On Living a More Meaningful Life

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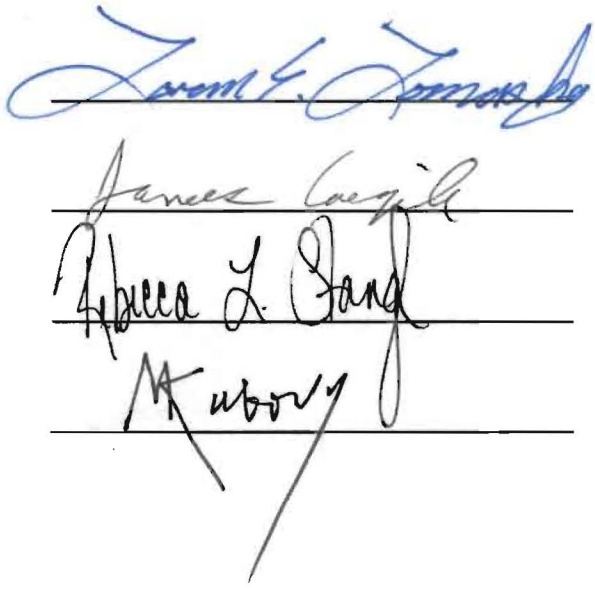
Master of Arts, the University of Virginia, May 2004

A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Philosophy

University of Virginia
May 2012



Abstract

In this dissertation, I differentiate between the philosophical questions of "What is the meaning of life?" and "What is involved in coming to live a more meaningful life?"; the aim of the dissertation is to provide an answer to the latter, but not the former, question. Previous attempts to distinguish between more and less meaningful lives have appealed to the notion of objective values; my account attempts to distinguish between more and less meaningful lives by appealing, not to the notion of objective values, but rather to the extent to which individuals actualize their capacities to have deep concerns and to live in accordance with them. I argue that coming to live a more meaningful life is a matter of 1) coming to live in better accordance with what one happens to care deeply about and 2) coming to adopt a more befitting set of deep concerns [wherein to say that a set of concerns is befitting is to say that a) it is possible to adopt those deep concerns; and b) that one's doing so would increase the overall extent to which one cared deeply about things in accordance with which one had some capacity to live, and/or one's doing so would increase the overall extent to which one was able to live in accordance with what one cared deeply about.] In this dissertation I also address some of the broad practical issues which are connected to the problem of how to live more meaningfully.

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For Laurie.

With special thanks to Dan and Joy,

Robert Corum, John Lyons, Loren Lomasky,

And my family.

Introduction

§1: "The Meaning of Life" and "A Meaningful Life"

Despite the assumptions of the general public, philosophers almost never talk seriously about "the meaning of life". Perhaps a portion of our reticence stems from a fear that providing an answer the question "what is the meaning of life?" would bring us uncomfortably close to laying the metaphysical groundwork for a religion. Such fears may not seem completely misguided: the question, after all, does tend to be asked in earnest only by individuals wanting to know such things as what role life (or "human life" or "my life in particular") plays in the dramatic unfolding of the universe, what the overarching purpose was for the evolution of consciousness, what ends we are meant to serve in the grand scheme of things, and what the relationship is between life and that which is responsible for the creation of the universe.

The philosophical neglect of this topic has also been propagated to some extent by attitudes inherited from Wittgenstein and the logical positivists, according to which the question may seem nonsensical or misguided[1]. Some philosophers may also be embarrassed to discuss what they see as an outdated question, as they think that Darwin would seem to have established the final answer: our lives have been shown to be simply the result of random forces acting on matter. Belief in a teleological goal for humans can be dispensed with, and, as such, the question is easily answered: "there is no underlying meaning to any of this random buzzing." Building on this conclusion, Nietzsche, Freud

[1] See, for example, Ayer in Klemke 2000.

and Sartre each did their part to make it unhip to talk about "the meaning of life", as, according to their view, the longing for an answer results from our continuing to live in "the shadow of God".

Questions about living "a meaningful life", on the other hand, tend to aim for different answers than do questions about "the meaning of life". Whereas questions about "the meaning of life" tend to be motivated by a specific desire to have a coherent understanding of *everything*, questions about "a meaningful life" tend to be motivated by a desire to evaluate how well particular lives have been, are, or will be lived. Susan Wolf spells out what we tend to be after when we ask how meaningful a life is:

> "A meaningful life is, first of all, one that has within it the basis for an affirmative answer to the needs or longings that are characteristically described as needs for meaning. I have in mind, for example, the sort of questions people ask on their deathbeds, or simply in contemplation of their eventual deaths, about whether their lives have been (or are) worth living, whether they have had any point, and the sort of questions one asks when considering suicide and wondering whether one has any reason to go on. These questions are familiar from Russian novels and existentialist philosophy, if not from personal experience. Though they arise most poignantly in times of crises and intense emotion, they also have their place in moments of calm reflection, when considering important life choices. Moreover, paradigms of what are taken to be meaningful and meaningless lives in our culture are readily available. Lives of great moral or intellectual accomplishment – Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein – come to mind as unquestionably meaningful lives (if any are); lives of waste and isolation – Thoreau's "lives of quiet desperation," typically anonymous to the rest of us, and the mythical figure of Sisyphus represent meaninglessness." (Wolf 1997a, 210-211.)

It seems more philosophically feasible to answer questions such as "Has my life been worth living?", "Is there any reason for me to continue living?" and, along these lines, "What, if anything, are the things that have provided my life with meaning?" than it does to answer questions such as "What is the teleological role of life in a mostly lifeless

universe?", "Do I play a role in the grand scheme of things?", and, along these lines, "What is the meaning of life?". This is because it seems possible to arrive at reasonable answers to the former set of questions simply by reflecting on our own experiences (e.g., our hopes and memories); answers to the latter set of questions seem to require, if not divine revelation, then at least suspicious metaphysical arguments. This is not to say that answers to the latter questions cannot be given (e.g., by a theologian, based on assertions made in a religious text); however, it seems unlikely that one would be able to arrive at such an answer via the methodology of anglo-american philosophy, which begins and proceeds in its investigations with a generally skeptical and faith-averse temperament.

In light of these considerations, I will not try to provide the answer to the question "What is the meaning of life?" in this dissertation; instead, I wish to discuss the notion of "a meaningful life." Ultimately, my aim is to provide an answer to the question "What is involved in coming to live a more meaningful life?" While initially building on the works of several contemporary philosophers, most notably Thaddeus Metz, Susan Wolf, Harry Frankfurt, and Nomy Arpaly, my intention is to put forth a more thorough and useable account of meaning than has henceforth been provided.

§2: Why Meaning Matters

As we try to take account of how successful our lives have been and as we try to decide how to live, deliberative weight is given to both the attainment of happiness and the fulfillment of our moral obligations. There is more to such deliberations, however, than the ascertainment of whether our lives have been (or whether envisioned ways of life

promise to be) both happy and morally irreproachable; when such questions arise, we also consider how meaningful our lives have been (or promise to be).

While meaningful lives are often both happy and morally estimable (or, at least, relatively blameless), the concept of meaning is itself distinct from the concepts of happiness and morality. It intuitively seems possible to live a particularly meaningful life without living a particularly happy life (e.g., Mother Theresa), and *vice versa* (e.g., Paris Hilton). Similarly, it also seems to be possible to live a relatively meaningful life despite continually living in flagrant violation of one's moral obligations (e.g., Genghis Khan) and *vice versa* (e.g., if not the moral saint described by Susan Wolf, then at least a perpetually well-behaved, well-intentioned person who was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to a life of solitary confinement). Indeed, it seems possible to live a relatively meaningful life that is both unhappy and immoral (e.g., Robespierre, Stalin) as well as *vice versa* (e.g., it is perhaps possible to live a relatively euphoric life and fulfill one's moral obligations by spending the entirety of one's life delivering pizzas, playing video games and watching entertaining television shows… though such a carefree life threatens to be relatively devoid of meaning; or, to give more extreme but more fanciful examples, one can imagine a life which consists in eating lotus leaves while stranded on a deserted island, or unknowingly residing in an experience machine.)

Despite the fact that living a meaningful life is different from living a happy or morally praiseworthy life, there does seem to be good reason to care about striving for the former insofar as it can serve as an instrumental means for achieving the latter. Though it does not guarantee it, striving to live meaningfully can help one to not only avoid a sense

of emptiness, but also to succeed in being positively happy (i.e., perhaps more so than a hedonist who focuses only on experiencing a sense of euphoria). Similarly, though it doesn't guarantee it, striving to live a meaningful life might ultimately provide the means by which to live a life which has a greater moral impact than that life would have had, had it been completely selfless (e.g., if Andrew Carnegie, Bill Gates, or Warren Buffett had cared only about living morally praiseworthy lives, they almost certainly wouldn't have ended up living lives which had such a positive moral impact on the world).

Living a meaningful life is not merely an instrumental consideration, however; for many (if not most) people, it is an intrinsic concern as well. As evidence for this claim, it seems common to experience a sense of pride in looking over one's life (or, at least, parts of it) and judging that it was meaningful; and conversely, it seems common to experience a sense of regret, shame, and embarrassment in looking over one's life and concluding that it has been largely meaningless. This intrinsic concern about living a meaningful life (perhaps silently) underlies practical questions such as whether to get (or remain) married, whether to have kids, whether to persevere through graduate school, and whether to pursue a particular line of work.

It should be noted, in addition, that the concept of meaningfulness is not limited to deliberations about how to optimize one's own life; it can also enter in to deliberations about how to influence others for their own benefit. This point is clearly illustrated by a great number of parents who want to raise their children in such a way that they come to live meaningful lives; such a concern also seems to underlie the aims many professions: promoting meaning in the lives of others is (or at least, I would argue, *should be*) a (or

perhaps even *the*) primary goal for therapists, if not for social workers, educators, healthcare workers and maybe even lawmakers. And even outside such professions, it seems that many people have a general longing to help others live meaningfully, and they feel certain feelings of regret or emptiness in finding themselves failing to do so.

Given, then, that living meaningfully is of instrumental and intrinsic importance to most of us, it would seem useful to have an understanding of what meaningfulness essentially consists in, for it seems much more likely that we will succeed in living meaningful lives, and helping others do so as well, if we understand what it is that we are striving for.

§3: The Relative Absence of Discussion about "Meaning"

In his 2002 article "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life", Thaddeus Metz notes that about five articles a year have been published on the topic, though the number has increased somewhat since then. Notable philosophers who have addressed the question (in addition to those listed above) include Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick, Charles Taylor, Robert Solomon, and Bernard Williams. Yet one has to wonder why more analytic philosophical ink has not been spilled on what seems to be an important topic; as Metz (2002, p. 811) wrote :

> "Western people clearly have a growing interest in issues of life's meaning. Psychics, televangelists, and self-help gurus are extensively addressing them, but academic philosophers are not. For example, the value of marriage, central to most people's lives, is something that Anglo-American philosophers have not adequately accounted for. This results from a lack of philosophical resources. No theory of well-being can alone explain the desirability of marriage, since most would choose marriage even if it meant somewhat

> less happiness. Moral theories are also not sufficient, since the issue is largely why one should make a vow in the first place, not just whether one should keep it. The most natural category to account for the worth of marriage is meaningfulness, the black sheep of the normative family."

The fact that a lot of self-help and "spiritual growth" books deal with the idea of meaning might have influenced academic philosophers to eschew such discussion; perhaps we would feel embarrassed to seriously engage in discussion of a topic which we associate with books lacking in complex systematic analytic-philosophical rigor, books such as, for example, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *Iron John*, *Awaken the Giant Within*, *The Road Less Travelled*, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, *The Secret* and *Dianetics*.

Another possible reason why there has been little motivation in academic philosophy to write extensively about the concept of meaning is precisely because relatively little has already been written about it. Philosophical ideas are formulated to a large degree in response to what has been already expressed at some time during the long history of published philosophical exchanges[2], and scandalous assertions in particular seem to lead to a proliferation of discussion. Because relatively little has been written about the notion of a meaningful life, and most of what has been written has not been

[2] According to Merriam-Webster, the term "meaningful" wasn't used before 1852. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the term did not come into being until after the Industrial Revolution had taken hold and brought about not only increasingly longer life-spans, more free-time and a greater range of choices of what one could do with one's life, but also the widespread redundancy of specialized work and an increased sense that one was alienated from the fruits of one's labor. These aspects of modern life created the conditions under which people became more apt to spend time taking stock of their lives in a *holistic* manner, i.e. in a way that goes beyond considerations of prudence and traditional morality, both of which, for most people, tend to deal with *relatively* immediate and localized actions and decisions.

scandalous, there has simply been relatively little fodder by which to propagate discussion in the area.

Of course, neither of these explanatory reasons which account for the relative dearth of discussion on the topic are themselves particularly forceful justificatory reasons. The fact that some works have already attempted to articulate a vision of a meaningful life via, for example, Jungian metaphors or science fiction does not preclude philosophers from attempting to discuss, with greater rigor and precision, the notion of a meaningful life. Similarly, the fact that it hasn't been discussed with much detail in academic philosophy does not entail that it shouldn't be; there is nothing illicit about changing or initiating a topic of conversation, even in the face of so many other open and unresolved discussions. On the contrary, the historical absence of conversation should be seen by analytic philosophers as having potentially hindered our ability to take stock of our lives and as possibly having prevented us from being able to correctly weigh our various reasons for action; and in acknowledging these potential effects, we should be work to replace our silence with understanding.

§4: Three General Impediments to an Investigation into "Meaning"

In addition to the aforementioned motivational hindrances, there are three general impediments which one runs up against as one tries to provide an answer to the question "What, if anything, makes a life meaningful?" My intention in addressing these difficulties is not so much to resolve them as it is to use them as a means by which to limit the scope of the present exploration; and by avoiding what promises to be

investigational dead-ends, we will be better situated to follow a more fruitful direction of inquiry into the nature of meaning.

The first impediment to answering the question of what makes a life meaningful arises from the fact that meaning intuitively seems to be somehow related to people's actions and/or the objects of their pursuits, but it is nonetheless difficult to see what it is that makes all of those actions and pursuits a unified set. That is to say that it seems quite possible for many different states of mind and ways of living to be equally meaningful, and it is difficult to see what so many different forms of life have in common, such that the concept of "meaningfulness" applies equally to them. It seems possible, for example, that a dedicated stay-at-home mother, an actor, a Carthusian monk, a racecar driver, and a nurse who works at a charity clinic could all lead more or less equally meaningful lives. But it is not evident what all of these individual lives have in common, such that meaningfulness applies roughly equally to them.

Conversely, it seems that the lives of two different people with similar routines could have differing levels of meaning; this makes it even more difficult to see how meaning could be cashed out simply in terms of one's actions. A pair of identical twins, for example, could be professional surfers and have similar patterns of behavior, but while one of them could feel the calling to do something "more meaningful" with his life, the other could feel that he has already found his calling, and that nothing could be more meaningful than just living in the beauty of the present moment, lifting the moods of people he meets, and "stepping lightly on the earth". As another example, one can imagine two people working side by side at a soup kitchen for the same reason (i.e.,

simply to help those who are in need) doing the same exact thing; but whereas the first person's heart was really in it, despite appearances, the second person's heart wasn't. If it is right to say that there are different levels of meaning between the two people in these examples, the difference cannot be easily explained simply in terms of their behavior alone.

This first impediment to determining what makes a life meaningful (i.e. the difficulty of correlating meaning with people's actions or the objects of their pursuits) suggests that objective lists such as "101 things you should do before you die" will not succeed in providing an intensional definition of "meaning". Similarly, while the question "What, if anything, are the things that have provided my life with meaning?" is probably an important question to ask, as answering it may help one to appreciate the elements of one's particular life and perhaps allow one to achieve some kind of self-knowledge, it would seem that enumerating such a personal list would not delineate the general concept of "meaning" itself, nor would it necessarily provide any useful guidance for anyone else on how to achieve a meaningful life. One individual, for example, might put "coaching my son's football team" on such a list, but that would seem to offer little direction to someone who doesn't have any children and who hates all sports, especially football.

The second difficulty that arises while trying to determine what, if anything, makes a life meaningful is that such an investigation forces us to face a "criterion

problem"[3]: the first horn of the dilemma we face is that it is often difficult to tell when (and to what degree) a particular life can rightly be said to be meaningful; the other horn is that we do not start off with a firm intuitive grasp of what precisely "meaning" itself amounts to.

In some instances of inquiry, we can rely on our intuitions that particular tokens belong in a certain category in order to come to an understanding of what the boundaries of that category are (e.g. we can generally tell if object x is a pillow by observing it; then, after having observed many different pillows, we can infer what "being a pillow" consists in). In other instances, we can use our knowledge of categories in order to identify particular tokens (e.g. one can learn in a health class what a stroke is, and then use that understanding to determine whether or not a person with a particular set of symptoms is having a stroke).

But when it comes to "meaning", as is often the case in philosophical inquiry, we are not given a completely firm foothold on which to proceed in either direction. Proceeding in one direction, it is difficult to derive a categorical understanding of meaning from token knowledge of meaningful lives because such token knowledge is often itself not self-evident: one may have to reflect in order to formulate an intuition on whether one way of life is more meaningful than another[4] (e.g., as Wolf asks, "Is the life

[3] For an in-depth discussion about this fundamental philosophical problem, see Chisholm 1973.

[4] The "problem of the criterion" seems more pronounced in discussions about meaning than it is in discussions about other normative areas, such as morality. When it comes to actions, we tend to have very strong and clear judgments about right and wrong. Even much of the "gray area" that arises in morality tends to arise out of clear, but conflicting, intuitions about what the right

of a great but lonely academic more or less meaningful than that of a beloved housekeeper?" (1997b, p. 224). The answer to this question is not immediately evident). Proceeding in the other direction, it is difficult to use our intuitive categorical understanding of meaning as a way to identify particular instances of meaningful lives, because we have only a somewhat vague pre-theoretical grasp of what "meaning" itself amounts to (e.g. does one need to be successful in one's endeavors in order to live a meaningful life?).

It does seem to me, however, that we have stronger intuitions about which particular ways of living are meaningful than we do about what meaningfulness itself amounts to. As such, it seems that the best epistemic course we can take is to pay attention to the gut-level judgments that we and others make about how meaningful particular lives are, then formulate a view about what "meaningfulness" itself amounts to, then test that formulation to see if it accurately predicts in accordance with our reflective judgments about how meaningful particular ways of life are, and then refine our account and our judgments, back and forth, until everything falls into equilibrium. Thus, even though we cannot proceed unilaterally from a certain and unshakeable foundation, we can proceed bilaterally between moderately firm knowledge of category and tokens.

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course of action is (e.g. "euthanasia is good because it ends a person's suffering, but bad because it is murder"). When it comes to meaning, on the other hand, the problem is that we do not typically have strong signals informing us that one way of living would be more meaningful than another. It is possible, though, that our moral intuitions are clearer and louder than our intuitions about meaning simply because we have been better trained to be receptive to moral signals, and that with more practice, we would be able to have stronger intuitions about meaning as well.

The third difficulty to determining what, if anything, makes a life meaningful is a linguistic one. On the one hand, it is normal to talk of "meaning" as being an on/off property (i.e., it is normal to talk of a life as if it were either "meaningless" or "meaningful", which makes it seem as if a life can either be completely devoid of meaning or completely replete with meaning). On the other hand, it also seems right to say, as Susan Wolf pointed out (1997b, p. 224), that the concept of a meaningful life is not an "all or nothing" concept: it seems quite admissible to say that, for example, person B lived a more meaningful life than person A, but a less meaningful life than person C; or similarly, that a person's life was more meaningful at time x than it was at time y, but less meaningful than it was at time z. As such, there is obviously a conflict in the way that we normally talk about meaning which brings with it the problems which accompany various *sorites* paradoxes.

It is not my aim in this dissertation to provide an answer to the (probably misguided) questions "at what point does the quantum jump occur between a meaningless life and a meaningful life?" or "what causes such a quantum jump to occur?". Rather, it is ultimately my aim to answer the question of what determines the extent to which a life ought to be seen as being meaningful and, consequentially, what, broadly speaking, one would have to do to live a more meaningful life. This aim, however, will not preclude me from talking about "meaningful lives"; it just needs to be kept in mind that my doing so is not necessarily a way of saying that the lives in question are replete with meaning. Instead, it is simply a way of saying that the lives in question have a significant amount

of meaning in them.

§5: A Taxonomy of Theories of Meaning

A natural way to start out in one's attempt to answer the question "what is involved in coming to live a more meaningful life?" is by investigating what has already been written about the subject. Thaddeus Metz has written several survey articles which summarize a good number of contemporary views put forth by philosophers working on the concept of a meaningful life. I will not provide a thorough summary and critique of these views, as Metz has already done so in great detail in his publications; it would be useful, however, to present Metz' taxonomy of theories of meaning, as put forth in his article "The Concept of a Meaningful Life", as a means of showing how my own theory compares to other theories that have been presented.

According to Metz, theories of meaning can generally be categorized as either supernaturalistic or naturalistic; both of these two categories, in turn, can be divided into two sub-categories: theories that fit into the supernatural category are almost always either "God-based" or "soul-based" theories (or both), and theories that fit into the naturalistic category are either subjectivist or objectivist theories.

§5.1: Supernaturalistic Theories of Meaning

A theory of meaning is supernaturalistic if it holds that "one's existence is meaningful only if one has a certain relation with some purely spiritual realm" (Metz

2002, p. 783). Most supernaturalistic theories of meaning, according to Metz, are "God-based" theories. That is to say that most supernaturalistic theories attempt to ground our understanding of meaning in terms of the nature of God, and of one's relating to God in the right way. God-based theories of meaning do not (or, at least, *need not*) stipulate that God does in fact exist; they need only stipulate that a necessary condition for any life's being meaningful is that God exists. If it turns out that God does not exist, then, according to these accounts, no one will have any degree of meaning in their lives.

An example of a God-centered theory might hold that a meaningful life consists in abiding by God's will. Very few such theories have been earnestly put forth in academic philosophical texts[5], though there have been a fair number of formulated views which have been put forth as fodder for objections (e.g. Metz 2002). If, however, one strays a bit from recent academic philosophy, the sentiment of such a view can be found in, for example, *The Purpose Driven Life*, which begins by stating,

> "The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose."[6]

[5] William Lane Craig essentially argues (in Klemke 2000, pp. 40 – 56) that without God, there is no possibility of there being an "ultimate" meaning or purpose *of* life, and that if there is no ultimate meaning or purpose *of* life, then there can be no meaning or purpose *in* life, i.e., that it is impossible to live a meaningful life in the absence of God. He does not seem to provide any justification for believing, however, that the meaningless *of* life entails a lack of meaning *in* life.

[6] It seems that these claims are attempting to provide answer questions about "the meaning of life" rather than trying to explicitly provide the necessary conditions for making one's life more meaningful. But if one accepts that "you were born by his purpose and for his purpose", it

Metz argues that it is difficult for such theories (i.e. those which hold meaning to consist in living in accordance with God's purpose) to provide a rationale that would explain why fulfilling God's purpose constitutes meaningfulness (Metz 2002, p. 786). Such theories tend to face problems similar to the Euthyphro dilemma. If meaning is conferred by acting in accordance with God's will, is that because God simply knows what would be meaningful for us to do, and wills for us to have meaningful lives? If that is the case, it would seem that God is doing nothing more than directing traffic on the road to meaning; his will would not itself be the *normative source* of meaning. It might turn out that God wants us to, for example, joyfully serve others, simply because he knows that doing so will make our lives more meaningful; however, if that were the case, simply appealing to God's will would not provide an explanation as to *why* joyously serving others confers meaning on our lives. In this case, we would have to investigate what it is about helping others, and not what it is about God's will, that makes life meaningful.

On the other horn of the dilemma, if God's will is *itself* the source of meaning, such that our doing whatever God happened to will would result in our living meaningful lives, then we have to live with a lot of counter-intuitive possibilities of meaningful and meaningless lives. If we knew that God's purpose for us was to serve as food for intergalactic travelers (Nozick 1981, pp. 586-87) or if we knew that God wanted us to

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doesn't seem that one would have to strain in order to make the jump to accept that the degree to which one lives in accordance with God's plan determines how meaningful one's life is. Under such a view, if getting married and raising children makes one's life more meaningful, for example, that is only because it is God's will that one do so.

spend our lives rolling around in the dirt in order to amuse the cherubs, then it would follow that our living meaningful lives would depend upon our making ourselves dinner, or by rolling around in the dirt in a cherub-amusing fashion. The fact that we think such ways of living wouldn't be particularly meaningful (and, as a result, feel inclined to protest, "but God would obviously never will us to do those things!") reveals that we don't really think that God's will itself is the (only) source of meaning.

