he would not have influenced people around him at the meeting in a way that gave him a springboard for achieving power). Why not instead blame all the people who could have stopped him from attending this rally? Or who could have murdered one of his ancestors? The point here is that assigning responsibility for such long-term consequences is difficult, at best, given that there will be potentially millions of additional intervening actions that could be relevant to the long-term effect resulting. And to the extent that this is so, it becomes rather implausible to attribute more than a miniscule causal role in the atrocities committed by Hitler to the barbarian's act of mercy. As such, there is little reason for the VIOs to vastly modify their assessments of the action in light of such long-term consequences, given the minimal role of the barbarian in shaping these consequences. In turn, this suggests that we typically will not need to worry that vast amounts of information about long-term future impacts

will alter the assessments of VIOs in ways that render them entirely inaccessible to ordinary humans.¹⁶

Finally, notice that in making these claims about the lives and activities that VIOs would deem to be meaningful (or not), we have not attempted to directly imagine ourselves possessing a view from nowhere. Where Nagel suggests that we ourselves can (and should) attempt to take on or imagine ourselves with a view from nowhere, this is not part of the current proposal; here, at most, it might be a helpful heuristic in some cases (to be taken with a grain of salt) to imagine ourselves with such a standpoint. As argued in section III (in discussing Nagel), we do not possess adequate grounds for believing that such imaginings would be reliably accurate; we might merely be playing pretend at having a God's-eye view. Instead, we have focused on cases about which we are well-informed—looking to examples of well-informed, virtuous people, and our consideration of various thought-experiments. These provide good, though not strictly conclusive, evidence that fully-informed VIOs would have similar reactions. We can also strive to acquire knowledge and virtues ourselves, rather than merely imagining ourselves as beings with these traits. Essentially, the argument has been that often we humans can be sufficiently informed and virtuous that our reactions capture those that would be had by VIOs, without trying to imagine ourselves possessing such a standpoint.¹⁷

VI. RESPONDING TO FURTHER OBJECTIONS TO THE VIO PROPOSAL

We can end with an examination of a set of objections to the proposed virtuous ideal observer account of meaningfulness. An obvious worry is that by attributing virtues to the ideal observers we have begged the question in favor of finding our lives and activities meaningful: “Of course if we’re looking at the attitudes of loving, compassionate, and just observers, we’ll expect them to find many of our commitments and projects to be meaningful. But such observers aren’t really neutral, and we don’t have a valid standard for determining whether our lives are meaningful; in appealing to *virtuous* ideal observers, we are simply stacking the deck in our favor.”¹⁸

Several points should be raised in response. First, notice that even if we have good epistemic grounds for expecting that VIOs would find many of our projects to be meaningful, there is still work being done. That is, not just any project of ours would be approved of by such observers. And, it could be that we (humans) might, due to a lack of information, cognitive capacity, or virtue, tend to mistakenly treat certain projects as meaningful (or not). Thus, the account does not simply mirror our judgments about what is meaningful; it provides a substantive test.

Second, even if the ideal observers are virtuous, this does not detract from their impartiality or objectivity. Recall the example of our reactions to Williams’s thought experiments. We ourselves possess certain virtues to some degree, and our possession of these virtues shapes our reactions to the thought experiments, but we are still impartial and objective. It is not that we are embedded into the scenarios, or know the characters involved in the thought experiments and are biased towards

one or the other, etc.; there is no obvious way in which we lack objectivity or impartiality merely by possessing virtues. Similarly, in contemplating our lives and actions, VIOs need not be partial or lack objectivity.¹⁹

Another way to approach this second response is to ask: what would be a superior set of character traits to attribute to the ideal observers? Appealing to the judgments of hateful or stupid ideal observers has nothing to recommend it. Presumably the objection rests on the assumption that a being without prior preferences, interests, values, and so on, would be more objective. But then we return to a familiar problem: such entirely indifferent observers are incapable of valuing (or disvaluing) anything at all, insofar as they lack all attitudes. Even if we allow that they could form attitudes (such as approval) as they contemplate various lives and activities, on what basis would they do so? These approvals would be entirely arbitrary, unless we attribute some prior set of desires, interests, or values to them. And it is hard to see what could make *these* desires and interests such that possessing them would make observers somehow more objective or impartial than possessing the virtues. As such, there is no obvious problem, with respect to objectivity or impartiality, in attributing virtues to ideal observers.