A soul-based supernatural theory of meaning holds that in order to lead a meaningful life, one must at the very least have a soul. As was the case with the God-based theories, soul-based theories seem to exist simply as a taxonomical placeholder in philosophical literature: I have not come across any contemporary philosophers who have earnestly put forward this view, though Metz did put forward the view in order to argue against it. This is not to say that no one holds this position; a Buddhist or Hindu framework, for example, might define meaning in terms of the soul. Or, to take an example from the Renaissance period, a poem of Joachim Du Bellay (Sonnet CXIII from *L'Olive*) might be read as[7] expressing a neo-platonic view, according to which living meaningfully is a matter of conditioning one's soul so that it will rise up after one's corporeal death to be in the presence of the Forms:

> If our life is less than a day
> In the Eternal, if the year which circles around

[7] Granted, this may be a somewhat anachronistic reading of Du Bellay, as the term "meaningful" didn't appear until 1852, and there wasn't a term or phrase in the French of his day which really captured our modern sense of the word. Nevertheless, even if Du Bellay wasn't actually *expressing* any views about the relationship between souls and meaningfulness, his poem can still be read as being *expressive of* someone holding such a view.

Chases away our days without hope of return,
If perishable is everything born,

Then why do you dream, my imprisoned soul?
Why do you take pleasure in the obscurity of today,
When, to fly up to a brighter stay,
Your back has well-feathered wings?

There is the good that every spirit desires,
There, the rest to which everyone aspires,
There is love, *there*, pleasure still.

There, my soul, to the highest heavens guided,
You will be able to recognize the Form
of Beauty, whose worldly shadows I adore.

The text of this poem might be better interpreted as simply being an expression of a spiritual longing for perfection than as providing a philosophical theory about what the nature of meaning is. Nonetheless, the sentiments expressed in it could be seen as arising from the view that meaningfulness consists in the soul's communing with eternal Truth, Goodness and Beauty, or that perhaps meaning consists in the pursuit of such communion. On this view, God[8] need not be posited as being a criterion for meaning.

Of course, a theory of meaning could be both God-based and soul-based, and hold that a necessary condition for one's living a meaningful life is the existence of both God and one's own soul. One such view might hold, for example, that leading a meaningful life amounts to preparing one's soul so that God will decide to spend all of eternity with

[8] Or, to be more precise, God according to the traditional understanding of Western religion. A nontraditional, neoplatonic view of God might hold that God is *equivalent* to the forms of Truth, Goodness and Beauty (which are themselves ultimately equivalent to each other). On such a view, the above-mentioned illustration of a soul-based account of meaning would ultimately be a God-based account of meaning as well.

it. On such a view, if either God or one's soul does not in fact exist, then one's life ends up being pointless (and therefore meaningless), because regardless of what people do, nothing would change their common eventual fate, which would be to lose consciousness and then dissolve into dust.

While such a view may be promoted to some degree in certain religious contexts, no recent philosophical articles that I have come across have earnestly put forth this view. If we look further back, however, it might be possible to say of Aquinas that he held[9] such a conception of meaning (though, again, of course, doing so would be an anachronism of sorts, as he didn't use the term "meaning" itself) when he presented his idea of the Beatific Vision: "Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence."[10]

The trouble with God-based and soul-based theories of meaning is not that it is inconceivable that the existence of God or souls could make life more meaningful. Rather, the problem that they have in common is this: *Regardless of whether God or souls exist*, it seems fair to say that the actual lives of Gandhi and Einstein, for example,

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[9] One might object to the claim that Aquinas held something akin to a "God and Soul" conception of meaning on the grounds that he allowed for the possibility of achieving a certain level of "imperfect happiness" through scientific contemplation: "There is no reason why we should not admit a certain imperfect happiness in the contemplation of the angels; and higher indeed than in the consideration of speculative science." (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part of the Second Part, Question 3, Article 7). However, in response to this objection, it can be said that Aquinas held scientific contemplation to provide "imperfect happiness" only because this activity "participates in" (Article 6) the higher, perfect form of happiness. Without God, and thus without the possibility of the Beatific Vision, there would be nothing for scientific contemplation to "participate in", and so in their absence, not even "imperfect happiness" would be conceptually possible.

[10] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, First Part of the Second Part, Question 3, Article 8*

were more meaningful than they would have been had they spent their entire lives lying in a gutter in a drunken stupor. Because it is seems right to judge some forms of life to be more meaningful than others without basing those judgments on the existence of God or of souls, it follows that supernatural theories do not appear to succeed in capturing the necessary conditions for coming to live a more meaningful life. And, in addition, living in accordance with God's will does not seem to be a sufficient condition either: even if it were God's will for a certain woman to become a nun, it doesn't seem like her life would be made more meaningful if she did so as the result of being forced into a monastery against her will for the entirety of her life.

Of course, it might be the case that life could not exist at all without the supernatural (e.g. perhaps the universe could not exist without God, and perhaps consciousness is not possible without souls). If this were the case, then, *a fortiori*, supernaturalism would be a necessary condition for any meaningful life. But regardless of whether or not supernaturalism is a necessary condition for life, the questions at hand are what are the general qualities which distinguish a more meaningful life from a less meaningful one, and what needs to be done in order to move from a less meaningful life to a more meaningful life. And, as argued above, we need not appeal to supernatural considerations in order to answer these questions.

It might also be the case that the existence of at least one supernatural being is a necessary condition for one's coming to live an *infinitely* meaningful life; in other words, if there were no God and no souls, then there could only be a limited amount of meaning in anyone's life. But that would not mean that our lives would in essence be

meaningless, as the absence of an infinite amount of something does not entail that smaller amounts of that thing do not exist. Even if, for example, it turns out that we will not live for an infinite amount of time, that will not entail that we were never alive at all; similarly, even if it turns out that we will all end in unconscious dust, this fact would not entail that none of us ever had any meaning in our lives at all.

§5.2: Naturalistic Theories of Meaning

Metz defines naturalistic theories negatively, saying that a theory about what, if anything, makes a life meaningful is naturalistic if it holds that neither God nor souls are necessary conditions for a life's having some amount of meaning. Naturalistic theories do not stipulate or require the non-existence of supernatural entities; they simply maintain that supernatural beings are not needed in order to make sense of what meaning consists in. The primary underlying motivation for advancing a naturalistic theory of meaning over a supernaturalistic one stems from the belief that the former is more ontologically parsimonious than the latter, and that ontological parsimony is something to be desired in a theory. In other words, according to such a viewpoint, if a theory can capture the essence of meaning without mentioning God or souls, then there is no point in making that theory more complicated by modifying it to talk about God or souls.

According to Metz, any naturalistic theory will be either a subjectivist or an objectivist one. A subjectivist theory of meaning will hold that the amount of meaning in any life is completely determined by whether that life (or parts thereof) is the object of some proattitude or other (Metz 2002, p. 793). A subjectivist view might hold that, for

example, a meaningful life is one in which the subject is satisfied with the choices he or she has made, regardless of what those choices in fact were. The second chapter of this dissertation will focus largely on subjectivism and what I take to be its shortcomings, so I will postpone an in-depth discussion of it until then.

An objectivist theory of meaning will hold that certain features of one's natural life can make it meaningful, but not merely in virtue of one's own positive mental orientation (Metz 2002, p. 796). That is to say that it is quite possible for an objectivist theory to hold that one's subjective states can influence how meaningful one's life is; however, such a view would hold that the amount of meaning in one's life can also be determined by things besides one's subjective states. An objectivist view might hold, for example, that one's life would be made meaningful if one were satisfied with the choices one has made, *and* if one left the world in better shape than it was when one found it.

Two main shortcomings have tended to arise in previous discussions centering around naturalistic theories of meaning. The first is that the theories themselves do not satisfactorily describe what we normally take meaning to be. Some theories tend to be overly broad[11], whereas others seem to be too narrow[12]. Other objectivist theories are, I

[11] To give an example, on Martin Seligman's view "The Meaningful Life consists in belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self, and humanity creates all the positive institutions to allow this: religion, political party, being green, the Boy Scouts, or the family." (2011, p. 12). This is problematic in that many people seem to serve something they think is larger than themselves, but their doing so does not seem to make their lives more meaningful. Being conscripted into a conquering foreign army, for example, would not seem to make one's life more meaningful; nor would spending one's life working a soul-crushing corporate job trying to get out of debt to said corporation.

believe, not obviously incorrect, but they would be improved if their views were spelled out more clearly: for example, as will be discussed in chapter 2, Susan Wolf's formulation that "meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (1997a, p. 305; 1997b, p. 211.) is appealing, but rather vague, in particular because she offers neither an account of "objective attractiveness" nor a list of things that are "objectively attractive".

The second main problem to arise is that many accounts of meaning focus on the theoretical concept of meaning, but don't spend much energy trying to answer what is, I believe, a more *useful* question: "what is involved in coming to live a more meaningful life?" In other words, regardless of what meaningfulness consists in, and regardless of how meaningful one's life has been, the practical question still remains of what should be done in order to make one's life more meaningful. Simply knowing what meaningfulness consists in may not be enough to be of much use: if it consists of transcending limits (Nozick 1989 pp. 162 - 169), for example, the questions remain of how to find out what limits one should transcend, and how to go about doing so. If meaning consists in creating, then how should one decide what and how to create? If it consists in acting upon one's subjective attraction towards objectively attractive things, how should one determine what is objectively attractive and how should one go about making oneself attracted to these things?

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[12] For example, Richard Taylor's later view is that a life is meaningful just insofar as it is creative. The obvious problem with this is that there are other ways to make one's life more meaningful besides being creative (Metz 2002, p. 797); it intuitively seems to be the case that one could make one's life more meaningful, for example, simply by fighting for a cause one believes in.

This is not to say, of course, that a theory of meaning ought to (or even could) provide details of what every individual person should do, given their particular circumstances, in order to live a more meaningful life (e.g. "anyone in Jones' situation, which is probably just to say Jones, should spend eighteen months in the Peace Corps after college…"); there is simply too much variety in human life to make such an approach feasible. Nor is it the traditional role of a philosophical theory to offer advice that only tends to work for a large amount of people the majority of the time (e.g. "pursue a hobby that you find enjoyable."); such work has traditionally been outsourced to the self-help section of the bookstore.

A practical philosophical theory should, however, lay out as much as possible what *anyone* would have to do in order to live a more meaningful life, and address the general difficulties which universally face *anyone* who would try to do so. Most philosophical theories of meaning have focused on trying to peg down the definition of meaning instead of trying to provide answers to these broader practical questions; however, these questions will need to be addressed if a full and practical account of meaning is to be given.

§6: My Account of Meaning

My purpose in writing this dissertation is to overcome the two aforementioned problems which have tended to dog naturalistic theories of meaning (i.e. they have been overly broad, too narrow and/or too vague; and they have been too far removed from practical application). In the remaining chapters, I will put forth and defend the

naturalistic objectivist position that coming to live a more meaningful life is a matter of the following:

1) coming to live in better accordance with the deep concerns one has; and/or
2) coming to have more befitting set of deep concerns.

My aim is to show that to the extent to which one meets both (or, in some cases, just one) of these conditions, one will, to a corresponding extent, come to live a more meaningful life. I will argue that if one meets both conditions, then in no instances will one end up with a less meaningful life; conversely, any more meaningful ways of living will also be instances in which at least one of the conditions has been met.

I hope to establish not only that this account is in line with our intuitions about the nature of meaning, but also that it could be of some practical use, in that it could help translate one's vague feelings that one's life isn't as meaningful as it should be into a clearer understanding of what is misaligned in it (i.e. by directing one to ask oneself if one's life is out of alignment with one's deep concerns, or if one's *de facto* set of deep concerns truly befits oneself). And having a clearer idea of what is misaligned puts one a step closer to aligning it, and thereby coming to live a more meaningful life.

This is not to say that this account will direct everyone to live in the same conforming way and thereby restrict individuals to a single recommended form of life. As I aim to show, this account leaves enough room in the direction that it gives so that many different ways of living could be considered equally meaningful. Nor do I claim that a

universal understanding and acceptance of this account would entail that everyone would be able to agree that a particular way of living will be more meaningful for a certain individual than will another way of living. For example, even if Smith and Smith Jr. both agree with this account, they might still disagree about whether working towards a degree in philosophy will likely lead Smith Jr. to have a more meaningful life, in the end, than if he had instead chosen to study engineering. However, I believe it will be possible to cash out any such disagreements as being disagreements over whether one (or both) of these conditions is likely to be met; that is to say that Smith and Smith Jr will find they disagree over whether studying philosophy will be likely to help Smith Jr. live in better accordance with what he will end up caring deeply about, and/or they will disagree over whether doing so will likely set him up to have a sufficiently befitting set of deep concerns.

§7: Chapter Synopses

In looking ahead, the first chapter will focus on the first aspect of coming to live more meaningfully which was listed above. Much of this chapter is geared towards defining the main terms that I use throughout the dissertation (e.g., “caring”; “caring deeply”; “living in accordance with”, etc). It also deals with several broad practical and epistemic difficulties of coming to live in accordance with one’s deep concerns (e.g., the possibility of not knowing what one’s deep concerns are; the possibility of not having deep concerns; the possibility of being frustrated in one’s attempts to live in accordance with one’s deep concerns by one’s own psychological processes and/or by other

"external" factors) and it briefly discusses some of the broad means by which these difficulties might be overcome. Finally, the first chapter addresses several objections that might arise in response to my claim that coming to live a more meaningful life can involve coming to live in better accordance with one's deep concerns.

The second chapter discusses and critiques several accounts of meaning which have been put forward by other philosophers and which in some ways resemble my own. It initially discusses the shortcomings of the accounts offered by Harry Frankfurt, who does not acknowledge that the amount of meaning in one's life can be diminished by having misguided deep concerns. The second chapter then discusses the shortcomings of the account offered by Susan Wolf, whose view is roughly that living meaningfully is a matter of living in accordance with deep concerns directed towards objectively-valuable objects. Finally, the third chapter attacks an argument put forth by Alan Gewirth which concludes that living meaningfully consists in living in accordance with the universal moral rights of other people.

The third chapter discusses a practical problem which threatens attempts to live a more meaningful life. As will be discussed in greater detail in the fourth chapter, the second aspect of coming to live a more meaningful life is coming to adopt a more befitting set of deep concerns. This seems to suggest that playing a fully-active role in coming to live a more meaningful life requires that we actively change which deep concerns we have. In this chapter, I will discuss whether or not this is possible. *Contra* Frankfurt, I argue that we can in fact actively choose our own deep concerns (to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps, so to speak), and I list several ways that one could do

so. I also discuss various impediments which can prevent us from actively choosing what we care deeply about.

In the fourth chapter, I start off by exploring Nomy Arpaly's attempt to improve Wolf's account by defining meaning in terms of striving to fulfill one's needs and make use of one's capacities. While I argue that her attempt is ultimately unsuccessful, it is useful in that it points us towards what I believe to be a correct view, which is that the amount of potential meaning in one's life is determined by one's various capacities. One's capacities, I argue, determine the extent to which any particular set of deep concerns is befitting for an individual, and coming to adopt a more befitting set of deep concerns can increase the extent to which one's life is meaningful. In this chapter, a fair amount of time is spent flushing out what the idea of "befittingness" amounts to and giving examples to illustrate how coming to adopt more befitting concerns can give rise to a more meaningful life. I argue that, *ceteris paribus*, one can come to adopt a more befitting set of deep concerns by coming to care *more deeply* about the particular things in accordance with which one has some capacity to live; by increasing *the number* of things one cares about in accordance with which one has come capacity to live; and by *exchanging* a set of concerns in accordance with which one has a smaller capacity to live for another set of concerns in accordance with which one has a larger capacity to live.) Several objections and responses to my account are also addressed.

The fifth chapter will be spent discussing a set of potential counter-examples to my account. According to the view I am putting forward, living a meaningful life requires that one have at least one object of deep concern. One may object to my view,

however, on the grounds that there seem to be some cases in which individuals' lives are judged to be meaningful in virtue of certain elements which are not grounded in the deep concerns of the individuals in question. One might take a life to be meaningful simply in virtue of its relationship to (and/or the effects it has on) other people, or simply in virtue of that life's objective features or causal effects, or simply in virtue of the fact that it somehow promoted or achieved things which were objectively valuable. In the fifth chapter, I will offer responses to these objections.

In the final section, I will offer several ideas for further research into the idea of meaning. My hope is that the ideas presented in this dissertation will not be the final word when it comes to meaning, but rather that they will open up further discussion about the role that meaning plays, or ought to play, in our practical deliberations and evaluations of lives.

Chapter One: Living in Accordance with What We Care Deeply About

At the end of the introduction I asserted that coming to live a more meaningful life is essentially a matter of 1) coming to live in better accordance with what one cares deeply about; and 2) coming to have a more befitting set of deep concerns. In this chapter I will focus on the first condition. I will spell out what I mean by it and discuss the general epistemic and phronetic hurdles that come with trying to meet it.

§1.1: The Notion of "Caring"

Central to my account of meaning is the notion of "caring"; it is therefore fundamental to address the question of what it means to say that one cares about something. In line with Harry Frankfurt, I believe that to care about something (or, as I shall also equivalently say, for that thing to be an object of one's concerns[13]) is to see it as being important to oneself[14]. To say that someone cares about X is to say that that

[13] In everyday discourse, to say that one "cares" about X is not equivalent to saying that one "is concerned" about X, as to say the latter is often just a way of saying that one is *worried* about X; and while caring about X *may* consist in part in being worried about X, one need not worry about X in order to care about X (e.g., one may care about making one's day at the beach enjoyable, without *worrying* about whether it is.) Nevertheless, I will still sometimes use the notion of a "concern" to refer to an instance of one's caring (e.g., to say "he only cared about talking with her; he did not care about what was to be talked about" is, for the purposes of this paper, to be taken as being equivalent to saying "talking with her was his only concern; what was to be talked about was not a concern of his.") The only reason for stipulating this equivalency is that allowing for the nominalization of the action of caring will prevent distracting grammatical twists and turns and thereby improve readability.

[14] However, as Frankfurt also notes, something can be important to one without one's caring about it: "People do not often care about certain things which are quite important to them. They may simply fail to recognize, after all, that those things have that importance. But if there is something that a person does care about, then it follows that it is important to him. This is not

person takes X to matter in some sense[15]; it is to say that that person takes X seriously[16]. *Ceteris paribus*, if one cares about X, one will have a motivation to promote, protect, maintain, acquire, achieve and/or appreciate X (depending on what X is).

Many contemporary philosophers have followed in the linguistic tracks of certain classical and enlightenment-era philosophers (most notably David Hume) by using the notion of "desires" as a means of attempting to explain why people act as they do. It is not my aim to show that such attempts are misguided; however, in attempting to elucidate the notion of "a meaningful life" and in addressing the general question of what is involved in coming to live a more meaningful life, I myself will not rely heavily on notions of "desires". This is not to say that these notions are somehow incoherent or incompatible with my view. In fact, "caring" might be seen as a type of "desiring". However, as I hope to show, the notion of "caring" is more specific term than is the notion of "desiring" (and, perhaps coincidentally, the specificity of the former notion

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because caring somehow involves an infallible judgment concerning the importance of its object. Rather, it is because caring about something *makes* that thing important to the person who cares about it." (Frankfurt 1982, p. 269). To illustrate this point: in virtue of the fact that I care about my health, it is important to me that I get enough Vitamin D, even if I don't care about getting enough Vitamin D *per se*, and indeed, even if I have never even heard or conceived of Vitamin D.

[15] By "that person takes X to matters in some sense", I am not advancing a self-absorbed view of caring. It might matter to me, for example, that a certain injustice in another country (e.g., the stoning to death of a woman because she was raped) be averted, even though I do not consider myself to be a victim of the injustice in question.

[16] "We take ourselves seriously whether we lead serious lives or not and whether we are concerned primarily with fame, pleasure, virtue, luxury, triumph, beauty, justice, knowledge, salvation, or mere survival… Human life is full of effort, plans, calculation, success and failure: we *pursue* our lives, with varying degrees of sloth and energy." (Nagel 178 in Klemke 2000.)

makes it easier to elucidate the notion of "a meaningful life" than does the latter); I also hope to show that notions of "caring" carry with them connotations[17] that are more in line with the connotations of the notion of "a meaningful life" than are the connotations of notions of "desiring".

In our everyday parlance, there is often not a clear severance between how and when notions of "caring", "wanting" and "desiring" get used. For example, aside from the difference in tone, the question "Would you care for some soup?" is not any different from the question "Do you want some soup?" Neither utterance is a question about whether one takes the soup to matter, or to be important; in other words, it is not a question about whether one *cares about* the soup. It is simply a question about whether one would choose to have any at the present moment. Or similarly, in response to a request to do something (e.g. mow the lawn, see a particular film), the assertion "I don't care to do that right now" is not, aside from tone, any different from the assertion "I have no desire to do that right now."

But to say that one cares about something is not necessarily to say merely that one desires it. The notion of "caring" often suggests a wider area of concern than does the notion of "desiring". To say that one desires that one's child's basketball team should win the game (or, to give a more realistic way of putting it, to say that one *wants* one's

[17] In their attempts to provide *definitions* for various definienda, philosophers tend to focus entirely on the denotations of words. However, in trying to provide an *exposition* of various notions, in trying to get us to see how rich and useful they are (or at least how rich and useful they can be, perhaps in spite of their *prima facie* mundanity), it is important to pay close attention to the connotations of words (which includes both the expositienda as well as the expositiens) as well. Some philosophers, such as Cora Diamond and Iris Murdoch, are masters at this particular skill.

child's basketball team to win) only seems to communicate the idea that one has a focalized concern that one's child's team should win. To say that one *cares about* whether one's child's basketball team will win the game seems to connote a wider concern, perhaps for the emotional well-being of one's child and that of his or her teammates; it might suggest, for example, a concern about their sense of accomplishment, the development of their confidence in themselves, and their belief in the idea that hard work pays off.

The notions of "caring" and "desiring" also seem to connote the presence of different phenomenological experiences. Desires are often thought of as being experienced as something akin to an itch or a hunger in one's mouth, stomach or loins; caring is often thought of as being experienced more as a broader warmth or pressure in one's chest, though these are by no means necessary or sufficient conditions.

A further distinction between caring and desiring lies in the conditions of their satisfaction. The usual aim of desire is to extinguish itself; caring often isn't so suicidal. It doesn't make much sense to say that one continues to desire the team's winning the game once it is over, but it does make sense to say that one continues to care about the team's winning the game once it is over, because one's wider concerns related to the win (e.g., the concern that one's child should come to have faith in him/herself) persist after the game is over.

Does one act of caring differ from another, aside from its targeting a different object? It would seem so. Most obviously, there may be differences of intensity (e.g.

one may care more about who wins the World Series than about who wins the Stanley Cup) and duration (e.g. one may care about one's spouse for a longer period of time than one cared about collecting baseball cards). There are also phenomenal differences between various acts of caring (e.g. caring about one's children feels different than caring about one's work, and the difference is not just one of intensity; rather, children and work each seem to pluck different heartstrings.)[18]

Acts of caring can also differ from each other in that there can be occurrent, non-occurrent, and, perhaps also, unconscious forms of caring.

While occurrent caring can often (if not always) be said to have phenomenological qualities, one can also make sense of a notion of non-occurrent or dispositional caring. If one points to a sleeping, non-dreaming woman and asks if she cares about her family, there is a sense in which it can be right to say "no" (i.e. she does not, at that moment, have any thoughts or feelings at all about her family) as well as a sense in which it can be right to say "yes" (i.e., in looking at the larger timeline of her life, one could see she often had the phenomenal experience of caring about her family in the recent past, and, in looking forward, that she would be apt to have frequent phenomenal experiences about them in the near future).

[18] These points are in line with Harry Frankfurt's view that "There are, of course, wide variations in how strongly and how persistently people care about things. It is also possible to discriminate different *ways* of caring, which are not reducible in any obvious manner to differences of degree. The most notable of these are perhaps the several varieties of love." Frankfurt 1982, p. 263.