A further objection to the current proposal is that it confuses or blurs moral evaluation and evaluations of meaningfulness. Granted, moral assessments might be relevant to assessments of meaningfulness, but they remain distinct. Attributing moral (and other) virtues to the ideal observers might lead to confused results where lives that are “merely moral” could well end-up being assessed improperly as meaningful, and similarly, immoral lives might simply be dismissed as meaningless. For example, we might expect VIOs to necessarily reject Hitler’s life as meaningless precisely due to its massive immorality. But could it not be that Hitler’s life was meaningful, even if horribly evil?²⁰

The crucial point in response is that in attributing moral and intellectual virtues to the ideal observers, we are in fact arriving at what are plausibly taken to be excellent judges across normative domains. Suppose you were an artist, searching for a genuine assessment of your works. What traits would you seek in a critic? Certainly knowledge of a wide range of relevant information—about the tradition in which you are working, your intentions behind various works, and so on. But presumably you would also want a critic who is just, consistent, non-arbitrary, honest, unbiased, and so forth. For example, you would not want a critic who would judge your work to be inferior simply because *you* painted it, and not her friend. Similarly, if we are looking for a genuine assessment of your work, we would not want one who would blindly approve of anything you produce; if we want an honest assessment, we would hope for an honest critic. And a hateful critic who simply despises all living things and all that they do would hardly be a useful aesthetic observer. Thus notice that across normative domains we would want to appeal to observers or judges with moral virtues. This is not to confuse these other domains with morality; instead, it is to recognize that such traits as honesty, fairness, lack of bias, consistency, and various intellectual or epistemic virtues are essential to arriving at consistent, impartial, just, and honest appraisals.²¹ This also helps us to address the original objection that attributing virtues to the observers makes them

biased or less-than-objective in some important way. Rather, these are precisely the traits we would want ideal observers to possess in order to achieve objective, just results.

In addition, it is not at all clear that all VIOs would, for example, necessarily reject Hitler's life as meaningless insofar as it is an immoral life. Even if they are morally good, if they are intelligent (and we are taking them to be intellectually virtuous!) they can distinguish between moral and other assessments. Compare: surely good people can assess a given person as physically beautiful, even while also deeming this person to be extremely evil; they can distinguish aesthetic and moral appraisals. Similarly, there is no obvious reason to expect that VIOs would be unable to distinguish assessments of morality and meaningfulness.

Still, the objection can be pressed further. Would VIOs find any meaning in, for example, the pursuit and development of athletic skills? More broadly—would VIOs have any direct interest in the pursuit of various human practices (athletic, artistic, and others)—and if not, could they adequately assess the meaningfulness of the pursuit and attainment of goals within such practices for humans?²² If we attribute to the ideal observers only moral and intellectual virtues, we might worry that they will not appreciate a broad range of practices—practices that, intuitively, are relevant to the meaningfulness of actual human lives.

But consider the assessments that morally virtuous beings must make, even while restricting our attention to moral assessments. In order to be benevolent we must be able to make plausible assessments of how meaningful or worthwhile various activities, practices, or commitments are for the agents involved in a given case. For example, if we truly wish to help someone, among our goals will be to aid her in projects that we deem meaningful. Acting courageously will often require assessing how various goods and projects contribute to the meaningfulness of a given life, in order to determine the risks we should take to protect these goods. In being just, we may need to make assessments of how much a given good will contribute to the meaningfulness of the lives of the various parties to a dispute. If we wished to give a musical instrument to one of two otherwise equally worthy children, surely it should enter into our deliberations whether one of the children has a love of music and a talent for it, such that musical practice and appreciation could come to play a central role in her life. As an initial point in response to the refined objection, then, notice that possession of the virtues implies an ability to make assessments of meaningfulness.

What would allow VIOs to arrive at such assessments? Here their knowledge and intellectual virtues will play key roles. They will understand the kind of creatures we are as human beings—our potentials and limitations, our common preferences and needs. They will have a knowledge of the culture and practices of the society in which a given individual finds herself, and of the alternative practices and relationships that are feasible for her (even where she herself has not thought of them). In addition, they will know of the potentials of the individual, her preferences, her relationships, commitments, and so on. When this knowledge is combined with imagination, unimpaired reflection and reasoning, moral virtues (including a genuine loving-kindness, benevolence, a concern for personal autonomy, a lack

of bias, and so on), we arrive at assessments of the meaningfulness of activities, practices, and lives that are worthy of our attention.