Is it possible to unconsciously care about something? Is it possible, for example, to care about something without *ever* having had a phenomenological experience of caring about it? It is very difficult to know what criteria one could use to determine whether or not this would be possible. Imagine a scenario in which Jones asks his best friend Smith if he could ask Smith's former girlfriend out on a date. Smith had never had any phenomenal thoughts about the possibility of Jones dating his former girlfriend, and in thinking about it, he sees no reason why they shouldn't. He therefore tells Jones that he wouldn't care if they were to go out together. However, when Smith later sees Jones and his former girlfriend together, his blood starts to boil and he realizes that he does in fact care that they are together. Now, is it necessarily the case that Smith only started to care once he saw them together, or was it possible that, on an unconscious level, he really did care all along, and it was only when he saw them together that the unconscious became conscious?

The difficulty in answering this question is that it seems impossible to verify that the unconscious caring was or wasn't there prior to Smith's seeing them together: we certainly can't ask Smith to think back and ask whether he had unconsciously cared all along or whether he only started to care once he saw them together, because, by definition, in neither case would there have been any instances of phenomenological caring for him to remember; and if he *could* remember experiencing some concern "in the back of his mind", then, since he was able to remember experiencing something, that would only prove it wasn't originally unconscious after all.

One set of conditions, however, might serve as evidence that Smith did originally care: Imagine the case in which, upon hearing Jones' request, Smith had no phenomenological experiences of caring, but at the same time, and unbeknownst to him, his blood pressure shot up dramatically. Similarly, there may be cases in which we find ourselves with a vague, undefined sensation of fear or anger, though we aren't sure what the object of that fear or anger is, and it may only be later that something (e.g. a suggestion made by a therapist) makes us consciously aware of what it was that we cared about all along, such that we should feel fear or anger towards whatever seemed to us as having been a threat to it. Only the first of these two cases might truly serve as a potential example of unconscious caring, as it was the only one in which no phenomenology of caring was present. However, both examples do at least suggest the *possibility* that we can care about things without knowing that we do.

§1.2: The Notion of "Caring Deeply"

It is possible to care about something without, as it is said, "*really*" or "*truly*" caring about it. Given the elucidation of the notion of "caring" given above, one can give a similar elucidation of "caring deeply" simply by adding intensifying modifiers: to care deeply about something (or, as I shall also equivalently say, for that thing to be an object of one's deep concerns) is to see it as being *of central* importance to oneself. To say that someone cares deeply about X is to say that that person takes X to matter *a lot* in some sense, that that person takes X *very* seriously. *Ceteris paribus*, if one cares deeply about X, one

will have a *strong* motivation to promote, protect, maintain, acquire, achieve, and/or appreciate X (depending on what X is).

I would argue, though, that to use the notion of "caring deeply" over the notion of "caring" is not just to underline the intensity of one's attitudes and motivations (though it does generally do that). The difference in terminology also tends to express a structural difference as well: Caring deeply serves as the motivational foundation for further caring, which is to say that the things we care about are often determined by what we care deeply about. This can be seen by following the motivational chain which links together various things that we care about; by repeatedly asking ourselves why we care about the things we do, we will eventually reach a point where the spade turns against our one or more *fundamental* concerns. As an example, Jones may want the car to start. Why? Because he cares about making it to the school play on time. Why? Because he cares about promoting the well-being of his child. Why? Here the spade turns; the question leads nowhere because Jones fundamentally cares about promoting the well-being of his child.

We might not care deeply, though, about what we fundamentally care about. We may fundamentally care about who wins this year's World Series, for example, without caring deeply about who wins. That is to say, we may care (without this caring's being determined by a further, more fundamental concern) about who wins, without the game's outcome being particularly central to one's life; we may simply be a *mild* Yankees fan, for example. Thus, while it is probably true to say that everything we care deeply about is also something we also fundamentally care about, not everything we fundamentally care about is also something that we necessarily care deeply about.

The relationship between caring deeply and fundamentally caring can also be more structurally complex: we can, at the same time, care both fundamentally and non-fundamentally about the things we care deeply about. One may care deeply about completing one's formal education, for example, both as a result of one's further concerns about getting a job (with this concern itself arising from further concerns), and also just because one fundamentally cares about completing one's academic journey. Or, similarly, an old man may find that he has, ever since his early adolescence, deeply cared about taking a train to the West Coast, both as the result of his further concerns about seeing the Pacific Ocean before he dies, as well as out of a simple fundamental concern about finally experiencing a long train ride.

As stated above, the notion of "caring deeply" does seem to suggest a certain intensity of attitude towards the object in question, as well suggest the presence of a relatively strong motivation to promote, protect, maintain, acquire, achieve and/or appreciate it. However, just because one has strong attitudes and motivations does not entail that one deeply cares about the thing in question. Intensity of feelings and dispositions alone do not account for the difference between mere "surface desires" and our deep concerns about things. As Loren Lomasky wrote,

> "Intensity of desire is, however, one but by no means the only indicator of an end's gravity. An infuriating itch might produce in an agent a well-nigh irresistible temptation to scratch even though he simultaneously denies that scratching that itch at that time is a crucial component of his good. To come closer to a procedure for discriminating between relatively grave and relatively inconsequential ends, it is necessary also to consider how they differ in respect of their persistence and centrality within the life of an individual." (Lomasky 25-26.)

Lomasky puts forth the definition of a notion, i.e., the notion of a "project", which is central to his work in moral and political philosophy, and which seems to have a somewhat similar sense to the notion of "something that one cares deeply about":

> "Those [ends] which reach indefinitely into the future, play a central role within the ongoing endeavors of the individual, and provide a significant degree of structural stability to an individual's life I call *projects*." (Lomasky 26.)

Lomasky's notion of an "end" corresponds relatively well with my notion of "something one fundamentally cares about". There is something to be said for the simple brevity of the term "end" over the clunkier notions of "what one fundamentally cares about" and "an object of fundamental concern". However, I believe that by using the more drawn-out literal notion, one is better able to keep in precise view what each of the notions are targeting, and by distinguishing between what one "fundamentally cares about" and what one "deeply cares about", one will be better able to keep in mind that one doesn't necessarily hold one's "ends" to be of central importance in one's life.

Similarly, Lomasky's notion of a "project" is intended to denote, I believe, more or less the same thing that I intend to denote with my notion of "what one cares deeply about". However, in using the notion of "projects", one does have to remain more vigilant to resist the somewhat misleading traditional connotations of that term. The notion of a "project" is traditionally used to refer to discrete goal-oriented tasks (e.g., refinishing a basement, overhauling a truck engine, organizing and presenting a proposal at the office); the notion of "what one cares deeply about" does not lead us to think of the objects of our deep concerns as being a collection of isolated tasks to be completed. The notion of

"what we care deeply about" allows us to naturally think of the objects of our deep concerns as being tightly interwoven with each other in our experience of them instead of being discrete in our experience of them (e.g., as will be discussed later, one's love of baseball and one's love of one's father are often not completely separate loves); it also allows us to think of these things not only as objects which are to be directed and controlled according to our plans, but also as things towards which it is sometimes enough to simply be present (e.g. part of what it means to love someone is to just be present to them, to *see* them; part of being "spiritual" is simply allowing oneself to be open to the beauty of the world).

A final misleading connotation carried by the traditional notions of an "end" or a "project" which is avoided by the notion of "what one cares deeply about" is that one normally thinks of the former as being things that can be forced on to someone. For example, one can think of a prisoner's being condemned to spend the entirety of his days uselessly moving a rock pile from one place to another as being the "end" that was forced upon him. Another, more mundane, example is captured via the much-uttered phrase "I have this project at work which I have to do." On the other hand, the notion of "caring deeply about something" tends to direct our thoughts away the things which we are forced to do against our will (though it does allow us to think of the things which we are forced to do *by* our wills, as well as the things we were originally forced to do against our wills, but which we then came to embrace as our own). This corresponds better with the fact that when we consider the notion of what makes our lives "meaningful", our thoughts do not tend towards the things which never become more to us than forced

burdens; rather, our thoughts tend towards the various objects and engagements which we have adopted as being our own (i.e. by our caring about them.)

However, traditional connotational infelicities aside, the conditions used by Lomasky to define the notion of a "project" do a decent job as well of spelling out what it means to say that one cares deeply about something: when we care deeply about things, our concerns about them do tend to reach indefinitely into our futures, these concerns do play a central role in our endeavors, and, via the motivations they provide us, they do create structural stability in our lives.

To give an example of the first of these three conditions as it applies to the notion of "caring deeply" (i.e. one's deep concerns reach indefinitely into the future), if one cares deeply about one's family, that concern will not, most likely, come with an epistemically available expiration date. If one cares deeply about one's family, one normally indefinitely continues to plan and act in accordance with their interests (to some degree, at least, as one's family is likely not the *only* thing one deeply cares about.) It should be noted, though, that although it is probably a necessary condition of one's deep concerns that they should have a relatively long temporal duration (anything that doesn't last is generally considered to be merely a "whim" or, at most, an "overwhelming urge"), it is by no means a sufficient condition: just because a concern or a desire persists over a substantial amount of time, and perhaps indefinitely into the future, doesn't entail that one deeply cares about it. One may have a lifelong persisting fundamental urge to scratch a chronic psoriatic itch, for example, without that concern's being of central importance to one's life.

In applying the second of the three conditions of a "project" to the notion of a "deep concern", we get the condition that a "deep concern" will be a fundamental concern which plays a central role in the ongoing endeavors of an individual. Its "centrality" is due to the fact that a deep concern will most likely be a concern out of which other non-fundamental concerns will grow, and living in accordance with this fundamental concern will be more important to one than living in accordance with any purely non-fundamental concerns which have grown out of this fundamental concern. For example, if one deeply cares about one's young family, one may start caring about going to Disneyland. However, unless, as the result of whatever psychological causes, going to Disneyland itself becomes a deep fundamental concern (witness Clark Griswold in the movie *Vacation*), then one will naturally abandon that endeavor if one discovers that there are better ways to live in accordance with one's deep concerns about one's family (e.g., by going to Disney World instead, which happens to be a lot closer).

In applying the final condition of a "project" to the notion of a "deep concern", we get the condition that a "deep concern" will be a fundamental concern which tends to provide structural stability in one's life. There are two ways that it can do this. The first is that having deep concerns provides one with the impetus to engage in various non-random patterns of behavior which serve to (or, at least, which one thinks are likely to serve to) promote, protect, maintain, acquire, achieve and/or appreciate what one cares deeply about (e.g., to live in accordance with one's deep concerns about one's family, one might find it necessary to get a nine-to-five job). Secondly, caring deeply about something provides one with a motivation to avoid a whole slew of potential actions

which one would have otherwise been open to, but which one thinks will keep one from promoting, protecting, maintaining, acquiring achieving and/or appreciating the objects of one's deep concerns (e.g., caring deeply about one's family will likely give rise to the motivation to avoid partying all night, or spending six months backpacking alone through India). In coming to care deeply about things, we voluntarily submit ourselves to a life with fewer degrees of freedom[19].

Our deeply caring about things does more, however, than merely give a life structure and stability; our doing so also expands our sense of identity[20]. As Frankfurt wrote,

> "A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He *identifies* himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced. Thus he concerns himself with what concerns it, giving particular attention to such things and directing his behavior accordingly." (Frankfurt 1982, p. 260.)

Frankfurt's view echoes a position maintained by William James:

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[19] See Schwartz 2003 for a discussion on the purported psychological benefits of not having too much freedom.

[20] One may wonder what the causal relationship is between caring about and identifying with something. It is conceivable that caring about something leads one to come to identify with it. It is also conceivable that the inverse is the case, i.e., that coming to have a sense of identity with something causes one to care about it. But the difficulty in trying to give an account of how we could develop a strong sense of identity with something without our also deeply caring about it seems to me to be more or less equal to the difficulty in trying to give an account of how we could come to deeply care about something without our also developing a strong sense of identity with it. This seems to suggest that the relationship between caring about something and identifying with it is not one of efficient causality; rather, the relationship might be said to be one of reciprocal material causation: to say that one cares about something is to say that one identifies with it, and to say that one identifies with something is to say that one cares about it.

> "In perhaps the first discussion of the self by a psychologist, William James observed that people's identities include not only things that are unambiguously part of them – such as their personal body and mental states, but also outer aspects of their lives such as their family, friends, ancestors, possessions, jobs, accomplishments, reputations, and bank accounts[…] Strictly speaking, none of these things is really you, yet you act as if they really are because you have incorporated them into your sense of self. External things, including other people, can be as much a part of your identity as your own body, thoughts, and feelings." (Leary 2004, p. 111.)

It is not simply by having a cerebral understanding of our possessions, jobs, accomplishments, hobbies, family, friends, the lives of our ancestors, etc. that we come to feel personally insulted when we hear someone insult them, for example, or that we react with a sense of personal pride when we see someone awed by them; rather, the degree to which we have these emotional reactions on behalf of other people or things seems to be a function of how much we take them to matter.

It is generally the case, furthermore, that we attempt to *define* ourselves in terms of the things that we care deeply about[21,22]. One might describe oneself as being "first and foremost a mother" or "a man of God", for example; if one finds these things important enough, one might even go so far as to frame all the events of one's life as being experiences which led to, or which were instances of, one's being a mother or one's connecting with God. But even if we do not organize our lives around a single

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[21] This is in line with Alan Gewirth's view that "To recognize certain of one's desires as 'deep' entails a corresponding recognition of who 'at bottom' one is or wants to be." (Gewirth p. 25.)

[22] While it seems that one's developing a sense of identify with something seems to entail that one cares about that thing, it is not the case that one's defining oneself in terms of something entails that one cares about that thing. One may say, for example, "I am a cashier at McDonald's" without suggesting that one cares about the job or the company.

deep concern, we do still use the things we care about as a partial means of defining ourselves (e.g. “I am a Yankees fan”). We define ourselves in terms of the things about us that do not change (or, at the very least, the things which we believe are not apt to change) over a relatively long period of time, and our lasting concerns belong in this category. One doesn’t come to define who one is, for example, in terms of what drink one happened to have felt like ordering with dinner, unless one came to make that drink “one’s drink” (e.g. “shaken, not stirred”). If one does partially define oneself in terms of what drink one orders, it can be presumed that one’s caring about this particular drink is something which promises to be of relatively long duration.

Conversely, not having a clear idea in one’s own mind about who one is (or being confused about who one is or “needing to find oneself”) often seems to be a matter of one’s not having very many or very strong concerns, or a matter of not being able to formulate in one’s mind what those concerns are. How these two possibilities affect meaningfulness will be discussed in the next two sections.

§1.3: On Not Caring

The notion “I don’t care” is often used to express the idea that one neither particularly likes nor dislikes something (e.g. a specific proposed course of action); when used in this way, the expression “I don’t care” is not meant to express the idea that one does not care *tout court*, and the utterance this expression does not entail a void of meaning in the life of the person who utters it.

However, not caring *simpliciter* does seem to undermine the possibility of living a meaningful life, and this threat is not a mere theoretical possibility. Depression, for example, might sometimes manifest itself as being the pain of finding oneself unable to deeply care about anything (which is not to say that it might not also sometimes manifest itself as the pain of finding oneself alienated from what one does care about[23]); it's not a coincidence that a chief lament of those who are depressed is that they find their lives to be meaningless.

But it doesn't seem to be the pain *per se* accompanying depression that necessarily undermines meaningfulness; many lives that one might normally think of as being extraordinarily meaningful are also full of suffering and lacking in overall happiness (e.g. Moses, Joan of Arc and Mother Theresa). And conversely, I would argue, meaning will also be absent in lives that are quite comfortable if those lives are completely infused with apathy[24]. A man who is able to live off the earnings of a trust fund and who, by default, does nothing with his time and attention besides zoning out in

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[23] "'Worker alienation' is the absence of meaning in what we do for a living. In its psychological aspect, it is a pained or numbed lack of identification with work, a sense that our work does not express who we are and what we value." (Martin, p. 176)

[24] A few things should be said here about whether complete apathy is possible in a comfortable life: the first is that it's probably not the case that anyone this side of a coma can be *completely* apathetic; the pain of hunger, at least, naturally pushes us to care about eating, for example. It should be noted, though, that this fact does not threaten the view that apathy stifles meaningfulness. The second thing which should be said is that I suspect that those who are comfortable are not so much *apathetic* as they are *complacent*, which is to say that they are satisfied with how their lives are going; and the presence of satisfaction does seem to entail some amount of caring, however minimal that caring may be. Finally, if experienced, complete lasting apathy would most likely lead to the discomfort of boredom, if not the pain of depression, neither of which can be said to be "comfortable".

front of television reruns and eating bland delivery food, for example, would not seem to be leading a particularly meaningful life, even though it be quite comfortable. Meaningfulness, it seems, is not *fundamentally* undermined by the presence or absence of a psychological state which follows as a result of caring[25]; it is fundamentally undermined, though, I would argue, by an absence of caring *simpliciter*. It is a contradiction to say of someone that he or she led an extraordinarily apathetic and meaningful life.

It might be possible to consciously choose to stop caring as a means of avoiding the potential suffering and humiliation that threatens one if one should fail to live in accordance with one's concerns (the term "avoidance disorder" need not refer only to a person's avoiding relationships as a means of avoiding rejection; it might also be used to refer to a person's general avoidance of pursuing all significant goals and connections as a means of avoiding the pain of failure). A more surreptitious (and, perhaps, a more common) threat to meaningfulness arises from the possibility of simply drifting into a merely habitual way of life in which one doesn't care very much. It is possible for our attention to become absorbed by things we don't care about, and for our concerns to wither away, after a while, from lack of nurturing. Midlife crises, for example, might sometimes arise as the result of one's having drifted into such a way of life (one can imagine a case in which a person takes a dull and tedious job with long hours in order to

[25] To further support this point, any such psychological state could be reproduced in an experience machine, but living the entirety of one's life in such an experience machine would not seem to be a way of living a *meaningful* life (indeed, one of the chief reasons why one would resist forever plugging oneself in to such a machine is precisely that such a life would lack meaning).

pay off her enormous student loans, and after many years of this, her movements in life become determined solely by habit) and then, after waking up from the trance of one's habitual life and realizing that one doesn't really care about anything, panicking as one tries to find things to care deeply about and to live in accordance with these things. The difficulty of knowing what things to care about, and the difficulty of subsequently making oneself care about these things will both be discussed in the following chapters.

§1.4: On the Difficulties of Knowing Our Deep Concerns

If not really caring about anything can prevent one's life from being meaningful, so too can ignorance of one's deep concerns keep one from doing or being what one needs to do or be in order to live meaningfully. If it is true that living meaningfully is a matter of living in accordance with what one cares deeply about, then in order to come to live in better accordance with what one cares deeply about, it would obviously seem to be an important practical matter to know, first of all, what the things are that one cares deeply about. It might be possible to *accidentally* live in accordance with one's deep concerns without knowing what they are, but this seems unlikely, and ignorance a handicap.

One may intuitively think that one's own deep concerns are self-evident, perhaps in a similar way that the hunger in one's own stomach is obvious. This is often not the case, however. As Harry Frankfurt stated,

> "The inner lives of human beings are obscure, not only to others but to themselves as well. People are elusive. We tend to be rather poorly informed about our own

> attitudes and desires, and about where our commitments truly lie. It is useful to keep in mind, then, that a person may care about something a great deal without realizing that he cares about it. It is also possible that someone really does not care in the slightest about certain things, even though he sincerely believes that he considers those things to be extremely important to him." (2004, p. 21.)

To experience the difficulty of trying to state what one's deep concerns are, one only has to try to make an accurate, specific, complete list of the things that one does care deeply about (and not, it should be stressed, merely a list of the things that one thinks one *ought to* care deeply about). In attempting to do so, one will most likely face a fair amount of hesitation and uncertainty in trying to decide what exactly to put on the list. In the end, because of the rather tedious nature of this exercise, there is a good chance that one will let oneself get distracted and find something else to do before completing the task. This flight to distraction easily occurs in our day-to-day lives, and as a result, we can be left unable to precisely name what things do matter the most to us.

Part of the difficulty of precisely placing one's finger on the objects of one's deep concerns stems from the fact that our concerns tend to be tightly interwoven with each other. To restate an example, one's love of baseball and one's love of one's father are often not discrete loves. One's love of baseball may in fact mostly be one's love of one's father, or vice versa; or the two loves may be roughly equal and diffused together. How could this be? Our mental lives, as William James argued, are largely determined by our "noticings"[26]. What we come to care about is determined by what we notice, and we may

[26] "As James observed years ago, with perhaps a touch of exaggeration: '*My experience is what I agree to attend to*. Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind.'" Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, p. 85 in Haidt 2003.

notice (i.e. focus our attention on) various aspects of one thing *in light of* the aspects of another. In watching a baseball game, for example, one may notice the sight and the sound of a ball landing in a glove, and make sense of that event (e.g., by imagining the slight nervous uncertainty experienced during the process of tracking the ball as it approaches, and then imagining what it felts like to have one's glove securely snap around the ball as it is caught) in terms of one's happy experiences of playing catch with one's dad. The warmth of the memories of playing catch with one's father colors the experience of watching the ballgame, and the game comes to matter to one partly in virtue of the fact that one's father matters to one. Or, to give the inverse example, in noticing one's father's hands, one may vividly recall his teaching one how to throw a curveball, and then remember the thrill of using that curveball to strike out a particularly renowned batter in little league. The pride of the memory of having done so colors one's current experience of one's father, and one's father comes to matter to one partly in virtue of the fact that the remembered experience of that game matters to one.

The fact that our concerns are interwoven with each other like this sets up two epistemological hurdles to understanding what it is precisely that we care about. The first is that one may come to mistakenly believe that one cares deeply about a particular object, when in fact one only really cares about some other proximately cared-for object or objects (e.g., it is possible that one may be of the mistaken belief that one cares deeply about one's spouse, when in fact what one is experiencing is only a deep proximate concern about one's children; the truth of who one really cares deeply about may only become evident after the children move out and one is left alone with one's spouse.) The

second epistemological hurdle created by the fact that our concerns tend to be tightly interwoven with each other is that a deep concern for one object might be concealed by the deep concern one has for one or more proximately cared-for objects. (E.g., one may care about one's spouse without fully realizing that this particular concern is tightly interwoven with one's concern about the social status which is afforded by the beauty or wealth of that spouse. And yet one may not realize that one's social status mattered so much to oneself because one also loves so many other aspects of one's spouse. This blindness might continue until one witnesses the loss of the beauty or the wealth of one's spouse, at which point one's concern about status will be made apparent by one's pain of having lost that status.)

How might one overcome these two epistemological hurdles? On the face of it, introspection might hold some promise as means of knowing what our deep concerns are. But is it really an epistemically reliable process? Nietzsche, for one, did not seem to believe so:

> "Present experience has, I am afraid, always found us "absent-minded": we cannot give our hearts to it – not even our ears! Rather, as one divinely preoccupied and immersed in himself into whose ear the bell has just boomed with all its strength the twelve beats of noon suddenly starts up and asks himself: "what really was that just struck?" so we sometimes rub our ears *afterward* and ask, utterly surprised and disconcerted, "what really was that which have just experienced?" and moreover: "who *are* we really?" and, afterward as aforesaid, count the twelve trembling bell-strokes of our experience, our life, our *being* – and alas! miscount them.–So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we have to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law "Each is furthest from himself" applies to all eternity – we are not "men of knowledge" with respect to ourselves." (Nietzsche 15.)

More recently, Timothy Wilson has amassed and presented a substantial number of studies[27] which serve to provide doubt that people are able to use introspection as a means of knowing about their own "inner workings". As he summarizes:

> "Sometimes people have mistaken beliefs about the nature of their feelings, particularly when their feelings conflict with cultural feeling rules ("people love their ponies," "my wedding day will be the happiest time of my life"), personal standards ("I am not prejudiced at all towards African Americans"), or conscious theories ("I must love him because he conforms to my idea of Mr. Right")." (Wilson 172.)

I do not think, though, that this entails introspection to be of *no* use to us as a means of coming to know what we care about deeply. I would accept that introspection does not provide an infallible path to knowledge of our deep concerns, but it does seem possible to often arrive at accurate beliefs via inductive triangulation. As a first step, we can pay attention to our desires and motivations and ask ourselves why such desires and motivations have arisen in us, following as such the chain until the spade turns against our fundamental concerns (and even though, as we have seen, having knowledge of one's

[27] To give an example of one such study: "A study of people's attitudes towards works of art tested Goethe's hunch [i.e. "He who deliberates lengthily will not always choose the best"]. Some people analyzed exactly why they liked or disliked five art posters and some did not. Then, all participants chose one of the posters to take home. Two weeks later, we called people up and asked them how happy they were with the poster they had chosen. Benjamin Franklin might predict that the people who analyzed their reasons would make their best choices, by carefully laying out the pros and cons of each option. We found the opposite: the people who did not list reasons, and presumably based their choices on their unanalyzed gut feelings, were happier with their posters than were the people who had listed reasons." (Wilson 171). It should be said though, that it would be difficult, and probably impossible, to conduct a study showing that subjects' introspection provided false information about what they cared deeply about, as there does not seem to be an empirically-verifiable of way for psychologists to independently determine what it is that individuals do care deeply about, which would allow the psychologists to compare these results with the results given by the subjects' reports of their own introspection.

fundamental concerns does not entail having knowledge of one's deep concerns, having knowledge of our fundamental concerns can be useful in that such concerns are good initial candidates for being deep concerns). As a second step, we can also pay attention to our physical responses as we interact with the world to give clues about what we care about (e.g., if learning that fifty two Iraqi civilians were killed yesterday in a suicide bombing provokes no somatic response[28] in an individual, this would seem to serve as evidence that that individual does not really care about those civilians or their families.) We can also pay attention to our actions and to the actions of others and make inferences from this about what we and other people care about (e.g. Jones is always buying flowers for his wife. He must care about her.) While none of these methods are foolproof, it seems that they often point us in the right epistemic direction, and provide us with reasonable assumptions about what the objects of our deep concerns are.

§1.5: The Notion of "Living in Better Accordance with"

I asserted earlier that if one cares deeply about X, one will have a strong motivation to promote, protect, maintain, acquire, achieve, and/or appreciate X (depending on what X is). Living in accordance with one's deep concerns about X, then, would thus seem to involve acting or behaving in ways that lead to, or that fully or partially constitute, the promotion, protection, maintenance, acquisition, achievement and/or appreciation of X (e.g., getting into one's car to go to work in the morning is an example of acting in accordance with one's deep concern to maintain one's house in that

[28] See Damasio 1994 for an account of how one's corporal sensations play a role in one's practical reasoning.

it is an action which *leads to* one's being able to pay for repairs. Repairing the roof oneself is an example of acting in accordance with one's desire to maintain one's house in that repairing the roof *partially constitutes* maintaining the house; i.e. maintaining the house partially consists in repairing the roof.)

But "living in accordance with", like "living meaningfully", is not an all-or-nothing concept; one can live in accordance with something (e.g., an ideal, a promise, one's duties) to varying degrees. In other words, one can live in *better* or *worse* accordance with what one cares deeply about. To live in better (or worse) accordance with one's deep concerns about X, then, is to act or behave in ways that more (or less) successfully lead to, or that more (or less) fully or partially constitute, the promotion, protection, maintenance, acquisition, achievement and/or appreciation of X, relative to some other way of acting or behaving in accordance with one's concerns about X. For example, if one cares deeply about avoiding climate change, one will live in better accordance with that concern by biking, rather than by driving a monster truck, to work.

It is impossible to say *a priori* what specific actions will need to be taken in order to live in better accordance with what one cares deeply about (i.e., "better", relative to how well one is currently living in accordance with what one cares deeply about, or relative to another possible way of living in accordance with what one cares deeply about). The reason for this is that what "living in better accordance with what one cares deeply about" specifically consists in will vary, depending both on 1) the nature of the thing that one cares deeply about, and 2) the circumstances in which one finds oneself. As an example of the first variable, if one's deep concern is to climb Mt. Everest, part of

living in better accordance with that concern might involve working to get into shape (e.g., by avoiding beer and pizza and by frequently hitting the gym), whereas if one's deep concern is to become certified by Guinness as being the world's most corpulent person, then living in better accordance with that concern would involve working to get out of shape (e.g., by avoiding the gym and by frequently hitting the local pizzeria/pub). As an example of the second variable, if one cares deeply about coming to own a Lamborghini, living in better accordance with this concern may involve scrimping and saving one's money for decades if one happens to work at IKEA, or it may involve nothing more than writing out a check if one happens to *own* IKEA. A side effect of this second variable is that contrary actions can arise as the result of deeply caring about something under differing circumstances: if one cares deeply about making money in the stock market, for example, one may invest in a particular stock if it is oversold, but one may also short-sell that stock if it becomes overbought. These two types of actions are, in a sense, opposites of each other, but, given the right circumstances, they are both ways of acting in accordance with what one cares deeply about (i.e. making money in the stock market).

The assertion that one's life is meaningful does not entail, therefore, the assertion that one performs a specific action or set of actions. However, one may ask, can it still be the case that specific *ways* of performing actions are essentially referred to by the notion of "living in accordance with", such that if one does a better job of performing one's actions *in these specific ways*, then one will necessarily come to live more meaningfully?

I have in mind two different possibilities of how there might be different ways of performing the same action.

The first possibility is that performing an action (e.g., climbing a mountain) can require more or less striving and sacrifice. It might be possible, then, that in judging how well a person has lived in accordance with what she cares deeply about, one may take into consideration not just whether and to what degree she has succeeded in accomplishing her objective goals (e.g., arriving at the mountaintop); one may also focus on how much striving and sacrifice was required of her to accomplish these objective goals (e.g., she broke an arm and nearly froze to death on the way to the top).

To test our intuitions, imagine four possible worlds in which Jonas Salk cares deeply about finding a vaccine for polio; all four possible worlds are initially identical except that in $World_1$ Jonas Salk does not act or behave at all in accordance with this concern[29]; in $World_2$ he works tirelessly and yet without success for the rest of his life in his attempt to find it; in $World_3$, he finds the vaccine on his first day on the job by accidentally tripping and serendipitously mixing several bio-chemicals together; and in $World_4$ he works tirelessly in the lab for many years until one day his work finally pays off and he discovers the cure.

[29] There is reason to doubt the very possibility of this world: it is hard to imagine how one could deeply care about something and not act *at all* on the concern. Even though someone who cares deeply about finding a vaccine for polio might not choose to become a medical researcher, this concern might influence who that person votes for, what magazines one picks up at the doctor's office, and, at the very least, how one directs one's attention (and if it doesn't play a role in how one directs one's patterns of attention, it seems unlikely that one really does care deeply about it).

Intuitively, it seems fairly obvious that, *ceteris paribus*, Jonas $Salk_1$ lived the least meaningful life of the four Salks[30]. It also seems, intuitively, that Jonas $Salk_4$ lived the most meaningful life of the four. This would seem to show that living meaningfully is not necessarily a matter of accomplishing one's goals as quickly and as effortlessly possible[31]. This is because our time and effort often come to mean something to us when we sacrifice them for something we care deeply about, and if it seems right to say that Jonas $Salk_2$ lived a more meaningful life than Jonas $Salk_3$ (and I'm not sure it is right to say that), then it seems fair to say that time spent actively pursuing what one cares deeply about can add more meaning to one's life than does the *accomplishment* of one's goals.

I do not think that the above example establishes, however, that striving and sacrifice are *necessary* conditions for one's living in accordance with one's deep concerns; in other words, the concepts of striving and sacrifice are not *essential* to the concept of meaning. We find some moments of our lives to be meaningful, even if there is no struggle or sacrifice involved; some moments of love, for example, are meaningful precisely in virtue of their effortlessness:

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[30] One may also compare Jonas $Salk_1$ with Jonas $Salk_0$, the two of which are exactly the same except that Jonas $Salk_0$ doesn't even care about finding a cure for polio. It seems to me that the amount of meaning in the lives of these two Salks is roughly equal. That is to say that having a concern but not acting on it adds roughly the same amount of meaning to a life (i.e. none) as neither having nor acting on that concern. Nevertheless, $Salk_1$'s life might be made more meaningful than $Salk_0$'s life in virtue of the fact that $Salk_1$ cares about *caring about things*; in such circumstances, caring itself becomes a meaning-bearing activity.

[31] This fact helps to explain why one might feel a certain *disappointment* when one's accomplishments come too easily. As Joske illustrates, "A neurotic who requested psychotherapy and was promptly and successfully treated with pills might well feel chagrin. He wanted to be cured, but he also wanted the adventure and discovery and struggle that are part and parcel of the sort of cure he had anticipated." Joske p. 286 in Kloske 2000.

> At my most beautiful
> I count your eyelashes, secretly
> With every one, whisper I love you
> I let you sleep
> I know you're closed eye watching me,
> Listening
> I thought I saw a smile
>
> (REM, "At My Most Beautiful".)

Rather than being concepts which are themselves essentially built in to the concept of "living in accordance with", striving and sacrifice are often things that make us care more deeply about our goals (e.g., $Salk_4$ surely would have come to care more deeply about finding the cure to Polio than did $Salk_1$ or $Salk_3$). And, as I will argue in chapter 4, coming to care more deeply about the objects of one's concerns is one possible way by which to live a more meaningful life.

In addition, rather than being concepts which are essentially built into the concept of "living in accordance with", striving and sacrifice are themselves sometimes things that we care deeply about for their own sake (just as behaving effortlessly is also something that we sometimes care deeply about for its own sake). Most people do want to experience some amount of struggle and sacrifice in their lives. As Richard Nixon said in his interview with David Frost, "What makes life mean something is purpose…a goal, the battle, the struggle, even if you don't win it." Battles and struggles are things that people care about for their own sake, just as, in addition, people care about achieving the various goals in the name of which they struggle. In other words, struggles are often (but not always) both fundamental and non-fundamental concerns simultaneously; and

coming to live a more meaningful life sometimes, but not always, partially consists struggling and sacrificing simply because that is what people happen to care deeply about.

Struggling and sacrificing was the first possibility of how there can be more than one way of performing the same action or set of actions. There is also a second possibility: it is possible to have different subjective experiences of the same objective action or set of actions being performed. Might it be the case, then, that one *always* lives in better accordance with one's deep concerns if one has a certain type of subjective experience while performing the relevant objective action or set of actions, as compared with not having that subjective experience while performing that objective action or set of actions? I have in mind the concept of "flow", which was developed by Mihalyi Csikszentmihhalyi and which has played a large role in the development of the "positive psychology" movement:

> "In Csikszentmihalyi's studies, people carry with them a pager that beeps several times a day. At each beep, the subject pulls out a small notebook and records what she is doing at that moment, and how much she is enjoying it. Through this "beeping" of thousands of people tens of thousands of times, Csikszentmihalyi found that what people really enjoy doing, not just what they *remember* having enjoyed.[…]
>
> Csikszentmihalyi's big discovery is that there is a state many people value even more than chocolate after sex. It is the state of total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to one's abilities. It is what people sometimes call "being in the zone." Csikszentmihalyi called it "flow" because it often feels like effortless movement: Flow happens, and you go with it." (Haidt 2006, p. 95.)
>
> "When one is completely absorbed in interaction with the world, experience unfolds organically and it is possible to enter a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi,

> 1975/2000). The flow state has the following characteristics: intense and focused concentration on the here and now; a loss of self-consciousness as action and awareness merge; a sense that one will be able to handle the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever will happen next; a sense that time has passed more quickly or slowly than normal; and an experience of the activity as rewarding in and of itself, regardless of outcome.
>
> Parameters of experience that foster the flow state have been identified: clarity about one's immediate goals, throughout the interaction; continuous and unambiguous feedback about the progress that one is making as the activity unfolds; and finally, perceived opportunities for action that stretch one's existing capacities. In flow, people thus feel that their capacities are being fully used (de Charms, 1968; Deci, 1975; White, 1959). Entering flow depends on establishing a balance between perceived capacities and perceived challenges; remaining in flow depends on maintaining this balance (Berlyne, 1960; Hunt, 1965). If one begins to feel that the challenges of the situation exceed one's skills, the focus of attention in the here and now gets disrupted; one becomes worried, then anxious. If one begins to feel that one's skills exceed the opportunities for action offered by the situation, attention drifts; one first relaxes and then grows bored. The shift toward an aversive experiential state constitutes information about one's relationship to the environment, offering a cue to adjust one's level of skill or challenge." (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, pp. 88-89 in Haidt 2003.)

Is experiencing flow necessarily a better way of living in accordance with a deep concern than not experiencing it? In other words, in line with my view, is the concept of "flow" built in to the concept of "meaning", such that the amount of meaning in a person's life necessarily increases as the amount of flow experienced by that person increases? Or is the experience of flow just another thing that one can care deeply about achieving, but which is not essentially built in to the concept of "living in better accordance with" (or, consequently, as I am arguing, into the concept of meaning)?

To help answer these questions, consider four additional cases of Jonas Salk[4] (each of whom works tirelessly in the lab for many years until one day his work finally

pays off and he discovers the cure). $Salk_{4A}$ doesn't care about experiencing flow in his work, and doesn't experience it; while his work is experienced as a sequence of deliberate, enjoyment-free tasks, he doesn't really dwell on this fact, as the only thing that matters to him is finding a vaccine. $Salk_{4B}$ doesn't care about experiencing flow in his work, but he does happen to frequently experience it nonetheless; he "loses himself" in the various tasks at hand and thoroughly enjoys the challenging process of doing so. $Salk_{4C}$ does care about experiencing flow in his work, but doesn't experience it. $Salk_{4D}$ also cares about experiencing flow in his work, and he also frequently experiences it.

Does $Salk_{4B}$ live a more meaningful life than $Salk_{4A}$? Similarly, does $Salk_{4D}$ live a more meaningful life than $Salk_{4C}$? I believe the answers to these two questions are "no" and "yes", respectively. The fact that $Salk_{4B}$ does not live in better accordance with his deep concerns than does $Salk_{4a}$, even though $Salk_{4B}$ experiences flow and $Salk_{4A}$ doesn't, shows that experiencing "flow" does not necessarily lead to one's living in better accordance with one's deep concerns. Rather, experiencing flow just happens to be something that most people care deeply about, and it is in virtue of this contingent fact that experiencing flow allows most people to live in better accordance with one of the things they care deeply about[32]. It is for this reason that $Salk_{4D}$ lives in better accordance with his deep concerns, and hence lives more meaningfully, than does $Salk_{4C}$.

[32] In looking ahead to chapter 4, it may very well turn out to be a contingent fact that it is befitting of *everyone* to care about experiencing flow, in which case it will be a contingent fact that everyone will live in better accordance with what they care deeply about if they were to experience flow with greater frequency. If that were the case, then, on my view, people will also come to live more meaningful lives by experiencing flow more frequently. However, such a contingent fact (i.e. that it is befitting of everyone to care about experiencing flow) would still not be sufficient to make it the case that flow is essentially built in to the concepts of "living in

§1.6: The Practical Difficulties of Living in Accordance with One's Deep Concerns

In addition to the epistemic problem of knowing what one's deep concerns are, there are, broadly speaking, two types of practical challenges which can sometimes (if not always) make it difficult (if not impossible) to live in accordance with what one cares deeply about. As such, on my account, coming to live a more meaningful life is partially a matter of overcoming these two broad types of difficulties, which I shall refer to as "internal difficulties" and "external difficulties".

Internal difficulties are the obstacles perpetuated by one's own psychological processes, or the lack the lack thereof. Some types of internal difficulties include a lack of cognitive ability (e.g. an insufficient attention span or memory); a lack of foresight (e.g., failing to plan ahead or failing to think about the consequences of one's actions); various mental incongruencies[33]; self-defeating automatic reactions (e.g., "A husband who aspires to have a happy family life may browbeat his wife or children", Gewirth p. 20) and patterns of attention (e.g., a person with depression may keep focusing attention on her failures and shortcomings); ignorance of how to achieve what one wants (e.g., not

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accordance with" or "meaningfulness" themselves. Contingent uniformity does not entail analytic truth.

[33] One can have conflicting desires for short-term gratification (e.g., wanting to see two different 7:00 movies); conflicting desires for long-term/delayed gratification (e.g., wanting to become a priest and also wanting to get married and raise a family); conflicting desires for immediate and delayed gratification (e.g., wanting to go out drinking now, and also wanting to be refreshed and alert for a job interview tomorrow); as well as conflicts between one's desires and one's beliefs (e.g., wanting to be in a relationship with someone, but believing oneself to be unworthy of that person).

knowing how to run one's business); laziness (e.g., zoning out in front of the television instead of pursuing one's goals); and losing sight of what one cares deeply about (e.g., "Especially in our efficiency-oriented society, [people] may become so obsessed with various means that they lose sight of the ends to which they aspire. A married couple, for example, may devote so much of their energies to money matters that the mutual love they aspire to preserve is diminished or destroyed." (Gewirth p. 41.))

There are many approaches that one may use to overcome internal difficulties, the most obvious of which involve various psychiatric regimens and forms of psychological therapy. Other potentially effective means by which one may deliberately attempt to overcome internal difficulties include education, exercise and meditation (Haidt 2006, pp. 35-37). Often times, however, one overcomes internal difficulties non-deliberately, as a side effect of engaging in various activities and relationships. (After having absorbed oneself in some form of literature, for example, on may find that what one notices, what patterns of attention one has, and what words and metaphors one uses to describe the world and one's relation to it[34] have changed. Or, as a different example, one may find oneself less crippled by fears after one has spent a considerable amount of time in the presence of someone who is courageous.) Finally, internal difficulties are, occasionally, unpredictably overcome without apparent cause via religious or non-religious epiphanies (See Miller 2001 for a large collection of illustrative anecdotes).

[34] As an illustration of this, see Iris Murdoch's famous case of "M" and "D" in her article "The idea of Perfection". (Murdoch 1997, pp. 299-336)

External difficulties are those hindrances which are not perpetuated by one's own mind. Some examples might include health problems (e.g., having cancer might prevent one from achieving one's lifelong dream of climbing Mt. Everest), competition for limited supplies in zero-sum games (e.g., the Yankees had a long history of denying the members of the Dodgers a World Series ring), laws and bureaucratic procedures (e.g., if one's dream is to be a doctor, one has to first get certified by the state), as well as the internal difficulties of others (e.g., if one's spouse develops Alzheimer's disease, one may have to abandon many of one's pursuits in order to take care of him or her).

As noted above, our drives to overcome internal difficulties have given rise to professions such as psychiatry, psychological counseling, education and religious/spiritual advising. Our drives to overcome external difficulties have given rise to professions such as engineering, construction and manufacturing, farming, medicine, politics, law, law enforcement and national defense. It would seem at first glance that there are significantly more people working in professions which are supported by people's desires to overcome external difficulties than there are people working in professions which are supported by people's desires to overcome internal difficulties, and this would seem to suggest that external difficulties pose a greater threat to most people than do internal difficulties. However, the preponderance of external difficulties is perhaps somewhat less than it might seem at first glance, for two reasons. The first is that many people do not reach out to others for help with their internal difficulties with the same frequency as they reach out to others for help with their external difficulties (e.g., someone who has a social anxiety disorder and a clogged septic tank will probably

find it easier to call a plumber than to call a cognitive therapist). This may be in part because it is often easier to recognize external difficulties than it is to recognize one's own internal difficulties, and so people with internal difficulties may not recognize that they would benefit from reaching out to others for help. The second reason is that some means of overcoming external difficulties also provide means of overcoming internal difficulties (e.g., one might buy a new car not just as a means of transporting oneself, but also as a crutch by which one can increase one's sense of self-confidence while dating. Or, one might buy a new outfit not only as a means of self-protection against the elements, but also as a means of lifting oneself out of an episode of debilitating sadness.)

Negative feedback loops can occur as the result of the interplay between internal and external difficulties. (One might, for example, suffer from depression and drink to ease the pain; then lose one's driver's license as the result of a DUI, and then drink to ease the pain; then get arrested for public intoxication, miss work and get fired, and drink to ease the pain; then end up homeless, and drink to ease the pain.) Conversely, positive feedback loops can occur: overcoming or avoiding internal difficulties can lead to overcoming or avoiding external difficulties (e.g., overcoming depression can help one find a better job), and vice versa (e.g., finding a better job can help one overcome depression).

§1.7: Potential Objections to My Account

The thesis I have put forth is that coming to live a more meaningful life partially involves coming to live in better accordance with what one cares deeply about. As a way

of testing this claim, I will consider two potential counter-examples which pose a threat to the claims I have made.

The first potential counter-example which I will consider was offered by Geoffrey Scarre (2001). The question he addresses is whether the amount of meaning in one's life can be retroactively influenced by events that occur after one's death. If this is possible, then it would seem that something beyond the two conditions that I put forth plays a role in determining how meaningful a life is. He makes his case by contrasting the two similar fictional lives of Bruce and Bryce:

> "A) Bruce has devoted ten exhausting and health-destroying years to writing a novel that will rank with the best in the English language. Racing against time to finish the book, he pens the last sentence in the final hour of his life. Bruce's best friend agrees to the author's dying request to convey the single copy of the manuscript safely to the publisher. Unfortunately, there is an accident on the way to Bloomsbury (taxicab, collision, fire) and the manuscript goes up in smoke.
>
> B) Bryce, who is equally avid of literary fame, has also spent a decade composing a masterpiece and killed himself with overwork. He too with his dying breath asks a friend to look after his newly completed manuscript. The fates are kinder to Bryce than to Bruce; his novel arrives safely at the publisher's and a few months later appears to great critical acclaim." (p. 211).

Scarre argues that Bryce ended up living a more meaningful life than Bruce did. In a similar way that one can be harmed by a friend's slander without one's ever having been made aware of or adversely affected by that slander, Scarre claims, a person's life can be made more or less meaningful by posthumous events. The amount of meaning in one's life is determined in part, on his view, by whether one's aims and projects come to fruition, and for many, the outcomes of some of these aims and projects will not occur

until after they have died: "If, e.g., I am anxious to promote my children's welfare, my concern will be bounded by the span – or more precisely, the potential span – of their lives." (p. 214.) Therefore, the amount of meaning in many people's lives will not be fully known until after they die and will depend on whether or not their aims and projects come to pass as they had wanted them to.

If Scarre is correct here, then this might be seen as being problematic for my account, because Bruce and Bryce both *lived* in equal accordance with what they cared deeply about (i.e. the only relevant difference in the stories about them occurred after they had stopped living), and so my account would seem to hold that they lived equally meaningful lives. This is because after Bruce and Bryce handed off their manuscripts to their friend, they stopped caring deeply about whether their books would be widely read and celebrated. In fact, they stopped caring about everything once they died[35], just as they stopped being able to live in accordance with their deep concerns. Put simply, they lost their ability to live (more or less) meaningful lives when they lost their ability to live *tout court*.

One might be tempted to argue here, though, that what happened after their deaths ended up making their lives more meaningful *while they were living* (e.g., since Bryce cared deeply about writing a critically-acclaimed masterpiece, and he ended up doing so, the part of his life during which he was writing the book could be said, in retrospect, to be

[35] Of course, one might bring up the possibility of life after death, and more specifically the possibility that each of the two writers continued to care about being a critically-acclaimed author after they died. If that is the case, however, their deaths would be irrelevant; it would be as if they had continued to live (a possibility I discuss shortly).

quite meaningful). In order for their lives to be made more or less meaningful by events that transpired after their deaths, however, it seems that some form of retroactive causation would need to obtain. That is to say that some event that happened in the future would have to cause some life (or segment thereof) in the past to become imbued with meaning. This seems to me to be an unlikely occurrence.

One way to avoid having to appeal to the notion of retroactive causation is to appeal to the possibility of determinism. If everything that happens (even in the future) is an unavoidable consequence of previous events, then it might be said that Bryce's life was already made more meaningful at the time of his writing the book (i.e., because it could have truly been said at the time that he was writing the book that was to become critically acclaimed, and he cared deeply about writing a book that was to become critically acclaimed), though it wouldn't be *known* by anyone how meaningful his life was at that time until later. Such possibility is perhaps compelling, but it is not problematic for my account, for if everything is played out in advance, it could be said that Bruce and Bryce were not living in equal accordance with their deep concern about writing a book that was to become critically acclaimed (i.e., only Bryce could be truthfully described as doing so.)

One question worth raising with respect to Scarre's examples is what the relevance is of the two authors' deaths. If each of the two authors had continued to live after Bruce's manuscript got destroyed on the way to the publisher, whereas Bryce's work became critically acclaimed, the question remains of whether Bryce's life prior to the accident ended up being more meaningful than Bruce's life prior to the accident.