Note also that the current proposal does not rest on an assumption that *only* moral, virtuous living gives meaning to life (though presumably such lives would typically be deemed meaningful by virtuous ideal observers)—rather it is grounded in the claim that the possession of moral and intellectual virtues makes possible a suitable assessment of the meaningfulness of lives in general. The virtues and knowledge provide the insight needed to assess the place of human practices and commitments (and the pursuit of them) in the lives of creatures like us.

Finally, we may wonder whether we should appeal to ideal observers, or beings with a view from nowhere at all. Nagel puts the worry as follows:

What am I doing out there, pretending to be a visitor from outer space—looking at my life from a great height in abstraction from the fact that it is mine, or that I am human and a member of this culture? How can the unimportance of my life from that point of view have any importance for *me*? (Nagel 1986, 216)

Nagel's own response to the question is to emphasize that we, as humans, are naturally drawn towards objectivity (as we are by our own subjectivity); it is part of who we are, part of what makes us human (Nagel 1986, 221). With the current proposal we can embrace Nagel's response, and add the following. First, we have seen that the distant-visual metaphor is misleading; we are instead concerned with beings with a vivid, immediate and intimate knowledge and understanding of us, our commitments, and our circumstances. We have no reason to think that they would downplay or not recognize the value and importance to us of our loyalties and commitments. We are not concerned with the attitudes of distant and detached beings (which are irrelevant). Second, we are appealing to *virtuous* ideal observers, and as we have seen, such observers seem to be in an excellent position to provide fair, objective assessments in a wide range of normative domains—not just those concerning meaningfulness.

While the above worry focuses on the worth of the impartial perspective as such, a related concern is that many values are best understood in terms of the subjective, engaged perspective (regardless of what sense we can make of an impartial view from nowhere). Bernard Williams writes:

The model [of Sidgwick] is that I, as theorist, can occupy, if only temporarily and imperfectly, the point of view of the universe, and see everything from the outside, including myself and whatever moral or other dispositions, affections or projects, I may have; and from that outside view, I can assign to them a value. The difficulty is, however, as we have already seen, that the moral dispositions, and indeed other loyalties and commitments, have a certain depth or thickness: they cannot simply be regarded, least of all by their possessor, just as devices for generating actions or states of affairs. Such dispositions and commitments will characteristically be what gives one's life some meaning, and gives one some reason for living it. (Williams 1995, 169)

John Cottingham similarly argues against appeals to impartial standpoints in coming to understand values, emphasizing instead what he refers to as the “autocentric” perspective, “in the sense of being constructed, as it were, from the inside outwards”

(Cottingham 1996, 60). This perspective is akin to Nagel's engaged, subjective perspective in which we find ourselves engaged with various projects, partial relationships, and the tasks of day-to-day life. Cottingham states that

The partialist case which I defend holds that human lives are valuable not primarily in virtue of how far they conform to impersonally defined rules of conduct, or in so far as they contribute to some giant amalgam called "the good," but in so far as they are lived in ways which give richness and meaning to the short journey each of us has to undergo. . . . we come to see what has worth and significance in our lives is ultimately linked to the fact that we ourselves generate that worth and significance by the intensely personal commitments and preferential networks of mutual interdependence to which we wholeheartedly devote ourselves. (Cottingham 1998, 7)

We thus find value and meaning by starting from our position as embodied, engaged human beings—not by appeal to some detached, impartial point of view that would focus on the general good or impersonal rules.

Cottingham, when arguing against impartialism, focuses on detached, impartial spectators (see, for example, Cottingham 1998, 3 and 6), sometimes also characterized as benevolent:

But what I question is whether a secular analogue of it [a loving creator God] can be constructed merely from the notion of the impartial—even the impartially benevolent—observer. (Cottingham 1998, 4)

[A]n impartial spectator of the planet adopting a perfectionist or "maximax" strategy for promoting the good might well decree that the likes of Gerard [a violent, neo-fascist drunkard] should be enslaved, or even eliminated. (Cottingham 1998, 5)

Both Williams and Cottingham reject such impartialism as leading to prescriptions (in ethics, in particular) that fail to adequately accommodate the commitments and partial relationships that are fundamental to any real human life. Thus the extraordinary demands of utilitarianism in ethics, requiring us, for example, to be willing to sacrifice our own children for the sake of those in greater need—or allowing us to maintain partialities only insofar as they ultimately lead to the greatest overall good (Cottingham 1996).