Again, unless one speaks from a deterministic framework by claiming that Bryce was living a more meaningful life than Bruce in virtue of the fact that, even before the accident, the former was living in better accordance with his deep concerns than the latter, it would have to be argued that the two led equally meaningful lives before Bruce's manuscript was lost. It was only after the accident that Bruce's life would be called less meaningful, assuming that both authors cared equally deeply about *being* a critically-acclaimed author (as opposed to caring only about the process of writing with an eye toward future success).

The second class of potential counter-examples to my account of meaning involves individuals who care deeply about doing things which are morally abhorrent, and who are successful in their pursuit of those things. Take, for example, Genghis Khan, who is said to have claimed that "the greatest happiness is to scatter your enemy, to drive him before you, to see his cities reduced to ashes, to see those who love him shrouded in tears, and to gather into your bosom his wives and daughters."[36] Should we say of him that he lived a meaningful life in virtue of his long and unbridled success in living in accordance with what he cared deeply about? A critic of my account might claim that it is mistaken on the grounds that living in a morally monstrous fashion precludes one's life from being meaningful, and my account does not take that fact into consideration.

There are two things to be said in response to such a claim. The first is that my account maintains that living meaningfully is not *just* a matter of living in accordance

[36] http://theliterarylink.com/quotes.html

with what one cares deeply about. It is also a matter of caring deeply about those things which are befitting of one to care deeply about. I will discuss what I mean by this in much greater detail in chapter four, but for now let it be said that there is perhaps reason to doubt that Genghis Khan's deep concerns were befitting of him. If this is the case, then on my account, his success in living in accordance with his immoral deep concerns might in fact have made his life less, not more, meaningful on the whole.

The second thing to say in response to the critic's claim is that even if it turns out that it was befitting of Genghis Khan to deeply care about bringing about all the pain, death and destruction that he did, then it would in fact be correct to say that Genghis Khan came to live meaningfully in spreading carnage. There is no reason to maintain that the notion of meaning necessarily communicates moral concerns.

It is important to note that we give weight to considerations about meaning when we make (or, at least, try to make) global assessments of lives, i.e., when we (try to) determine the extent to which particular lives were, on the whole, successful or well-lived; however, there is more to these global assessments than the evaluation of how meaningful the particular lives in question were. There are, in addition (and perhaps among others), evaluations of how morally the person acted as well as evaluations about the quality and quantity of pleasures that that person experienced. These various evaluated ways of living are often interlinked (e.g., living meaningfully often involves living pleasurably, as most people care deeply about experiencing pleasure; living meaningfully often involves living morally, as many people care deeply about living morally; and living morally often gives rise to a pleasurable existence), but they need not

always be. That is to say that it is possible to live a meaningful but immoral life[37] (and *vice versa*[38]), just as it is possible to live a pleasurable but immoral life[39] (and *vice versa*[40]), as well as a meaningful but unpleasant life[41] (and *vice versa*[42]). This is not to say that we weigh each of these evaluations equally when arriving at a global assessment of an individual's life; and, in addition, one or more types of positive evaluations might be *sine qua non* conditions of such a positive global assessment, regardless of the extent to which other positive evaluations may apply. If so, then it might very well be the case that we assess profoundly immoral lives to be, on the whole, failures (or, at least, not well-lived), regardless of how meaningful they were.

[37] E.g., it might be said of Gauguin that his life became more meaningful as the result of his clearly immoral decision to abandon his family so that he could go paint in Tahiti.
[38] One may consider here Susan Wolf's "moral saint".
[39] E.g., Nero.
[40] E.g., Jesus of Nazareth.
[41] E.g., Mother Teresa.
[42] E.g., Paris Hilton.

Chapter Two: On Similar yet Competing Views

The last chapter focused on the first manner in which one could come to live more meaningfully, i.e., by living in better accordance with the deep concerns that one has. The present chapter will address several accounts that have already been put forth in the philosophical literature which are in agreement with this idea, but which are nonetheless problematic for various reasons. Discussing the shortcomings of these alternate accounts will open the way to discussing what I will put forward as being the second manner in which one cold come to live meaningfully.

§2.1: Frankfurt's View of Meaning

One may wonder, in light of the discussion of the previous chapter, whether anything more is needed at all for an adequate account of meaning. One might hold that the only way of coming to live a more meaningful life is to simply come to live in better accordance with what one *happens* to care deeply about. This seemed to be Frankfurt's view, for example, when he asserted that "A life is meaningful, indeed, only to the extent that it is devoted to pursuing goals that are important to him." (1988a, p. 90). Indeed, Frankfurt goes even further in asserting the importance of what we care about. For him, pursuing what we care about not only answers the question of how to live meaningfully; it answers the question of how to live *tout court*: "Coping with our troubled and restless uncertainty about how to live[…] requires us simply to understand what it is that we ourselves really care about, and to be decisively and robustly confident in caring about it." (2004, p. 28.)

Frankfurt's account of meaning might be said to be subjectivist insofar as he seems to take people's concerns to be sacrosanct, at least insofar as meaning is concerned; he does not consider the possibility that some concerns are more conducive to meaning than others. His account is not subjectivist, however, in the sense of making meaning purely a mental state; his view is not, for example, that living meaningfully amounts to simply *believing* that one's life is meaningful, nor is his view that living meaningfully simply amounts to experiencing some type of pleasure[43]. The notions of work and engagement play a more central role in his descriptions of meaning than do the positive psychological effects of work and engagement. This is not to say, on his view, that meaningful lives can't be pleasurable, or even that pleasure can't arise as a result of living meaningfully. All it means is that his account of meaning is not fundamentally a hedonistic one. According to his view, for example, being plugged into a euphoria machine for the entirety of one's existence would not be a meaningful way to live – unless, of course, for whatever reason, one happened to care deeply or passionately about being plugged into a euphoria machine for the entirety of one's existence, in which case, this form of life would indeed be a meaningful one for that person.

[43] When people ask me about the topic of my dissertation, before I explain to them my views, I normally start by asking them what *they* think is meant by the notion of meaning. The most common response (especially among non-philosophers) is to equate meaning with happiness. People are easily dissuaded of this view, however, when they are presented with examples of people who seemed to have lived unhappy yet meaningful lives (e.g. Mother Theresa) or of imaginary cases of people who would seem to have lived euphoric yet rather meaningless lives (e.g. by being plugged into a euphoria machine their whole lives.)

Frankfurt's view does have certain advantages over conceivable[44] accounts which equate meaning with the performance of specific actions or types of actions, such as fighting courageously in a just war, getting (and remaining happily) married, raising well-adapted children, excelling in a high-status profession, and/or living a morally blameless or supererogatory-filled life. On Frankfurt's view (and on mine), it seems that simply performing certain actions or types of actions is not sufficient to bring meaning into one's life; it also seems necessary that it be *important to the agent* that he or she perform those actions. Consider a woman who is married off against her will and who is forced to have and raise children; or a closet atheist in the eighteenth century who, for economic reasons, is forced by her family to live in a monastery; or a military weapons researcher who excels in a job which he in no way enjoys or believes in: the lives of these individuals do not seem to be made more meaningful simply in virtue of the fact that they got married and had kids, performed many supererogatory acts, and excelled at a high-status job, respectively.

Another advantage that Frankfurt's account has over conceivable accounts which equate meaning with specific actions or types of actions is that it seems quite possible that person A's performing a specific action X or type of action Y would make A's life more meaningful, whereas person B's performing X or Y would make B's life less meaningful. A's life might be imbued with more meaning by spending a weekend at a specific new-age spiritual retreat, whereas B's life might not; similarly, B's life might be

[44] No such account that I know of has been put forth in the philosophical literature, but this view does seem to be implicitly held by many social conservatives, for example. I will address the tenability of such accounts in greater detail in chapter 5.

made more meaningful by B's raising a family, whereas A's life might be made less meaningful by A's doing so. Both Frankfurt and I would argue that the difference is accounted for by the fact that A and B simply care about different things.

Even though Frankfurt's account does seem to be superior to an account which equates meaning with specific actions or types of actions, his account does ultimately seem to be insufficient, for there seems to be more to living meaningfully (or coming to live more meaningfully) than simply living in (better) accordance with the plans, passions, or concerns one happens to have. To illustrate this point, imagine the case of an adolescent with some form of OCD, and whose mind is completely consumed by a desire to change the position of a light switch: whenever he sees it in the "off" position, he finds himself overcome with a physically uncomfortable and unrelenting urge to change the switch to the "on" position; and as soon as he sees it in the "on" position, he feels the same urge to switch it to the "off" position (*usque ad mortem*)[45]. Most people would say that his life would not be made replete with meaning by his successfully living in accordance with his constantly-renewing desire to flip the switch, even if his desire were relatively intense; it seems intuitively correct to say that such a person's life would be

[45] If it doesn't seem right to say that such a case, as it was described, would serve as an example of the type of attitude which is requisite for meaningful activity on Frankfurt's view, then one only have to modify the language describing the hypothetical case: Tim cares about flipping the switch; as the result of a brain injury, say,he has become passionate about doing so, and, accordingly, he plans his life around this concern. If the example of Tim seems absurdly unlikely, one only has to leaf through *Guinness Book of World Records* to be reminded of how people have, with apparent passion, organized their lives around ridiculous plans (e.g., organizing one's life around one's act of growing one's fingernails out as long as possible, even at the expense of causing debilitating nerve damage to one's arm.)

made more meaningful if he were to come to care deeply about *other* things besides switch flipping.

One might defend Frankfurt's account against this charge of insufficiency by saying that a critic is simply expressing his prejudices when he concludes that meaning is lacking in particular lives which are nonetheless being lived in accordance with what matters most to the subjects of those lives; in these circumstances, the critic is simply focusing his attention on (and reacting to) the fact that *his* life would lack meaning if he were to live in accordance with the concerns held by the subjects in question. The defender of Frankfurt's account might say, for example, that we judge the chronic light-switch flipper's life to lack meaning because we simply don't care about flipping light switches; and in flipping a light switch on and off all day long, we wouldn't be living in accordance with what we cared about. Hence, *we* wouldn't find that such a way of living would give *our* lives meaning. But, the defender of Frankfurt would say, that doesn't show that flipping the light switch all day doesn't make the *chronic light flipper's* life more meaningful *for him*.

The problem with this defense is that people come to judge that their *own* lives have been made more meaningful by their having changed what they care about. More than a few parents, for example, have talked about the transformational power of having children: it seems relatively common for an individual to stop seeing oneself as the center of the universe (i.e., to not ultimately care about anyone else but oneself) soon after one becomes a parent, and instead to start to see oneself as a satellite (or, perhaps, as a member of a mutually-orbiting set of bodies.) And in addition, it seems common for

parents to claim that their lives have become more meaningful as the result of this transformation[46].

In addition to an individual's judging that, as a result of changes in what one cares deeply about, one's *former* life was less meaningful than it currently is, it also seems possible for one to judge that 1) as a result of changes in what one cares deeply about, one's *current* life is less meaningful that it used to be, or 2) that it is less meaningful than it would be if one had other deep concerns.

As an example of the first type of circumstance, one can imagine a person who cared deeply about developing a certain type of technology (and who found great meaning in that quest) but who then one day discovered that someone else had already developed, patented and started to produce that piece of technology (or one superior to it)[47]. Such a person may judge that even though her former way of life carried a lot of meaning with it, she now finds it impossible to continue caring about (or pursuing) the advancement of that technology, and that, consequently, (assuming all other things are equal, and that nothing else fills the void left by the absence of her previous deep concern), her life is less meaningful than it previously was.

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[46] According to the National Marriage Project's 2006 "State of Our Unions" report, married parents report feeling less happiness, but a greater sense of meaning and purpose, than do married non-parents. (http://www.newsweek.com/id/143792/page/1)

[47] One may think of an engineer who worked towards developing the HD-DVD format right up to the point where Blu-ray won the format wars. Once the HD-DVD format was abandoned and the engineer laid off, it (presumably) became impossible for the engineer to continue caring about the development (now-defunct) of the HD_DVD format, or to continue to find meaning in the quest to advance it.

As an example of the second type of circumstance, one can imagine a person who became severely addicted to heroin, and who finds himself thinking (or caring) about little else beyond finding immediate relief via his next hit[48]. He might be able to occasionally take a step backwards and recognize that his life would be more meaningful if he were able to care about other things, and yet nonetheless be *unable* to care about those other things (or to live in accordance with such concerns)[49]. In addition, his judgment that his life would be more meaningful if he cared about other things is not necessarily just an epistemically-unreliable psychological side effect of the drugs he is taking. This judgment seems to be verifiable: if it turns out that he eventually breaks his heroin addiction (he is forced into rehab for a long period of time, for example) and comes to care deeply about other things and to live in accordance with these deep concerns, he would still likely conclude that his initial judgment was indeed correct, i.e., that his life is in fact more meaningful when he cares deeply about (and lives in accordance with) other things beyond getting his next hit.

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[48] It might be the case that the heroin addict doesn't *care deeply* (or perhaps even care *tout court*) about anything, including drugs: it might only be the desire for the next hit is essentially no different than a strong superficial desire to scratch a constant psoriatic itch. Be that as it may, there are certainly many other instances in which individuals know (or at least have a sense) that their lives would likely be more meaningful if they cared about other things: a good example might be people who spend all their time playing video games. Despite the fact that they genuinely care about playing and beating the games, they might still know (at least on some level) that their lives would likely be more meaningful if they stopping caring so much about video games and started caring deeply about other things, and living accordingly, instead.

[49] Furthermore, even though he might be able to recognize that his life would be more meaningful if he were able to care about other things, he might not even be in a position to *care* about changing what he cares about: he might not be in a position to care about coming to live more meaningfully. He might only deeply care about finding immediate relief via his next hit.

The preceding examples serve to show that the account of meaning given by Frankfurt is insufficient. An account which adequately explains what, broadly speaking, is involved in coming to live a more meaningful life cannot be given simply by appealing to the idea of successfully living in better accordance with whatever happens to be one's plans, passions or concerns: we can sometimes intuitively tell that successfully living in accordance with one set of concerns will give rise to a more meaningful way of life than will successfully living in accordance with another set of concerns.

§2.2: Wolf's Account of Meaning

If, as I have just argued, there is more to coming to live more meaningfully than coming to live in better accordance with one's deep concerns or strongest passions, then what further condition or conditions need to be met? According to Susan Wolf, there is a second condition to meaning: in addition to living in accordance with what one cares about, the object of concern must be *objectively valuable*. On her view, coming to live a more meaningful life is a matter of coming to live in better accordance with deep concerns that have as their target objectively valuable things:

> "[M]eaningful lives are lives of active engagement in projects of worth[…] That a meaningful life must involve 'projects of worth' will, I expect, be more controversial, for the phrase hints of a commitment to some sort of objective value. This is not accidental, for I believe that the idea of meaningfulness, and the concern that our lives possess it, are conceptually linked to such a commitment. Indeed, it is this linkage that I want to defend, for I have neither a philosophical theory of what objective value is nor a substantive theory about what has this sort of value. What is clear to me is that there can be no sense to the idea of meaningfulness without a distinction between more or less worthwhile ways to spend one's time, where the test of worth is at least partly independent of a subject's ungrounded preferences or enjoyment." (Wolf 1997a, p. 209)

Wolf's more complex account does promise to solve the problems of the switch-flipper and the drug addict which were left unresolved by the view offered by Frankfurt: Wolf's account can maintain that even though these individuals were living in accordance with what they cared about, the things they cared about weren't "projects of worth" and so living in accordance with them did not provide their lives with meaning. Along the same lines, the fact that these individuals could *know* that their lives weren't as meaningful as they could have been can be explained in terms of the fact that these individuals were aware that what they cared about (and actively pursued) weren't projects of worth, and that they could have been pursuing projects of worth instead.

However, while, on first inspection, Wolf's account does have the aforementioned advantages over Frankfurt's account, it also suffers from two major problems which stem from the fact that her account only posits the *existence* of a linkage between meaning and some kind of objective value, and that, as she says, "I have neither a philosophical theory of what objective value is nor a substantive theory about what has this sort of value". Unfortunately, the tenability of her account of meaning seems to depend heavily on the tenability of two such theories. The fact that she proffered neither might raise suspicions about whether it is even *possible* to successfully put forward either of the two theories, and, in any case, it seems fair to say, her account of meaning is ultimately left unsupported until two such theories are put forth.

Why is that? Let us consider first the problem of the two major problems posed to her account by the absence of a theory explaining what objective value is (i.e. the objective value which makes it the case that some endeavors belong on the list of

"objectively worthwhile endeavors"). To say "meaningfulness is a matter of actively engaging in projects of worth", without specifying what it means to say that something is a project of worth, is more or less tantamount to saying "meaningfulness is a matter of actively engaging in X". And this, of course, is not saying much.

Wolf might try to argue here that we can have an adequate *intuitive* grasp of the meaning of the notion of "objectively valuable projects of worth" and that this grasp provides a sufficient understanding of the term; consequently, for the purposes of giving an account of meaning, no *explicit* account of the notion of "objectively valuable projects of worth" need be given.

While it may be the case that we have an intuitive sense of what it means to say that a project or endeavor is "objectively valuable" or "objectively worthwhile", a problem remains in that the object of this intuitive sense is ontologically suspicious. Why should we assume that projects or endeavors can have the property of being "objectively valuable" or "objectively worthwhile" (as opposed to merely having the property of *being valued* or *being considered worthwhile*), other than because doing so would neatly resolve some of the problems which are left open by competing accounts of meaning? After putting aside this *ad hoc* justification, there does not appear to be any particularly obvious reason to accept that the actual universe (or perhaps even, for that matter, any possible universe) contains such "objective" properties[50], and that Wolf's

[50] One of the problems facing the notion of "objective value" (which, according to Wolf, serves as a foundation for meaning) very closely parallels a problem facing accounts of moral realism, i.e., there seems to be no obvious, non-*ad hoc* reason to believe that the universe has objective features which make moral propositions true or false. Given the amount of ink that has already

account provides "neither a philosophical theory of what objective value is nor a substantive theory about what has this sort of value" is, in part, a consequence of this fact.

The first major problem facing Wolf's account of meaning, as has just been discussed, is that she does not explain what it means to say that a project is "worthwhile" or "objectively valuable". The second problem, which will now be discussed, is that even if we do accept that the notion of objective values is coherent, that there is such a thing as objectively worthwhile projects, and that Wolf's account of the linguistic meaning of "meaningfulness" is accurate, we are still left with the question of how to make use of her theory. According to her view, it seems that in order for us to actively direct our lives so that they are to become more meaningful, we must first come to know what sort of projects are on the list of objectively worthwhile endeavors. But how is one to know which things are on the objective list? Does the list consist of broad descriptions of actions (e.g., "leave the world a happier place than you found it") or does it consist of more specific descriptions of actions (e.g., "travel when you are young, before setting down and raising a family.")? Does the list consist entirely of moral actions, or do some immoral actions make the cut (and if so, which ones)? Is there one objective list that applies to everybody, or is there an objective list for each individual person (or, perhaps, a different objective list for each person at each stage of that person's life; e.g., the types of activities that can make for a meaningful childhood might not, objectively speaking, be

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been spilled in debate over this issue, however, I will not pursue it in great length here; for the purposes of the present discussion, it is enough to simply note that Occam seems to pose a legitimate threat to any account of meaning which relies on the existence of objective values.

the types of activities that can make life meaningful for someone who is middle-aged)? Take, as an example, the way of life of the person described in this anecdote:

> "I was on a road trip with my brother driving through New Mexico on our way back to Louisiana. We were in the middle of the desert, no town, no trees, no *nothing*. In the middle of nowhere, we find this sprawling ramshackle house with a big sign that says 'Rock Shop'.
>
> We go inside and the entire house is a giant collection of rocks, stones, gems, carved rocks, etc. A total geologist's or rock collector's dream. The owner lives in the house. His story was that he was a geologist and found a mine nearby that's one of the only places in the world that has a certain kind of stone (I don't remember what kind, something beautiful, but not precious).
>
> So, he uprooted and moved to be near it, built this house and opened the shop to support himself. He would mine the stones himself and then spend his free time carving these incredible sculptures in the stone.
>
> I've never met someone who seemed to have so fully captured their dream and completed themselves before. His sense of contentment made for an incredibly magnetic charisma."[51]

How could Wolf's account be used to determine whether, and to what extent, such a way of life is meaningful (for the man in question, or for anyone else, assuming they were capable of "actively engaging" in such a way of life)? How can one tell if living a near-hermetic life sculpting and selling rocks in the middle of the desert is objectively worthwhile? In the end, it seems that although Wolf's account does avoid some of the problematic cases that plague Frankfurt's account, it ends up being inferior to his account insofar as it provides far less practical guidance than his does: if every meaningful activity must be on the "objective list", and we have no reliable means of

[51]http://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/75ugq/who_is_the_one_person_who_you_only_met_once_that/c05re9n

determining which activities are on that objective list, then it seems that we are left with no practical guidance on how to go about living a more meaningful life (other than that we should be "actively engaged" in our projects).

Wolf might respond here by saying that we should simply rely on our intuitions to tell us which types of activities are objectively worthwhile and which ones are not; in other words, we can trust our intuitions to tell us which projects will make our lives more meaningful by our pursuing them.

A counter-response to this would be to ask how one is to know whether one's intuitions are accurate; its seems that we would be unjustified in asserting the veracity of our intuitions if there were no way whatsoever to independently verify that our intuitions are in line with reality. But even if we accept that our intuitions are reliable, it seems that we are sometimes left with intuitions which undermine Wolf's account of meaning. More precisely, it sometimes seems more intuitively obvious to say of a particular project that it is meaningful than that it is objectively valuable. It may seem more intuitively plausible to say that the geologist's life is meaningful, for example, than it is to say that the projects which he pursues are *objectively* worthwhile. This case is problematic for Wolf, for our intuitions about which projects are "objectively worthwhile" ought to be *at least* as clear as our intuitions about which projects are meaningful, given that objective worthwhileness is more fundamental than meaning on her account (i.e., meaning is partially defined in terms of objectively worthwhile projects). In other words, in the absence of an independent method of determining which lives are meaningful, we cannot know that a particular life is meaningful if we don't also know that its pursuits are

objectively worthwhile. Given that some ways of living seem intuitively meaningful, even though they don't intuitively seem to have much objective value, it follows either that our intuitions can't be trusted, or that Wolf's account of the relationship between meaning and projects of objective worth is mistaken[52].

§2.3: Gewirth's Account of Meaning

In his book *Self-Fulfillment*, Alan Gewirth puts forward an account of meaning which is somewhat similar, yet much more argumentively complex, than the bi-conditional account put forward by Wolf. Underlying Gewirth's account of meaning are what he refers to as the two modes of self-fulfillment, i.e., "aspiration-fulfillment" and "capacity fulfillment":

[52] A further objection to Wolf's account might be given by pointing to intuitions which she herself expressed earlier in her career: Though she never actually used the notion "meaningful" in her article "Moral Saints", one way of formulating the central claim of that article might be that a life which is spent in non-stop active pursuit of moral projects will not be as meaningful of a life, on the whole, as a more well-rounded life which is spent in active pursuit of both moral and non-moral projects, even if the aggregate amount of objective value actively pursued by the moral saint is greater than the aggregate amount of objective value actively pursued by the person who isn't a moral saint. In other words, if we are to assume that moral ends are objectively valuable ends, it seems to be Wolf's view in this paper that the amount of meaning in a life is not simply additive in the same way that objective value is additive; her view here seems to be that the amount of meaningful in a life is also determined by what *types* of objectively valuable ends that person pursues. Such a view conflicts with her later works on meaning, in which the amount of meaning in a life is not determined by what types of objective value imbue the ends actively pursued by that person.

While I myself do not believe that well-roundedness is an *essential* requirement of living meaningfully, I do believe that, as a matter of contingent fact, it tends not to be particularly befitting (the concept of which will be discussed in chapter 4) to have only one type of befitting concern (e.g., to have only moral concerns). As such, on my view, it is probably the case that, for most people, coming to live a more meaningful life will not simply be a matter of coming to live in better accordance with a single type of concern (i.e., moral or otherwise).