But notice that Cottingham focuses on a particular understanding of an impartial spectator—one characterized only by a weak benevolence. Similarly, Williams suggests that from the viewpoint of the universe our loyalties and commitments would be treated "just as devices for generating actions or states of affairs" (Williams 1995, 169). We can begin to see our way around these characterizations via suggestive remarks from Phillipa Foot. She believes that recognizing such sparse characterizations of the spectator

throws some light on a certain type of utilitarian theory which identifies the moral assessment of a situation with that of a sympathetic impartial observer whose benevolence extends equally to all mankind. For what, we may ask, are we to suppose about this person's *other* characteristics? Is he to be guided simply and solely by a desire to relieve suffering and increase happiness; or is he also just? If it is said that for him the telling of truth, keeping of promises,

and respecting of individual autonomy are to be recommended only insofar as these serve to maximize welfare then we see that the “impartial sympathetic observer” is by definition one with a utilitarian point of view. (Foot 1988, 237)

Why ascribe only benevolence to an impartial observer? Cottingham and Williams’s rejections of appeals to impartial spectators are grounded in their rejections of spectators that by definition (as Foot notes) embody a utilitarian, consequentialist perspective. But we can equally attribute other virtues—honesty, justice, compassion, and so on to the spectators, and need not assume that an observer would treat truth-telling, respect for autonomy, and so on as of merely instrumental value. The proposal of the current paper is that meaningfulness is determined by the assessments of virtuous observers with an intimate knowledge of each individual. We need not construe ideal observers as detached and cold, or with only a blind interest in a crude maximization of happiness or good states of affairs. The proposed ideal observers would know and have a genuine concern for us, and would assess our possibilities in light of their virtues.

In defending his alternative, partialistic account of meaning and ethics, Cottingham suggests that

each of us must construct the blueprint for fulfillment from the inside outwards, by using our reason to reflect on the best pattern for a worthwhile life. (Cottingham 1996, 75)

But consider the perspective of a being who knows us better than we know ourselves—who knows of our genuine potentials and limitations, of how much certain relationships and projects matter to us (or would matter to us, if we were to develop them)—even if we do not recognize these things ourselves. This would be, on the current account, the perspective of a being who can reason without the limitations and biases that affect us as limited humans, and who can assess our lives with an eye that is loving, but not limited by our vices (be they, for example, self-loathing on one hand, or excessive self-love on the other). Surely we would arrive at an intuitively better assessment of what would be meaningful or fulfilling *for us* from such a perspective, rather than our own.²³ Such an assessment would still be strongly individualized—there is no reason to think that such virtuous, informed observers would simply impose a crude and narrow cookie-cutter standard of a meaningful life upon us all. We thus capture Cottingham’s primary claim, that our personal relationships, potentials, and commitments will be crucial to what makes our lives meaningful. Indeed, the proposed virtuous ideal observer approach allows for more attractive assessments for each of us qua individuals (given the observers’ extensive knowledge of us as individuals—and of humans in general) than if we merely appealed to our own estimates as to what would be meaningful or fulfilling in our own lives (given our blind spots and biases, our limited knowledge and imagination). The ideal observers embody an informed, critical perspective on our lives, and as we ourselves become informed and virtuous, our assessments can gradually come to mirror those of the observers.

We thus have a promising account of the perspectives from which determinations of the meaningfulness of our lives and commitments can properly be made.

In appealing to virtuous ideal observers we appeal to objective, informed beings without the vices and cognitive limitations that constrain our ordinary assessments, and we move beyond incomplete appeals to “the viewpoint of the universe.” In addition, we have good reason to believe that many of the commitments that we take to be meaningful in fact would be so on this account; by examining the lives and attitudes of virtuous, well-informed humans we gain insight into the attitudes of ideal observers.²⁴