"[W]e can distinguish more specifically between aspiration fulfillment and capacity-fulfillment by reference to the different basic questions each is designed to answer. The question for aspiration-fulfillment is: What will satisfy my deepest desires? The question for capacity-fulfillment is: How can I make the best of myself? To fulfill oneself by reference to one's aspirations involves that the self is viewed as a center of desiderative force which strives to achieve intended outcomes. To fulfill oneself is to achieve these outcomes and thereby to bring oneself, as thus centered in one's aspirations, to fruition, although, as we shall see, the objects of the aspirations may be things other than oneself. To fulfill oneself by reference to one's capacities involves that the self is viewed as a more or less ordered set of powers, abilities, or potentialities. To fulfill oneself is to bring the best of those powers to as full development as possible, so it involves a normative selection among a person's capacities. The selection aims to single out excellences, virtues, or perfections, and self-fulfillment for the double reason that it is a good, indeed a (or the) highest good, for the person in question, and that it is this person's own capacities that are developed or exercised in attaining and possessing this good[…]

Aspiration-fulfillment is both a process and a product or outcome. It is a process of development whose outcome or culmination is the successful attainment of the objects of one's deepest desires. These objects may vary from person to person, and from one cultural milieu to another, and between different historical epochs. But in all cases they reflect the inherent purposeiveness of human action and the freedom or autonomy that is a generic feature of such action. Because of this purposeiveness, aspiration-fulfillment, at least as envisaged outcome, is regarded as a great good by all the persons who are able to achieve it or who strive for it.

Where such self-fulfillment is relative to persons' aspirations, in capacity-fulfillment the criterion of self-fulfillment is located rather in the objective goods or values that persons can achieve by developing certain of their inherent capacities. These goods or values have an objective status independent of whether they are aspired to or desired by the persons who are capable of achieving them. Thus, for example, persons like Hitler or Stalin might be held to have achieved aspiration-fulfillment at least on the occasions of their greatest triumphs; but they would not have achieved capacity-fulfillment because the objects of their aspirations, far from being genuine goods, were execrable evils.

The two modes of self-fulfillment have had varying relations to the history of thought. We may to some extent tie the distinction to two different traditions of Western philosophy. Aspiration-fulfillment reflects the liberal and individualist tradition of John Stuart mill's insistence that "free scope" be given to "different experiments of living," as well as corresponding emphases in Rousseau and the German Romantics of the nineteenth century. Capacity-fulfillment reflects the perfectionist exaltations of reason found in Plato and Aristotle as well as, variously, in Kant and Hegel and such of the

nineteenth-century continuators as T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley." (Gewirth, pp. 14 - 15.)

Gewirth's description of what is, on his account, the first aspect of self-fulfillment, i.e. "aspiration-fulfillment", is quite analogous to what I advanced as being the first condition for coming to live a more meaningful life; the difference in terminology we use is relatively minor (e.g., Gewirth's "deepest desires" vs. my "what one cares deeply about" and "deep concerns"). However, as will be discussed later, while Gewirth's second mode of self-fulfillment, i.e., "capacity fulfillment", is in some respects similar to what I will posit as being the second method of coming to live a more meaningful life (e.g., both accounts posit, in some sense, that there are both more and less appropriate objects of deep desire or concern), there is also an important difference in that for Gewirth, the second mode is determined in part by a conception of a system of universal rights (i.e., his "Principle of Generic Consistency", which states that one should act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as of yourself). My account, on the other hand, tends more towards particularism in that its formulation does not essentially rely on, and is not explicitly bounded by, any universal moral laws which state how one ought to behave.

Gewirth's account of meaning[53] ends up being quite closely related to his account of self-fulfillment; however, he begins his formulation by making a connection between the notion of "the meaning of life" and the broader notion of "meaning" (which includes

[53] It should be noted that in *Self-Fulfillment*, Gewirth gives an account of "the meaning of life", rather than an account of what "living meaningfully" consists in. However, given the relative similarity of his account to both Wolf's account and my own, the difference in this terminology does seem to make his account relevant to the discussion at hand.

linguistic meaning, ideational meaning, and Gricean natural meaning.) (p. 184.) Gewirth takes "meaning" to be the way that one interprets a sign as "taking account" of something else: e.g., the term "Socrates" has meaning because an interpreter can use that term to "take account" of its object; similarly, it makes sense to say "smoke means fire" because an interpreter can "take account" of fire with smoke, the latter being a sign of the former. Similarly, for Gewirth, a life has "meaning" insofar as an interpreter uses life as a sign to "take account" of something else. For Gewirth, that "something else" which is taken account of is the values and virtues of the agent whose life it is:

> "… the meaning of human life is constituted by the pursuit of [the values and virtues upon which capacity-fulfillment is based]. The meaning of life consists in the values that the agent who lives the life regards as most worth pursuing. It comprises not only the attainment of those values but also the pursuit itself. In briefest compass, it consists in the best kinds of purposive action, where the purposes may consist not only in various objects outside the action but also in the actions themselves when they are performed for their own sakes; and the criteria of "best" are found in the considerations of capacity-fulfillment discussed above.
>
> Three restrictions on this generalization must be noted at once. First,[…] the pursued values must not be a miscellaneous assortment of purposes; they should be organized according to some general plan that is intelligible and indeed compelling to the agent. […] Second, the purposes must be, and be regarded as, attainable by the agent. […] A third restriction on the idea that the meaning of life is to be found in important purposive action is that the purposes must themselves meet certain valuational criteria. To begin with, they must not violate the principle of universalist morality with its focus on human rights. […] In addition, the purposes that constitute the meaning of life must take account of the relative rankings of better and worse that enter into the various components of capacity-fulfillment along some such lines as those that have figured in the above analyses of it." (Gewirth, pp. 186-188.)

The fact that Gewirth's account of meaning implements the idea of objective values helps it to avoid the main problem facing Frankfurt's account, which is that, on his view, the amount of meaning in one's life is not influenced by *what* one cares about, just

as long as one has deep concerns and lives in accordance with them. On Gewirth's account, someone of normal capacity who cares only about flipping a light switch on and off, and who lives accordingly, cannot be said to live a particularly meaningful life, because such a life is not spent pursuing the values and virtues which underlie what would constitute capacity-fulfillment for that person. In other words, by living in such a way, she is simply not making the best of herself[54].

Furthermore, Gewirth's account has the advantage over Wolf's account in that the former offers more substantive content than does the latter: Gewirth's account describes, to some extent, what is objectively valuable: the "generic rights" [55] of freedom and well-being[56]. His account also offers greater guidance than hers does (i.e., it states that in order to live more meaningfully, one should voluntarily pursue the values and virtues which underlie one's own capacities in accordance with the three aforementioned restrictions.)

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[54] One may pause here and wonder about instances of individuals who have very limited capacities. Imagine, for example, someone who suffered a severely traumatic brain injury and who was left in a position such that her capacities were nearly non-existent; would it be right to say of that person that she was living a meaningful life if she lived in accordance with her very limited capacities (e.g., all she wanted to do was flip a light switch on and off, and that doing so would be the best that she could do)? If it is right to say of such a life that it lacks meaning, then this might serve as a counter-example to Gewirth's account (i.e., because it might serve an example of a relatively meaningless life which is spent in pursuit of the values and virtues upon which capacity-fulfillment is based).

[55] As we shall see, Gewirth tries to prove the truth of the principle: "Act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as of yourself." (p 84.)

[56] "Well-being consists in having the various conditions and abilities to act at all or for having general success in achieving one's purposes through one's actions." (p. 80.)

In spite of these advantages, however, Gewirth's account of meaning still faces some problems, the first of which arises from the discussion he uses to try to link his conception of self-fulfillment to the notion of "the meaning of life". In particular, he does not adequately explain what the expression "taking account of" amounts to. What does it mean to say that an interpreter can use the sign *Socrates* to "take account" of Socrates, or that smoke, as a sign, can be used to "take account" of fire, or that an agent can interpret her life as a sign which "takes account" of her best values and virtues? Does Gewirth mean to say that the sign is simply taken by the interpreter to show that its "object" exists (i.e., that an agent interprets her life as being a sign showing that her best values and virtues exist)? If so, it seems like something is lacking; it seems that *living* a meaningful life involves more than just using the artifact of one's life to infer that one has some values and virtues that are better than others. Or does Gewirth mean to say that the sign is taken by the interpreter to reveal both the existence and the *nature* of one's best values and virtues? If so, what does it mean to say that a life has become more meaningful over time? Is it just to say that that life has come to be interpreted as better revealing the existence and nature of one's best values and virtues? Such an explanation seems lacking as well. In the end, the problem with Gewirth's trying to give a unified account of meaning (e.g., semantic meaning, Gricean non-natural meaning, and "the meaning of life") is not that it is obviously false; rather, the problem is that it is not spelled out to the point of being comprehensible, or, therefore, verifiable.

A second problem for Gewirth's account arises in the first of the three restrictions (i.e., "the pursued values must not be a miscellaneous assortment of purposes; they

should be organized according to some general plan that is intelligible and indeed compelling to the agent.") which, according to Gewirth, serve to limit the claim that "the meaning of life… consists in the best kinds of purposive action." Gewirth asserts this restriction without a justifying argument, and one may wonder why all of one's pursued virtues and values must be focused on some general plan if one's life is to have meaning; in fact, one may very well hold that variety of purposes is the spice of a meaningful life:

> "A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects." (Heinlein, p. 248.)

Gewirth might have meant that a meaningful life may contain a miscellaneous assortment of purposes *if and only if* those purposes area organized according to some general, intelligible plan; however, such a way of life would seem to preclude some spontaneity in one's behavior, and it's not intuitively clear how that would make one's life less meaningful.

A third questionable tenet put forth by Gewirth arises in the second of the three restrictions (i.e., "the purposes must be, and be regarded as, attainable by the agent."). This is assertion is not obviously false, but it does deserve further investigation, as the possibility of the futility of one's actions does seem to play an important role in many, if not most, discussions about meaning (and it is for this reason that the myth of Sisyphus

arises so frequently in such discussions[57]). The underlying question, though, is whether, and perhaps why, futility and meaningfulness are incompatible. There are two propositions contained in Gewirth's assertion which need to be addressed: 1) pursuing unattainable purposes does not contribute to a meaningful life; and 2) pursuing attainable purposes will not contribute to a meaningful life if one does not believe that those purposes are attainable.

One may question the acceptability of the first proposition by asking whether it seems intuitively possible for a life to be made more meaningful by pursuing unattainable purposes. One may wonder whether, for example, the lives of the soldiers who decided to fight at the Battle of Thermopylae (or Karbala, or Roncevaux, or the Alamo, or Shiroyama…) ended up being more meaningful than they would have been had they simply assumed the fetal position, even though the end result (i.e. certain death) would

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[57] A noteable example is given by Richard Taylor, who reimagines the myth in such a way that Sisyphus ends up living an eternally meaningful life:

> "Let us suppose that the gods, while condemning Sisyphus to the fate just described, at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him a strange and irrational impulse; namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones. We may if we like, to make this more graphic, suppose they accomplish this by implanting in him some substance that has this effect on his character and drives… [As a result of their doing so,] his one desire in life is to roll stones, and he is absolutely guaranteed its endless fulfillment. Where otherwise he might profoundly have wished surcease, and even welcomed the quiet of death to release him from endless boredom and meaninglessness, his life is now filled with mission and meaning, and he seems to himself to have been given an entry to heaven." (Taylor 2000, pp. 323-324.)

Although he doesn't explicitly flush out the position, Taylor's example here seems to align with the position I will argue for in the following chapters, i.e., that one can come to live more meaningfully by changing what one cares deeply about.

have been the same in either case[58], or whether a medieval mathematician's life was made less meaningful by his life-long pursuit of finding a way to square the circle. It is not obviously false that the lives of such people were made more meaningful by pursuing these purposes than they would have been had they instead done nothing at all (especially in cases, such as those of the soldiers, when doing nothing at all was the only other alternative); and if their lives were made more meaningful by such futile endeavors, then Gewirth was mistaken in positing the second restriction on his idea that meaning consists in the pursuing the best kinds of purposive action.

One may question the acceptability of the second proposition (i.e., "pursuing attainable purposes will not contribute to a meaningful life if one does not believe that those purposes are attainable") by asking whether it seems intuitively possible for a life to be made more meaningful by pursuing purposes which one thinks to be unattainable. It is in fact difficult to come up with examples of a person who pursues purposes which she believes to be unattainable and where her doing so makes her life more meaningful; however, the main reason for this is simply because it is hard to come up with examples where one does truly pursue a purpose which one believes to be unattainable. Indeed, one may wonder whether it is even psychologically possible to pursue purposes one does

[58] It is difficult to test the assertion "Pursuing unattainable purposes precludes meaning" because it is difficult to arrive at an example of a particular pursuit which contains no purposes whatsoever that can be attained. (The Spartans might not have been able to achieve the goal of personal survival, for example, but they still were able to cause enemy casualties and hold off the Persians long enough for the Greek Allies to regroup and eventually defeat them.) To some degree, then, testing this assertion may require one to abstract the pursuit of the unattainable from the entirety of one's pursuits, and then ask if that pursuit in and of itself could provide meaning (e.g., did the Spartan soldiers' pursuit of their own individual survival provide their lives with meaning, even though such a pursuit was futile?)

not believe to be attainable. The main reason that people do not go marlin fishing in mud puddles, for example, is because they do not believe there are any marlins in them to be caught; and while one might put a fishing line into a mud puddle, this is not done with the intent of catching a marlin (such an act might done, say, for the sheer childish fun of messing around in the mud puddle). Similarly, one might take a job performing tasks which one thinks to be futile (e.g., working in a lab doing radio-carbon dating on geological samples when, because of one's religious beliefs, there is no doubt in one's mind that radio-carbon dating is bogus science); however, in such cases, it seems fair to say that the purposes one more fundamentally pursues are not the tasks which one believes to be futile (e.g., the purpose one is more fundamentally pursuing is, in fact, the obtainment of a paycheck.) As a result of this, the proposition "pursuing attainable purposes will not contribute to a meaningful life if one does not believe that those purposes are attainable" might be true, but only trivially so.

The fourth problem facing Gewirth's account arises in the third and final restriction on the proposition that the meaning of life "consists in the best kinds of purposive action" (the third restriction being, it will be recalled, that "the purposes must themselves meet certain valuational criteria.") This forth problem is not limited only to the final restriction, however: the scope of the problem is larger, for it threatens to undermine his entire notion of "capacity fulfillment" which serves as the foundation for his notion of meaning. On Gewirth's view, we have "better" and "best" capacities in

virtue of the fact that there is an objective, universal system of rights-based morality[59], and what makes it true to say that one capacity is "better" than another is that the former capacity better serves this system of morality than does the latter. His argument to establish that there is such a normatively-forceful moral system comes in two parts; the first part aims to show that "I" have rights to freedom and well being, and the second part aims to show that everyone else has these rights as well, and that one should act in accord with them. Beginning with the first part of his argument:

> Reduced to its barest essentials, the argument for the first main thesis is as follows. Since the agent has at least a minimum of self-awareness, when he acts for some purpose there can be attributed to him a statement of the form (1) "I do X for the end or purpose E." This is a statement form that logically must be accepted by every agent for himself, so that it serves to ground the categoricalness of the rights-principle generated by the argument. From (1), as we have seen, the agent locally must accept (2) "E is good." For while the goodness in question need not be moral, and the ascription of goodness need not be definitive, it involves the agent's acceptance that the purpose for which he acts has for him at least some value sufficient to merit his trying to attain it. Now since freedom and well-being are the proximate necessary conditions of the agent's acting to attain any of his purposes and thus any goods, the agent, on the basis of his accepting (2), must also accept (3) "My freedom and well-being are necessary goods." Hence he must also accept (4) "I must have freedom and well-being," where this 'must' is practical-prescriptive in that it signifies the agent's advocacy or endorsement of his having the conditions he needs to have in order to act and to act successfully in general." (p. 81.)

A few clarifications are in order here. It is important to note that (2) is not equivalent to the proposition "E is *objectively* good": it is not asserting that any goal (e.g., murder, etc.) is objectively good simply in virtue of the fact that it is a goal; all that (2) means is that since "I" have adopted E as an end, I must experience E as having *some*

[59] Gewirth does not explicitly claim that the extent to which a capacity promotes this universal system of rights-based morality is the only thing that determines how good that capacity is, relative to other capacities; however, he does not offer any other factors which would make it the case that one capacity would be objectively better than another.

kind of value. Along similar lines, (3) is equivalent to the proposition "'I' necessarily experience my freedom and well-being as having *some* kind of value." Finally, (4) does not (or, at least, it has not been shown to) carry with it any normatively-binding force; rather, it is simply an expression of "my" instrumental desire to have freedom and well-being.

Gewirth next argues that, based on (4), one can deduce that "I" have rights:

> The next step is especially crucial. On the basis of his accepting (4), the agent logically must also accept (5) "I have rights to freedom and well-being." At this step the normative (though not necessarily moral) concept of rights (in the strong sense) is introduced, as an essential element in the thinking of every rational agent. That the agent logically must accept (5) on the basis of accepting (4) can be shown as follows. Suppose he rejects (5). Then, because of the correlativity of claim-rights and strict 'oughts,' he also has to reject (6) "All other persons ought at least to refrain from removing or interfering with my freedom and well-being." By rejecting (6), he has to accept (7) "Other persons may (i.e., It is permissible that other persons) remove or interfere with my freedom and well-being." And by accepting (7), he also has to accept (8) "I may not (i.e., It is permissible that I not) have freedom and well-being." But (8) contradicts (4). Since every agent must accept (4), he must reject (8). And since (8) follows from the denial of (5), every agent must reject that denial, so that he must accept (5) "I have rights to freedom and well-being." (pp. 81-82.)

After having argued that "I" have these rights, Gewirth goes on to argue that these rights belong to all agents as well:

> "On the basis of his having to accept that he has the generic rights, every agent logically must accept that all other actual or prospective agents have these rights equally with his own.
>
> Hence '10) All prospective purposive agents have rights to freedom and well-being.' At this point the rights in question become universalist moral rights, because the agent is now committed to taking favorable account of the interests of all other persons, as prospective purposive agents, as well as of himself." (p. 83.)

> "Since the universalized judgment (10) sets a prescriptive purpose for the action of every agent toward all other prospective purposive agents, who are or may be the recipients of his action, every agent logically must also accept for himself a universalist moral principal which may be formulated as follows: (11) Act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as of yourself." (p. 84.)

This argument is of central importance to Gewirth's account of meaning. On his view, coming to live more meaningfully is not just a matter of coming to live in better accordance with our deep concerns and desires: we have a brighter, more stable beacon to guide us, i.e., a system of universal natural rights. For him, coming to live in accordance with the demands of those rights will require that we develop and use some capacities and not others. (One might very well have the capacity, for example, to viciously insult someone with very thin skin simply for the fun of it; however, because doing so would mostly likely diminish the well-being of that person, and thereby abuse her rights, it would be better for one to neither use nor develop that capacity. It would be not only *wrong* for one to do so: it would also make one's own life less *meaningful*, because doing so would take one away from one's own best self.)

If it turns out, however, that we are left with no apparent reason to accept the existence of the objective, universal system of rights described by Gewirth, then his account will leave us with no apparent reason to accept that there is such a thing as objectively "better" and "best" capacities to fulfill. As a result of this, the only apparent foundation remaining from Gewirth's account upon which to base a conception of meaning would seem to be the fulfillment of our own individual aspirations. Such an account of meaning would be little different from the account of meaning offered by

Frankfurt; it would not have the means to overcome the problems which plague his account.

With so much on the line, then, one must ask if Gewirth's argument for universal natural rights succeeds. I believe it does not. Gewirth claims that (4) contradicts (8), and it is tempting to believe so, as normally it does seem right to say that "I must X" contradicts "I may not (it is permissible that I not) X". However, there is an equivocation in Gewirth's argument between the sense of "I must have" in (4) and the sense of "I may not (it is permissible that I not) have" in (8). In (4), the only thing being put forth is "my" *advocacy* or *endorsement* for my own freedom and well-being. (Recall that (4) is immediately followed by this elucidation by Gewirth: "where this 'must' is practical-prescriptive in that it signifies the agent's advocacy or endorsement of his having the conditions he needs to have in order to act and to act successfully in general."). Premise (8), on the other hand, is asserting something else all together: it is asserting that, *as a matter of objective moral fact*, it would be *permissible* to deny my freedom and well-being. As such, (4) and (8) are not contradictions of each other: one may endorse or advocate something (e.g., a candidate for city treasurer; a paint color for the living room, etc.) all the while accepting that it would in fact be morally permissible for the world to disregard what I endorsed or advocated (e.g., by electing a different candidate for city treasurer; by choosing to paint the living room a different color, etc.)

In order to get the contradiction he needs to establish (5), Gewirth must either establish (4a): that it is, as a matter of objective moral fact, *impermissible* to deny my freedom and well-being (which would contradict the original sense of (8)); or he must

establish (8a): that it is not the case that "I" endorse or advocate my own freedom and well-being (which would contradict the original sense of (4)).

When one tries to derive (4a) from the first three premises of Gewirth's argument, however, one finds that one cannot do it: from the fact that "I" deeply desire E, one can conclude neither that E is objectively good, nor that it would, as a matter of objective moral fact, be *impermissible* to deny whatever it took for "me" to obtain E. Premise (4a) poses an additional challenge in that it seems quite prone to counter-examples: For example, "my" deep desire to steal the Mona Lisa does not make it objectively good for me or anyone else to steal it; similarly, my deep desire to steal it does not make it the case that it is, as a matter of object moral fact, *impermissible* to stand in the way of my doing so. As a result, deriving (8a) would seem to offer a more promising means of establishing (5).

As it turns out, though, one cannot derive (8a) from the denial of (5), i.e., one cannot derive the claim "It is not the case that I endorse or advocate my own freedom and well-being" from the claim "It is not the case that I have rights to freedom and well-being." As a matter of fact, not having rights to freedom and well-being has long been a *cause for* endorsing or advocating one's own freedom and well-being (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement.)[60]

[60] Gewirth might accuse me here of equivocation over the notion of "rights" (i.e., in the above example I suggested that African Americans didn't have many rights before the civil rights movement, whereas his view might be that they *always* had these rights, but they were prevented from exercising them by those in power). In other words, on his view, rights are something that cannot be *created* or *given* to anyone; their existence can only be *acknowledged* or *ignored*. In

Because Gewirth does not establish a contradiction between (4) and (8), he is not justified in claiming that (5) follows from (4). Furthermore, given that his account fails to provide us with a reason for accepting that "I have rights to freedom and well-being", it also fails to provide us with a reason for accepting that others have rights to freedom and well-being as well, for the latter point depends on the former point as its means of justification:

> On the basis of his having to accept that he has the generic rights, every agent logically must accept that all other actual or prospective agents have these rights equally with his own. This generalization is an application of the logical principle of universalizability: if some predicate P belongs to some subject S because S has a certain quality Q (where the 'because is that of sufficient condition), then P logically must belong to all other subjects S1 to Sn that also have Q. Thus, if any agent holds that he has the generic rights because he is a prospective agent, then he also logically must hold that every prospective purposive agent has the generic rights. (p. 83.)

And since Gewirth's principle that everyone ought to follow the maxim "Act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as of yourself" (p. 84) is based on the premise that everyone has these rights, we are also left without a justification for believing that we ought to follow that maxim. As a result of this, Gewirth's account leaves us without a basis for saying that some of our capacities are, *objectively speaking*, better than others, which, ultimately, undermines his goal of providing us with an objective, unshiftable beacon by which to navigate towards meaningfulness. As such, the only guidance his account is able to provide is the same guidance offered by Frankfurt,

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any case, though, it still seems impossible to conclude that "I" do not endorse or advocate for rights just because those rights do not exist (or, in fact, that they ever did or ever will exist). My endorsing or advocating something does not entail that what I endorse or advocate be actualizable.

i.e., that we should pursue what matters most to us.

§2.4: Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that one account (that of Frankfurt) which consists only in the first half of my own account ends up being incomplete; we have also seen that two other accounts (those of Wolf and Gewirth) which could be seen as trying to build on the first half of my account end up being problematic as well. What else remains, then, as a plausible candidate for meaningfulness? In the next two chapters, I will attempt to provide a second way to live more meaningfully. It will be similar to Gewirth's account in that the fulfillment of this condition will (partially) depend upon what capacities each of us has, but it will be different from his (and Wolf's) account in that the condition I will argue for will not rely on the existence of any universal, objective systems of value in order to be fulfilled.

Chapter Three: On Bootstrapping

§3.1: Is It Possible to Actively Choose Our Deep Concerns?

If, as will be argued in the next chapter, coming to live a more meaningful life sometimes involves changing what we care deeply about, an important question to ask is whether we have any control over our deepest concerns. If we do not, then it would seem to be the case that, to a significant extent, we don't have any control to determine how meaningful our lives end up being.

It is certainly the case that chance can and does play a large role in determining our deepest concerns. The following excerpt from a news article, for example, relates the story of a successful professional chef whose chance encounter with a destitute old man changed what he cared deeply about:

> Narayanan Krishnan was a bright, young, award-winning chef with a five-star hotel group, short-listed for an elite job in Switzerland. But a quick family visit home before heading to Europe changed everything.
>
> "I saw a very old man eating his own human waste for food," Krishnan said. "It really hurt me so much. I was literally shocked for a second. After that, I started feeding that man and decided this is what I should do the rest of my lifetime."
>
> Krishnan was visiting a temple in the south Indian city of Madurai in 2002 when he saw the man under a bridge. Haunted by the image, Krishnan quit his job within the week and returned home for good, convinced of his new destiny. "That spark and that inspiration is a driving force still inside me as a flame -- to serve all the mentally ill destitutes and people who cannot take care of themselves," Krishnan said.
>
> Krishnan founded his nonprofit Akshaya Trust in 2003. Now 29, he has served more than 1.2 million meals -- breakfast, lunch and dinner -- to India's homeless and destitute, mostly elderly people abandoned by their families and often abused.

> Krishnan's day begins at 4 a.m. He and his team cover nearly 125 miles in a donated van, routinely working in temperatures topping 100 degrees Fahrenheit. He seeks out the homeless under bridges and in the nooks and crannies between the city's temples. The hot meals he delivers are simple, tasty vegetarian fare he personally prepares, packs and often hand-feeds to nearly 400 clients each day. Krishnan carries a comb, scissors and razor and is trained in eight haircut styles that, along with a fresh shave, provide extra dignity to those he serves.
>
> The group's operations cost about $327 a day, but sponsored donations only cover 22 days a month. Krishnan subsidizes the shortfall with $88 he receives in monthly rent from a home his grandfather gave him. Krishnan sleeps in Akshaya's modest kitchen with his few co-workers. Since investing his entire savings of $2,500 in 2002, he has taken no salary and subsists with the help of his once-unsupportive parents.
>
> "Now I am feeling so comfortable and so happy," he says. "I have a passion, I enjoy my work. I want to live with my people."[61]

Krishnan almost certainly wouldn't have come to care deeply about feeding the destitute if he hadn't encountered the old man; he most likely would have continued to care instead about advancing his professional goals in Switzerland. This goes to illustrate the fact that happenstance plays a significant role in determining what matters most to us, both in the sense of leading us to care deeply about new things, but also in the sense of setting us up to abandon previous deep concerns. Chance encounters and circumstances can simply introduce us to the objects which end up mattering deeply to us; but they also make us more or less apt to develop deep concerns for various objects *when* they are introduced to us. Siddhartha most likely wouldn't have come to care so deeply about learning how the ills suffered by his subjects could be overcome, for example, if he hadn't been completely shielded from those ills until he was twenty-nine years old; seeing the old man eating his own feces most likely wouldn't have triggered such a

[61] http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/04/01/cnnheroes.krishnan.hunger/index.html?iref=24hours

strong concern to help the destitute if Krishnan had always been around people who behaved in this way, rather than spending his time being surrounded by the trappings of a five-star hotel and the clients who frequent them.

Given that chance does seem to play a large role in determining what we care about, one may begin to wonder about the extent to which chance plays in our lives, both in terms of which things matter to us, and also in terms of how deeply we come to care about those things. In the end, one may wonder, do we really have any control *whatsoever* over the objects and the depths of our concerns[62]?

Frankfurt's view seems to be that our (at least conscious, deliberately made) decisions are all determined by what we care about: one's decision to open the car door, to offer an example, is based on one's desire to get to the school play, and this desire itself based on one's love of one's children. But if one's love for one's children is itself

[62] The question of whether we have any control whatsoever over what we care most deeply about flows in to the broader question of whether we really have any ultimate control over *any* of our apparent actions, beliefs, decisions, emotions, etc.: one may worry that every one of our actions (etc.) either arises randomly in us or they were determined by some preceding cause or causes (which themselves either occurred randomly or which were determined by some preceding cause or causes, *et ad infinitum*). It is hard to see how it's accurate to say that *we* have any ultimate control over "our" actions (etc.) insofar as they randomly occur in us (no more than a sufferer of Tourrette's syndrome apparently has any ultimate control over his or her random tics and utterances); similarly, it is hard to see how it's right to say that *we* have any ultimate control over "our" actions (etc.) insofar as they are directly determined by a chain of events that extends beyond us (no more than a remote-controlled robot has any ultimate control over its "own" actions.) The question of whether *we* have any control over what we care deeply about does not escape this general problem about human agency. One might feel that because nobody can be held ultimately causally responsible for what they deeply care about, no one can *really* be said to have any choice in the matter of what they care about. I am sympathetic with this view, but, as discussed below, I will sidestep the problem by stipulating that a "choice" occurs when one considers various options, and one's doing so itself plays a causal role in one's pursuing one of those options.

one's deepest concern, upon what could one base a decision to continue or to stop loving them? As Frankfurt says,

> "In order for a person to have an appropriate basis for deciding upon his final ends, then, there must not only be something that is antecedently important to him; in addition, its importance to him must be outside his immediate voluntary control. In other words, there must be something about which he *cannot help* caring. This does not entail either that his caring about it must be impervious to change or that he cannot change it himself. Rather, it means that his caring about it is not up to him as a matter of free choice: whether he cares about it does not depend upon his simply making up his mind one way or the other. The fact that it is important to him must be due to a feature of his will which he can neither sustain nor alter just by deciding to do so." (1988a, p. 94.)

Contrary to Frankfurt's view that "…what we love and what we fail to love is not up to us" (2004, p. 46.), I wish to argue that it is possible to choose what we care deeply about. I aim to do this by providing successive examples of how one can could choose to start caring about something when one doesn't care deeply about anything at all; how one could choose to care deeply about something new based the deepest concerns that one already has; how one could choose to *stop* caring deeply about something in circumstances when that deep concern conflicts with other deep concerns that one has; and how one could choose to let go of *all* of one's deep concerns.

First, let us consider the question of whether it is possible, in instances where one doesn't care deeply about anything, for one to choose to start caring about something. Is it possible for such a person, simply by the force of one's own will, to convert oneself from being someone who doesn't care deeply about anything to being someone who does?

We all begin as a single cell, not deeply caring about anything, and most of us sooner or later turn into beings who do deeply care about at least one thing. Is this initial transformation one that we actively choose? This seems unlikely; whatever could be said to be the initial object of our deep concerns (be they the avoidance of pain; or our own survival; or attachment to our mothers), it is almost certainly the case that these initial deep concerns were not actively chosen: as infants (or perhaps young children), we did not entertain both the possibilities of caring and of not caring about, for example, avoiding the pain of hunger. We simply did not have at our disposal the cognitive complexity required to make such a decision; rather, we most likely first experienced the pain of hunger, and, as a result, avoiding further pain of hunger automatically became important to us.

But what, however, of the possibility of losing all of one's deep concerns, and then of actively deciding to start caring deeply again about something? One can try to imagine, for example, a person who has fallen into a severe depression, someone who no longer feels any hope, motivation or strong desires of any kind, someone to whom nothing really matters[63]. Would it be possible for such a person to lift herself up by her bootstraps, to *choose* to start caring again about something?

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[63] As an illustration of what such a life might be like, the depression of a man I once knew was so acute that he couldn't summon the energy to leave his bed in order to go to the bathroom. There are perhaps individuals whose levels of depression surpass his; perhaps the most depressed people do not have the energy required to think coherently about anything, in which case it would probably be fair to say that they are neither in a position to care deeply about anything, nor are they in a position to *choose* to start caring. However, one may still wonder whether it is possible (e.g., perhaps in somewhat milder cases of depression) to have coherent thoughts without caring

As previously noted, Frankfurt does not believe that it is possible to choose to start caring deeply about something when one does not already care about anything. In order to investigate the truth of this view, however, it seems necessary to have an understanding of what is meant by the notion of "choice", and despite extensive discussion about "desires", "effective desires", "second-order desires", "second-order volitions" and the "will", Frankfurt does not provide a detailed analysis of what exactly a "choice" is or how it is made. He seems to espouse some form of a neo-humean view, according to which one's strongest first-order desires determine one's attempted actions (though one's higher-order desires can themselves influence one's first-order desires), but he doesn't attempt to explain the mechanism by which a desire arises, becomes stronger than its competitors and ultimately moves one into action. The absence of such an account leaves ample room to doubt Frankfurt's claim that one cannot "choose" to care deeply about something when one doesn't currently care deeply about anything, because one can imagine possible mechanisms by which "choices" could be made even in the absence of deep concerns. Perhaps, for example, it is possible to make a "choice" simply by imagining various possible outcomes, and the imagining of one possible outcome "jives" with one's own physiology in such a way that it sets off a neural domino effect through which one is automatically set in motion towards the realization of that possible outcome. If it is possible to make a choice in such a manner, then why couldn't a severely depressed individual who didn't really care about anything come to care about something in the same manner? For example, why couldn't such a person imagine

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deeply about anything, and to use one's coherent thoughts as a means to actively choose to start caring deeply about something.

owning a puppy, and imagine what it would be like to care about the puppy, and, as a result of those imaginings, end up *wanting* to own and care about a puppy, and then be compelled by her physiology to do so?

If such a case is possible, then this would go to show the falsity of Frankfurt's claim that "In order for a person to have an appropriate basis for deciding upon his final ends, then, there must not only be something that is antecedently important to him; in addition, its importance to him must be outside his immediate voluntary control." It seems possible, that is, for one to have the power to imagine oneself caring about a puppy, without some relatively deep concern being a precondition for that act of imagining; likewise, it seems possible for that act of imagining to bring about one's genuinely deeply caring about the puppy, without some deeper or more fundamental concern being a precondition for that transformation.

We have just addressed the question of whether it is possible, in those instances where one does not already deeply care about anything else, to choose to start deeply caring about something. It would also seem possible for one to expand the number of things one cares about by using one's current deep concerns as a point of departure.

As a means of addressing this issue, imagine being in a situation where the only object of deep concern you have is your sister, who is the only remaining member of your immediate family. She has been living on the other side of the country and has an infant daughter whom she conceived with the help of a sperm bank. Imagine that you have always had a rather strong aversion to children, that you have never even met the

daughter, and that, as bad as it may sound, you do not really care about the daughter. Now imagine that your sister calls with the news that she is dying of cancer; she wants you to take care of her daughter once she is gone, as you are the only family she has left, the only person she trusts with her child. She knows your aversion to children and asks that you accept her daughter only if you can take care of the child, not simply out of love for her, your sister, but rather out of deep concern for her daughter, as your sister doesn't want her daughter to grow up in an environment where *she herself* is not deeply loved for her own sake.

Given such a situation, would it be possible to make oneself care deeply about one's niece (as opposed to simply raising her out of love for one's sister)? It seems unlikely that one could actively bring about such a psychological change by brute strength of will alone, e.g., by simply furrowing one's brow and forcefully saying to oneself "Care about her! Come on, damnit, care about her!" However, caring deeply about one's sister and having knowledge of her circumstances may provide one with the motivation to seriously imagine[64] how things would be if one did not agree to take care of

[64]To *seriously* imagine, as I am using the phrase, requires that the imagining be more than a fleeting consideration; rather it requires that the imagining be relatively enduring and qualitatively rich. It requires that one imagine in accordance with both what is possible and with what is probable. One would not be *seriously* imagining, for example, if, in imagining how things would be if one refused to take care of one's niece, one imagined Bill Gates stepping up to the plate and taking care of her. As such, seriously imagining might very well require that one imagine things with painful verisimilitude: Seriously imagining how things would be if one cared about one's niece would seem to require, in part, imagining one's dispositions and habits deleteriously effecting her; it would also seem to require, in part, imagining her deleteriously effecting oneself. Seriously imagining might very well require also that one imagine *numerous* possibilities: it may require that one vividly imagine more than just the best case scenario, or

one's niece at all; to seriously imagine how things would be if one raised one's niece only out of love for one's sister; and to seriously imagine how things would be if one came to genuinely care deeply about one's niece herself. In doing so, one may quite quickly find oneself starting to *want* to care deeply about one's niece; via such considerations, one may even find oneself reoriented in such a way that one finds oneself *naturally drawn* towards caring about one's niece herself.

I have just argued that it is possible, at least in some instances, to choose to care deeply about certain objects about which one did not previously care deeply. Is it conversely possible to choose to *stop* deeply caring about certain things in those instances in which one *does* currently care about them?

It does seem unlikely that a person could, simply by a singular act of will, immediately convert oneself from being someone who cares deeply about X to being someone who doesn't care at all about X (though such an ability would certainly sometimes be useful, e.g., when it comes to coping with divorce or leaving an abusive partner). Simply telling oneself "don't care deeply about X!" simply isn't sufficient to bring about an immediate and lasting change the underlying patterns of thought, feeling, behavior and action which constitute "caring deeply"[65].

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more than just the worst-case scenario, for example, of how things might be if one were to raise one's niece out of a deep concern for her.

[65] In fact, if William James was right in saying that our mental lives are determined by our noticings, then, in a similar fashion that the command "Don't think of a pink cartoon elephant wearing a tutu" naturally leads us to think of a pink cartoon elephant wearing a tutu, repeatedly

It does seem possible, however, for one to choose to let go of one of several deep concerns in those instances where living in accordance with that deep concern will stand in the way of living in accordance with one's other deep concerns, or perhaps even *all* of one's deep concerns. As an illustration, imagine someone who deeply cares about four things: making sure his family is happy and healthy; performing well in his career as a brain surgeon; serving as a role model as a district Boy Scout master; and feeding his crystal meth addiction. In this case, assuming that severe brain damage has not already occurred, the person might be able to understand that continuing to care about feeding his addiction would seriously hinder his ability to act in accordance with the first three things he cares deeply about… and that losing his job would then prevent him from being able to feed his crystal meth addiction anyway. So, based on these realizations, it would seem to be possible for him to decide that it would be clearly prudent to stop caring about the crystal meth. It would also seem possible that his deeply caring about the first three things could provide *motivation* for him to find a way to stop caring about feeding his crystal meth addiction.

But is there such a way for him to *cause* himself to stop caring about feeding his addiction? As stated above, simply commanding oneself to stop caring deeply about something doesn't seem to be an effective means by which to stop caring deeply about it. Nevertheless, it does seem possible in some instances to cause oneself to stop caring deeply about one of the multiple things one cares deeply about, though the choice is generally not effectuated immediately. While it is true that simply wanting to stop deeply

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telling oneself "Don't care about X" might actually direct our attention towards X and thereby foster a deep concern for it.

caring about some thing X is in itself insufficient to make one *immediately* stop deeply caring about X, it does seems possible that one could, simply by the force of the motivations provided by one's other deep concerns, immediately prevent oneself from *overtly*[66] acting in accordance with X. This change in overt behavior can sometimes lead to the attrition of one's underlying deep concerns: abstaining from taking crystal meth for long enough for one's body to reboot itself can result in one's no longer deeply caring about continuing to feed one's addiction, just as abstaining from seeing or communicating with a former lover for a long enough period can result in one's no longer deeply caring about that person.

Finally, let us first consider the question of whether it is possible, in instances where one deeply cares only one singular thing, for one to choose to stop caring about that thing. Is it possible for such a person, simply by the force of one's own will, to convert oneself from being someone who cares deeply about X to being someone who doesn't care deeply about anything? This may seem like an odd question to ask, at least to many of us in the western world, where not only are many things important to us, but,

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[66] It is much less likely that one could, simply by the force of one's will, *completely* prevent oneself from acting in accordance with what one cares deeply about. A compulsive gambler might refrain from *overtly* acting in accordance with his deep-rooted concerns (e.g., he might refrain from placing any bets), but he might not be able to prevent himself from *covertly* acting in accordance with those concerns (e.g., he might *notice* opportunities for betting, or perhaps even calculate in his mind the odds of winning potential bets that he does notice). Indeed, if one could, simply by the force of one's will, *completely* and *permanently* abstain from acting in accordance with some thing X (i.e., if one were to completely and permanently succeed in behaving both overtly and covertly as if one didn't care about X), then perhaps it would be a stretch to say that one *did* really care about X at all. In any case, however, as was stated above, people generally don't seem capable of making themselves immediately stop caring deeply about something simply by wanting or commanding themselves to stop caring about it.

in addition, *it's important to us* that things be important to us. We often strive to make things matter to us, to find things to care about; many of us are apt to think of people who don't really care about anything as being, in some sense, mentally ill, or perhaps even a cause for a certain amount of fear or distain. So why even raise the question? Why, in other words, would one actively choose to stop caring about the only thing that one did care about?

One can imagine various examples which, *prima facie*, might seem to provide a good reason to give up deeply caring about the last thing one purports to care about; however, on closer inspection, these examples only seem to show that, in fact, one really cares for several things. If one claims that the only thing one deeply cares about is one's spouse, and one finds out that one's spouse is cheating, what motivation would there be for such a person to choose to stop deeply caring about one's spouse? The answer seems to be that any such decision to stop caring about one's spouse would have to be motivated by other deep concerns, such as the concern to be in a relationship where one is loved and respected, the concern for one to live in an environment where one can trust others, and the concern to be happy. Examples such as these seem to show not that we sometimes have reason to stop caring about everything, but rather that we in fact latently care about, and are motivated by, many things.

Perhaps the most likely candidate for an instance in which one might choose to go from deeply caring about one thing to caring about nothing[67] might arise in cases

[67] Aside, that is, from the possibility of suicide (i.e. in deeply caring only about ending one's suffering, one may decide to destroy one's self, and thereby cause oneself to stop caring about

involving practicing members of Hinduism or Buddhism who are striving to achieve a state of nirvana, in which (as I understand it) one in some sense sheds one's own "self", including all of one's desires and, presumably, all of one's deep concerns. Paradoxically, then, caring about achieving nirvana itself prevents one from achieving nirvana; while caring about achieving it may send one on the path towards achieving it, one must eventually let go of this concern (and all others) if one is to end up where one originally wanted to go.

While I cannot claim to have ever reached such a state, there are those who do claim to have done so. If their claims are accurate, this would seem to show that it is possible to choose to stop deeply caring about everything. The fact that it is often alleged to require years to achieve such a state, coupled with the fact that such states are often transitory both suggest that it is not easy (and perhaps, given the history of human evolution, not natural) for someone to *actively*[68] choose to not care about anything. In

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everything.) Suicide doesn't provide one with a means by which to come to live a more meaningful life, however, because it doesn't provide one with a means by which *to live* at all. In retrospect, though, it is conceivable that suicide might provide one with the means by which to *have lived* a more meaningful life if there is such a thing as "negative meaning" (as opposed to simply the absence of meaning, i.e. "meaninglessness"): if the amount of meaning in a particular life could be quantified (though I do not believe it can) as +97 from time t_1 to t_2, and as -32 from time t_2 to t_3, then that person's life would end up being, on the whole, more meaningful if the person committed suicide at t_2 than if the person lived until t_3. Of course, the question of whether or not suicide is justified in any particular case is not simply a matter of whether the life in question has a positive or negative amount of meaning; there are also matters of morality to consider as well. However, it does seem fair to say that the notion of meaning should play a prominent role in discussions of whether suicide or euthanasia are justifiable.

[68] This is not to claim that it is not easy to *passively* fall into a state of not deeply caring; on the face of it, it seems to be all too easy for some people, e.g., those who are severely depressed, to reach such a state.

any case, though, the fact that it can be done further demonstrates the possibility of actively changing what it is that we care deeply about[69].

§3.2: How One Could Actively Change One's Deepest Concerns

In light of what has just been said, by being able to both add and let go of one's deep concerns, it seems possible that one could, given sufficient time, actively choose to change *everything* that one cared deeply about. It is, of course, not necessarily easy to make any such decisions or to abide by them; success, far from guaranteed, might often require a lot of mental and physical effort.

The mental effort required to choose to change one's deep concerns often involves imagination and the persistence through memory of what was imagined and the way in which it was imagined. If one wants to start caring deeply about something, it is useful, and perhaps necessary, to imagine, and to continue imagining that thing in a particular way, and perhaps to imagine oneself, and to continue imagining oneself, in relationship to that particular thing and in a particular way. It may require, for example, that one imagine oneself playing with a tail-wagging puppy, or that one imagine oneself helping one's adopted niece pass through various milestones in her life.

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[69] To give another (and more far-fetched) example, one can imagine someone whose only concern was to know what it was like to have had a lobotomy and to thereby not care about anything. Such a singular concern might lead to his forming and effecting a plan to undergo such an operation (perhaps by designing and building a robot whose sole function is to perform it). While this example is quite silly, it does demonstrate the possibility of actively choosing to stop caring about everything, and that, in Frankfurt's words, "what we love and what we fail to love" can indeed be up to us.

Conversely, actively preventing oneself from caring about something might require that one imagine how things would be if one continued to care about it (e.g., without family, job, leadership position in the Boy Scouts, and unable to pay for one's crystal meth addiction) as well as to continue imagining what it would be like to not care about that thing (e.g., with a family, a job, a leadership position in the Boy Scouts, and with an increased amount of discretionary spending money.) It might also require the ability, in Pascal's words, to *tourner la tête* (P. 88.), i.e., to *not* notice, imagine, or remember things that lead to one's caring about those things that one wishes to not care about (e.g., the good times one had when one first started experimenting with crystal meth), or to notice, imagine, or remember the things that lead one away from caring about those things (e.g., Ovid, in part five of his *Remedia Amatoris*, recommends focusing only on the faults of a lover if one wishes to overcome one's feelings for him or her).

Being able to change one's deep concerns may require not only the ability and endurance to continue focusing on particular objects; it can also require the mental dexterity necessary to change the *way* that one thinks about people, objects, events and circumstances by using different language to describe them in a new, yet still acceptable, way. In her famous example of M and her daughter-in-law D, Iris Murdoch (1998, pp. 312 - 315) illustrates how this process of reframing can lead to one's changing what one cares about. In the story, M initially finds D to be "pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile." However, M "reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters." After a

while, M is able to think of D as "not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on." In this example, it would not be easy at the beginning for M to fundamentally care about D; at best, she might be able to treat D well because she fundamentally cares about her son. M ends up being much more apt to care about D after coming to make sense of D, and her behavior, in a new way. It's not enough, however, for M to think of D in this manner; rather, this way of thinking about her has to *persist* if it is to alter M's overall attitude towards D. If M returns to thinking of D as being "pert and familiar, etc." onward from the next time they see each other, then M's single instance of reframing D will probably not be sufficient for M's continuing to care deeply about D.

Choosing to no longer care about something can require that one exercise a similar degree of persistent mental dexterity in the opposite direction. If, for example, M cared deeply about D, but M decided (for whatever reason) that it would be better if she stopped caring deeply about D, she could alter the language she uses to think of her, e.g., "not refreshingly simple but vulgar, not spontaneous but undignified, not gay but noisy, not delightfully youthful but tiresomely juvenile, and so on." Again, it might take a fair amount of mental perseverance for one to maintain this new way of formulating one's thoughts until it takes hold long enough to become ingrained as a habitual deterrent to particular deep concerns (e.g., towards D)[70].

[70] Murdoch's own neo-platonic view was that morality was largely a matter of seeing things *accurately*, e.g., that M's seeing D as "refreshingly simple" was *more accurate* than was her seeing D as "vulgar". I see no reason to cash out the difference between competing frames in terms of greater or lesser accuracy: it is equally *accurate* to say the glass is half-full as it is to say

Choosing to change one's deep concerns can require not only significant mental energy; it can require significant physical energy as well. Blaise Pascal touched on this when he explained that one could actively move from a state of apathy to a position of concern towards God by getting oneself to "*plier la machine*" (P. 138). It is not simply the case that one's actions arise as the result of one's emotional commitments; according to Pascal, the inverse is also true. If one wants to care about the possibility of saving one's immortal soul, one can start by bending one's knees, bowing before the alter and taking communion. If one wants to stop caring about feeding one's crystal meth addiction, one can walk into a rehab center and/or start a rigorous exercise regimen. If one wants to start caring about one's niece, one can begin by picking her up.