ENDNOTES

1. I will work with a broad, intuitive notion of “meaningful”; a more precise characterization will not be necessary for the purposes of this paper. For a quite thorough discussion of important concepts—and conceptions—of a meaningful life, see Metz 2001.
2. The confusion, according to Hare, lies in thinking that “mattering” is an activity performed by things. When we say “Completing this task matters,” this expresses *our* concern with completing the task; the confusion would lie in thinking that there is an object / event “completing this task” that performs a mysterious activity of “mattering.”
3. To simplify discussion, in what follows I will use the term ‘objective point of view’ to refer to a maximally objective point of view, as understood by Nagel; that is, to refer to a point of view at the extreme objective end of his proposed continuum of points of view.
4. Note that this is not Nagel’s view. For Nagel, while we can take on an objective point of view and judge our lives to be meaningless or trivial, we also, equally, have a subjective point of view from which our projects seem important. The result for Nagel is that our lives are absurd (due to the conflict between our objective and subjective views of ourselves), not entirely meaningless.
5. Nagel 1986, 216 appeals to a similar image.
6. Singer 1995, 218 relates this viewpoint to a meaningful life: “I shall suggest that living an ethical life enables us to identify ourselves with the grandest cause of all, and that to do so is the best way open to us of making our lives meaningful.” Leading an ethical life—which involves taking up the viewpoint of the universe—is the best way available to us to make our lives meaningful, according to Singer.
7. If all attitudes are to be denied to a being with the viewpoint of the universe, then what of beliefs? Perhaps we could hold that beings taking on the viewpoint of the universe must lack only all affective and conative states; or we could simply stipulate that the only attitude permitted to such beings is belief. Still, why this should be so is rather unclear.
8. See LaCaze 2002 and Kazez 2007, 7 for related and additional concerns with such spatial-visual metaphors.
9. I defend a related virtuous ideal observer account of moral norms elsewhere, including Kawall 2002; 2006; and 2009.
10. One could treat full-information as consisting in knowledge of all facts relevant to the given case. See, for example, Carson 1984, 58. Alternatively, one could attribute omniscience (or perhaps all possible true beliefs) to the observer, thereby avoiding questions of relevance. I prefer the latter approach, but will not defend it here.

11. This is not to endorse such accounts (indeed, they face important difficulties)—but they are familiar and can serve adequately for our immediate purposes.
12. See Kawall 2009 for further elaboration and defense of these claims.
13. A variation of a case presented by John Rawls. See Rawls 1971, 432.
14. See Taylor 1970 for a defense of the view that the grass-counter could lead a meaningful life. For Taylor's later rejection of this view see Taylor 1987.
15. This example and argument are drawn (and slightly simplified) from Lenman 2000, where he provides epistemic arguments against consequentialism in ethics.
16. This is not to deny that in *some* cases it could be that the agent's action is in some way absolutely crucial to the long-term consequences (perhaps she has painted an artwork that is suddenly recognized as a masterpiece a thousand years in the future; without her actions, it would never exist to be appreciated).
17. I further defend our ability to form epistemically justified beliefs about the attitudes of virtuous ideal observers in Kawall 2006.
18. Cooper 2005, 132 presents a similar worry, though Cooper is concerned more broadly with any perspectives that could reflect any human values and purposes whatsoever.
19. Note that the VIOs may have various partial or personal relationships and so on. But for any case where we might appeal to a given ideal observer's attitudes, the observer must not have partial relationships with any of the parties involved. Intuitively, we can think of the relevant ideal observers as being akin to virtuous human judges in a court system. We expect human judges to have various partial relationships, and these may even be essential to making them good judges; but we would not want them to preside over cases where they have personal relationships or interests at stake. We can take a similar stance with respect to the VIOs and the impartiality required of them.
20. John Kekes (2000) suggests that the life of a committed Nazi mass-murderer could be meaningful, even if obviously morally abominable.
21. Iris Murdoch makes similar points in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). Murdoch further suggests that moral virtues will be crucial to artists in the production (not just the assessment) of worthwhile works of art.
22. A precise characterization of a practice is not necessary for current purposes; I broadly have in mind MacIntyre's influential account. See MacIntyre 1984, 175.
23. For related arguments, see Carson's careful defence of a divine-preference account of rationality. See Carson 2000, esp. chapter 8.
24. I would like to thank Thaddeus Metz, Marvin K. Mooney, and the anonymous referees who provided such helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper. Parts of this paper were written while I was a research fellow at the Centre for Ethics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs at the University of St. Andrews; I would like to thank the Centre and John Haldane for this support.

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