Perhaps the reason that physical actions seem to be able to lead one towards caring about something might be because it is possible to define oneself at least partially in terms of the actions one performs[71] (e.g., "I am a bricklayer" or "I am a golf

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the glass is half-empty, for example. Rather, it seems to me, what distinguishes competing linguistic frames from each other is what those frames are apt to make us pay attention to (e.g., the amount of water remaining versus the amount of water absent, in the case of the glass) and how those frames are apt to make us feel (e.g., irritated versus happy-go-lucky, in the case of D).

[71] The idea of *action* and the idea of *sacrifice* seem to be closely linked in this regard, as acting on behalf of something entails a certain amount of sacrifice on behalf of that thing. It is not simply the case that we make sacrifices of our time, energy and resources for those things we already care about: Sacrificing our time, energy and resources for something also often seems to play an important role in *coming* to care about that thing. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry illustrated this well in *The Little Prince*: the titular character had originally explained his love for his rose in terms of what seemed to him to have been its unique physical and behavioral qualities; however, he then fell into an emotional crisis when he discovered a field full of roses which were qualitatively identical to his own rose. After the Little Prince has learned to deal with this realization via his conversation with a fox, he returns to the field full of roses and tells them, "You're lovely, but you're empty… One couldn't die for you. Of course, an ordinary passerby would think my rose

enthusiast"), and because one naturally tends to care about those things in terms of which one thinks oneself to be.

§3.3: Do We Actively Choose Our Deepest Concerns?

If it is possible, as I have argued it is, for one to actively choose what one cares deeply about, one has to ask if we ever do in fact make such decisions *in practice*. It is probably true that it does not often *feel to us* like we are making a deliberate choice if and when we do actively choose what to care deeply about. There are certainly exceptions, however; sometimes it does feel to us like we are making a choice about what to care about, e.g. when it comes to deciding whether or not to continue seeing a romantic partner[72].

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looked just like you. But my rose, all on her own, is more important than all of you together, since she's the one I've watered. Since she's the one I put under glass. Since she's the one I sheltered behind a screen. Since she's the one for whom I killed the caterpillars (except the two or three for butterflies). Since she's the one I listened to when she complained, or when she boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing at all. Since she's *my* rose." (Saint-Exupéry, p. 63) Or, as the fox more succinctly puts it, "It's the time you spent on your rose that makes your rose so important." (Saint-Exupéry, p. 64.)

The idea that voluntarily sacrificing on behalf of an object often causes the sacrificer to care more about that object (though the inverse might not hold: receiving the benefits of someone else's voluntarily sacrificing for oneself often seems less likely to result in one's deeply caring for the sacrificer; being the beneficiary of sacrifice often leads to a sense of indebtedness or guilt towards the sacrificer) could help explain why it is true (if it is true) that parents care more about their children than their children care about them: Parents generally sacrifice a lot more for their children than their children do for them.

[72] One may object here by saying that whether or not one decides whether to stay with a romantic partner is itself determined by whether or not one deeply cares about that person: in other words, one doesn't decide what to care about; rather, the caring (or lack thereof) does the deciding when it comes to how one acts. However, there do seem to be instances where one does actively decide

Is it possible that we do actively choose what to care deeply about, even though it doesn't *seem* to us like we are actively making such profound choices? It is almost certainly the case that the vast majority of our decisions over what to care deeply about do not occur abruptly (as do, for example, our choices about what entrée to pick on the menu), and so the decision-making process is probably not phenomenologically apparent to us. Rather, it might be said that most of our decisions are slowly made over an extended period of time, and as a result, it may seem to us that we have simply and unreflectively eased ourselves into our deepest concerns; in other words, it may seem to us that we simply find ourselves caring more and more about the objects of our deep concern without undergoing much focused deliberation about whether or not to do so.

The fact that we don't often experience ourselves as making grand resolute decisions concerning what to care deeply about does not entail, however, that we don't actively decide what to care deeply about. It might very well be the case that our considerations over what to care deeply about are themselves sometimes latently present in our day-to-day considerations about how to interact with the various objects that enter into our lives. For example, one's considerations about whether to meet up with some acquaintances after work might involve considerations about whether or not one wants to develop a closer friendship with them (which would entail coming to care more deeply

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to stop caring about someone: for example, one can imagine a woman who deeply cares about her fiancé but who is strongly at odds with him over whether they should have children (i.e., she strongly wants to be a mother and he strongly does not want to be a father). In such a scenario, she might decide, after much deliberation, that she ought to move on to someone else who shares her strong desire to have children. She is, essentially, deciding to stop caring deeply about her fiancé and to attempt to find someone more suitable for her to care deeply about.

about them); one's considerations over whether to lend someone money might involve considerations about how the nature of one's relationship with that person would change as the result of making that person one's financial debtor (i.e., pecuniary concerns aside, would making the loan likely make one care more or less about the person *qua* person?); one's considerations over whether to go to a strip club with one's friends for a bachelor party might involve considerations about whether one wants to think of oneself as being a loyal husband (i.e., whether one wishes to continue caring deeply about being the type of person who is a faithful spouse). What I am claiming is not merely that our latent considerations over what to care deeply about can themselves influence which actions we will perform (e.g, meeting, or not meeting, acquaintances or work; lending, or not lending, someone money; going, or not going, to a strip club). Nor am I merely claiming that our actions are apt to have an effect on what we care deeply about. Rather, what I am claiming is that our latent considerations regarding what to care deeply about end up playing a causal role in determining what we come to care deeply about[73]. As such, by weighing and being moved by such considerations, it very well may be the case that we

[73] The causal chain between latent considerations over what to care deeply about can, it seems to me, be both indirect and direct. As an example of an indirect causal chain, latent considerations over whether to care deeply about being the type of person who is faithful to one's wife (e.g., juxtaposed thoughts consisting of one's imagining oneself as being faithful and bored, and also as being somewhat less than faithful but having a good time out with the guys) can influence whether one goes to a strip club for a bachelor party, and this in turn can put one into situations where one becomes less apt to see faithfulness as being a characteristic worth preserving. As an example of a direct causal chain, entertaining these same latent considerations (i.e., imagining oneself as being faithful and bored, and also as somewhat less than faithful but having a good time) might be enough to immediately make one care less, to some degree, about the very idea of being faithful. Of course, the causal relationship between the considerations and their effect on one's deep concerns need not be one of exclusive disjunction: considerations about what to care deeply about might very well indirectly *and* directly influence what one cares deeply about.

actively choose what to care deeply about, even though, in looking back, we may not be able to recall the phenomenal experience of having actively made these choices, because the choices in question are often made in a somewhat slow, non-focused, bit-by-bit manner over an extended period of time; they are often not made in one grandiose fell swoop. As a result, it seems that we are quite capable of playing an active role, in our day-to-day lives, in deciding what to care deeply about; *prima facie*, it might seem otherwise, but this is, as I have argued, because we don't normally spend a great deal of mental energy reflecting on or recalling our fleeting, latent considerations over what to care deeply about.

This is not to say, however, that we *do* normally put a lot of effort into actively deciding what to care deeply about (especially during the potential time of one's life after one has decided to "settle down" and, perhaps, before one has entered a mid-life crisis.) It is quite possible, and perhaps common after a while, for people to adopt deep concerns which are, for the most part, mutually compatible with each other (e.g., as a youth, one may care deeply about being a professional baseball player, as well as care deeply about being able to survive; as one gets older, however, one may naturally come to drop the former deep concern, because it becomes incompatible with the latter, and in its place, one may come to adopt the deep concern over, say, managing a construction company, which is compatible with one's deep concern about continuing to survive). Once one adopts a set of deep concerns which are mutually compatible, there is less to motivate one to make any changes. If a particular deep concern (e.g., managing a construction company) does not conflict with one's other concerns (e.g., raising a family; playing golf

on the weekends), then there would seem to be little psychological motivation to even consider abandoning that deep concern. Along similar lines, one's adopting a set of mutually compatible deep concerns might lead one to go on autopilot, and thereby habitually direct one's mental and physical energy towards living in accordance with the deep concerns that one does have, rather than directing one's energies towards changing or increasing the number of deep concerns that one has; in other words, once one settles in to a routine way of life, one might not put a lot of effort into thinking about new things to care about.

I have just explained how it might be possible for one to stop considering (or to consider relatively little) what to care about; the absence of such considerations presumably precludes one's ability to actively choose what to care deeply about. But even if we do put a lot of effort (both latent and overt) into deciding what to care about, making and sticking with a choice is not necessarily easy, nor is success guaranteed. As Frankfurt states,

> "…a person can care about something only over some more or less extended period of time. It is possible to desire something, or to think it valuable, only for a moment. […] Since the making of a decision requires only a moment, the fact that a person decides to care about something cannot be tantamount to his caring about it. Nor is it a guarantee that he will care about it. By making such a decision, the person forms an intention concerning what to care about. But whether that intention is truly fulfilled is quite another matter. A decision to care no more entails caring than a decision to give up smoking entails giving it up. In neither case does making the decision amount even to initiating the state of affairs decided upon unless that state of affairs actually ensues." (Frankfurt 1982, p. 261)

There are at least two reasons why it might be hard for us to actively change what we care about, even when we do put a lot of energy into making such a decision. The first reason, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter, is that it can be really difficult to arrive at a decision concerning what to care deeply about, because it is difficult to know which criteria to use to make such a decision. A second reason is that our mental and physical habits can make it difficult to actively change what we have decided to care about. To give an example of how a mental habit can keep one from actively letting go of a deep concern: even if one decides that one will be better off if one were to stop caring about the thrill of winning at the dog races, it will be more difficult to successfully do so if it is the case that whenever one sees a dog, one automatically starts thinking about how exciting it is to win. As an example of how a mental habit can keep one from actively adopting a deep concern: even if one as decided that one would like to enter into a deeply committed romantic relationship with someone, doing so will be difficult if one ruminates on the pain of previously-experienced sexual abuses. To give an example of how a physical habit can keep one from actively letting go of a deep concern: even if an alcoholic has decided that he would be better off not caring about how good it feels to be inebriated, it will be more difficult for an him to actually stop caring about experiencing those feelings if he habitually walks through the bar district on the way home from work every night (or, *a fortiori*, if he routinely stops in for a drink). As an example of how a physical habit can keep one from actively adopting deep concerns: even if one has decided that one would like to forge deep connections with other people, habitually not making eye contact with others will probably make it more difficult for one to come to care deeply about them, because making eye contact allows

one to feel more connected with others, and one is more apt to care deeply about others when one feels connected to them.

Given the significant influence that our mental and physical habits have on our deep concerns, it seems quite possible for what we care about to be, to a large extent, passively determined, especially if we don't pay much attention to our habits and their effects on our deep concerns. Along the same lines, it is possible for our deep concerns to be altered simply in response to our patterns of thought and behavior gradually and passively shifting over time (e.g., good relationships can go bad when partners drift away from focusing on what they like in each other and drift towards focusing on what they dislike). As such, if it is true that coming to live a more meaningful life is, in part, a matter of coming to adopt different deep concerns, it seems that the way our mental and physical habits passively shift over time can make us "lucky" or "unlucky" in terms of how meaningful our lives become.

However, as I have tried to show in this chapter, we do have some capacity to actively choose what we care deeply about, and, as I shall try to show in the next chapter, if we can actively choose a more befitting set of deep concerns, then it can be said of us that, to some degree, we can actively determine how meaningful our lives turn out to be.

Chapter Four: On Befitting Concerns

§4.1: Which Deep Concerns Give Rise to Greater Meaning?

As I have asserted in the previous two chapters, living in accordance with the deep concerns one happens to have (e.g., to repeatedly flip a light switch) does not necessarily entail that one is living a particularly meaningful life. As the example of the crystal meth-addicted man who is a father, surgeon and scout master was designed to show, one's life can become more meaningful if the objects of one's deep concerns change[74].

But even if we do accept that coming to have and live in accordance with certain deep concerns will make a life more meaningful than having and living in accordance with other concerns, we are left with the question of *which* deep concerns are the ones which would serve as a foundation for a more meaningful life (i.e., which deep concerns would give rise to a more meaningful life *if* one lived in accordance with them). We have already seen in chapter two that there are problems with trying to answer that question by

[74] It should be noted that it is not simply that changes in the man's overt *actions* (i.e., his no longer taking crystal meth) led to his life becoming more internally meaningful; rather, it is the changes in his deep concerns, combined with living in accordance with these new concerns, which made his life become more internally meaningful. To illustrate why this is so, imagine that the man turned out to not really care at all about being a good father, surgeon or scout master, even though he did seem to act *as if* he did care about those things (perhaps just because he had a strong natural aversion to being harped on by those around him); imagine, in addition, that he did continue to care deeply about fostering his crystal meth addiction (in fact, he thought doing so was the greatest thing he could do) but he didn't overtly act in accordance with his addiction, because he became convinced that all the crystal meth in the world and all the means by which to produce it had been destroyed by the DEA. Under such circumstances, it does not seem like his life is made more internally meaningful by his acting in better accordance with *someone else's* deep concerns that he behave like an ideal father, surgeon and scout master.

appealing to the idea of universal objective values. So how else could we differentiate between concerns which would serve as a foundation for a more meaningful life and those concerns which would not?

There are several ways one might try to make such a differentiation. One may, for example, simply appeal to cultural consensus. Under such a view, the reason why a concern about, say, flipping light switches back and forth is not a type of concern which would serve as a foundation for a particularly meaningful life (whereas a concern about, say, being a good parent would provide such a foundation) is simply because that is how "we" think and that is how "we" have come to make the distinction. The line separating concerns which could lead to a more meaningful life from those concerns which could not might have been different, if we had been given a different cultural heritage. To co-opt the words of Pascal, had the shape of Cleopatra's nose been different, then perhaps flipping light switches might have ended up being a concern which would have led to a more meaningful life, because that's how we would have ended up thinking.

Such an attempt to distinguish between concerns which could and those which could not lead to a more meaningful life is perhaps coherent, but it's not very compelling. Given the concept of meaning that most people work with, it seems right to say that a culture could be widely mistaken about which types of concerns are the ones which would serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life. Regardless of what the general consensus is on the matter, adopting a concern for flipping light switches, for example,

simply does not seem to offer much potential as a foundation for particularly meaningful living, especially for individuals who have no interest in doing so[75].

Another potential way to differentiate between deep concerns which could and those which could not lead to a more meaningful life relies on the notion of one's "personal good". One might try to say that coming to live a more meaningful life involves coming to care about things which are good for oneself, regardless of whether those things are good for anyone else. The reason that a concern about hunting is a concern which would lead to more meaningful life for my twin brother, but not for me, is because hunting is good for him, but it's not good for me. The fact that something can be good for one regardless of whether one actually cares about that thing explains how it's possible for one to come to live a more meaningful life by changing what one cares about. If I presently care about hunting, but my brother does not, for example, then we could both come to live more meaningful lives if I stopped caring about hunting, and he started to do so. On this view, the fact that "goodness" is idiosyncratic rather than monolithic and universal allows for different lives to be lived in completely different (perhaps even diametrically opposing) ways, and still be meaningful.

One problem with trying to differentiate between concerns which could and those which could not lead to a more meaningful life by appealing to the notion of one's

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[75] If this example is too far-fetched, there are others closer to home. In a consumption-driven society, for example, everyone may become (at least tacitly) convinced that living meaningfully amounts to accumulating material possessions, but everyone may still be mistaken about this, and come to acknowledge their mistaken beliefs, especially if they manage to adopt other deep concerns (e.g., for social interaction which is not centered around the acquisition of material possessions).

"personal good" is that it is hard to make sense of the term "personal good". What determines whether or not something is a personal good, as opposed to a universal and objective good (the problems of which were already discussed)? The distinction presumably has something to do with one's idiosyncratic nature and one's circumstances, but it's not clear how to say anything more than this without retreating to some kind of latent universal, objective standard (e.g., "one's personal good is whatever gives one pleasure" is a clarification which seems to entail that pleasure is a universal objective value).

Another problem with trying to differentiate between concerns which could and those which could not lead to a more meaningful life by appealing to the notion of one's "personal good" is that doing so threatens to give rise to a definitional circularity. It seems to make sense, that is, to define a "good life" partially in terms of meaningfulness, but if one tries to define "meaningfulness" in terms of one's "personal good", then one will end up defining a "good life" in terms of "one's personal good". As such, one would simply end up spinning one's linguistic wheels, and getting nowhere.

As a final problem, it seems that we are left with a dilemma: On the one horn, we can resist the philosophical urge to cash out the idea of "one's personal good" in terms of anything else (e.g., by saying that the idea of "one's personal good" *can't* be explained in terms of anything else). But if we do this, it seems that we are not left with much *guidance* about how to live more meaningfully: simply knowing that coming to live more meaningfully is partially a matter of coming to care about things which are good for oneself does not leave one with any type of knowledge about what things *are* good for

oneself. Because the notion "one's personal good" is so vague, it offers little-to-no practical direction for deciding what things one can care about if one is to live more meaningfully.

On the other horn of the dilemma, if one does cash out the idea of "one's personal good" in other terms, then the notion of "one's personal good" itself becomes redundant. That is to say that one could differentiate between concerns which could and those which could not lead to a more meaningful life by appealing to the terms with which one cashed out the notion of "personal goodness"; as such, there would be no need to even refer to "one's personal good" in order to provide guidance about which concerns one ought to adopt in order to live more meaningfully.

§4.2: Nomy Arpaly's Account of Meaning

Nomy Arpaly might be seen as offering one possible way of cashing out the idea of "one's personal good" in terms of one's needs and capacities. According to her view, a human life can lack meaning in virtue of the fact that it is one in which "basic human needs are not being met" (p. 88 in Wolf 2010), and that one way for such a life to arise is for a person to care about a set of things which don't collectively offer the means by which to meet those basic human needs. In borrowing an example from Wolf, Arpaly suggests that a person who cares only about her goldfish will lead a rather meaningless life, not because taking care of her goldfish is an *intrinsically* worthless pursuit (as Wolf claimed), but rather because a life spent taking care of her goldfish will not meet her basic human needs.

Intuitively, Arpaly's explanation of why certain ways of life seem to lack meaning (i.e., because they don't fulfill "basic human needs") seems to be on the right track, but the view does have a few problems. The first is that the notion of "basic human needs" was put forth with the intention of replacing Wolf's (what Arpaly considered to be unpalatable) reliance upon universal objective values. However, the idea of "basic human needs" (whatever they may be) itself seems to suggest a certain type of objective value; that is to say that the bearers of the needs cannot determine whether or not it would be a good for them if their needs were to be met – it *would* be a good for them, regardless of what their preferences may be. The notion of "basic *human* needs" seems to suggest that those basic needs belong to everyone who is human, i.e., that the objective values in question are universal (over the scope of humans).

It is not immediately clear how Arpaly could remedy the problem posed by the fact that the idea of "basic needs" seems to assert objective values (which is something she wished to avoid). If she were to replace the notion of "basic needs" with the notion of "what matters most to someone" I believe she would capture all the types of concerns she presumably wants to capture (e.g., obtaining sustenance, establishing and maintaining social connections, being free from chronic pain, etc.); however, replacing the idea of "basic needs" with the notion of "what matters most to someone" also opens the doors to subjectivism and the various problems which plagued Frankfurt's account. If the only thing that really mattered to someone was taking care of her goldfish, for example, it would not seem right to say of such person that her life of goldfish-attending was particularly a meaningful one. Arpaly might here try to retreat to using the notion of

"what *really* matters most to someone", but it is not clear what this should be taken to mean, if it should not be taken in exactly the same sense of "basic needs" or "what matters most to someone" (both of which, I just argued are problematic positions for her).

Nor is it immediately clear how Arpaly could remedy the problem posed by the fact that the idea of "basic *human* needs" seems to assert universality. The main problem with universality is that there seem to be many different ways of living meaningfully, and that there are very few needs/deep concerns which serve as a foundation for every single one of those lives. The traditional list of "basic human needs" includes food, water, oxygen, a means thermoregulation, and perhaps a certain degree of social connectedness. It might very well indeed be the case that there are several "basic human needs" which are required to be satisfied for *any* individual to live meaningfully; however, acknowledging this fact does not seem to ultimately provide much guidance for coming to live *more* meaningfully, even if one correctly determines what one's "basic human needs" are and lives in accordance with those needs. Given what Arpaly said in her proposed alteration of Wolf's account, it seems to be the case that, once one's basic human needs have been met, one's life will be equally meaningful regardless of what one does, just as long as one succeeds equally well in living in accordance with one's deep concerns, whether they be about taking care of goldfish, flipping light switches or establishing peace in the West Bank. Such a view does not seem right.

Arpaly also appeals to the idea of "not wasting one's capacities" as being a criterion which could be used in lieu of Wolf's criterion of "pursuing objectively valuable ends". The problem of the goldfish fanatic, the light switch flipper, Sisyphus the

petraphiliac, etc., is that they have numerous capacities (e.g., for forming and maintaining social bonds, learning new things, exploring new places, etc.) which are not being used. Again, there seems to be something to this: intuitively, it does seem that actively utilizing these capacities is a means by which most people come to live more meaningful lives. And conversely, if someone did have limited capacities (Arpaly gives the example of a mentally handicapped child in an institution whose main focus was on a pet goldfish; one might give a more unlikely example of someone whose *only* capacity was the ability to flip a light switch on and off), then performing a large amount of time using these limited capacities, assuming that that is what mattered to the capacity holder, would not seem to bring about a less meaningful life; quite the contrary.

The only problem with the notion of "not wasting one's capacities" when used as a criterion for living meaningfully is that most people have an *enormous* set of capacities which they could potentially utilize. Most of us have the capacity to make one's house even cleaner than it is, the capacity to exercise more, the capacity to spend more time singing to one's goldfish, the capacity to spend more hours in at the office, the capacity to spend more time randomly chatting with strangers, the capacity to spend more time hopping around on one foot reciting Milton, etc. We cannot, however, do it all, and our decision to, say, make use of our capacity to spend more hours in at the office comes at the expense of our not being able to make use of our capacity to make our house cleaner than it is, or our capacity to exercise, or our capacity to do any number of other things. We are constantly, and unavoidably, not making use of our capacities. Does that mean that we are precluded from living meaningfully? Arpaly would presumably say no, and

maintain that “not making use of” our capacities is not the same as “wasting” our capacities. However, it is not clear from the account she has given how one could differentiate between “not making use of” and “wasting” one’s capacities without retreating back into either universal objective values or subjectivity.

§4.3: The Second Road to Meaning

Arpaly’s comments on the importance of meeting human needs and making use of our capacities does nonetheless point us towards a more tenable view, according to which the types of concerns which can serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life are neither unfirmly grounded and haphazard (as seems to be the case for the subjectivist), nor are they based on universal objective values (as Wolf and Gewirth hold). Rather, according to such a view, the one which I myself am hereby advancing, the concerns which can serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life are grounded in and limited by one’s capacities to care and act.

As was asserted in previous chapters, the first way to live more meaningfully is to live in better accordance with the deep concerns one has. The second way to live more meaningfully is, I shall argue, to adopt a more befitting set of concerns. I wish to argue that a potential foundation for a more meaningful life isn’t created simply by coming to care about just anything; as will be demonstrated in the following pages, there are other factors at play which will limit the number and types of concerns which could serve as a foundation for a more meaningful life for any particular individual.

One reason why not all concerns can serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life for someone is simply because there are presumably some concerns which that person is incapable of having. For example, one can imagine someone who has the capacity to take care of a dog (e.g., such a person is wealthy, has a lot of free time, has a large fenced in yard, access to dog food and veterinary services, the ability to throw a tennis ball, etc.) but lacks the capacity to care about dogs or taking care of them (e.g., maybe such a person is allergic to dogs, had an insurmountably traumatic experience involving dog attacks, and grew up in a religion and a culture which found dogs to be nothing but filthy disgusting nuisances). It seems that such a person's life would not be made more meaningful by that person's going through the motions of feeding a dog, taking it for a walk, taking it to the vet, etc. If such a concern were unadoptable[76] by a person, that person's living in accordance with that *unheld* concern would not provide the foundation for a more meaningful life for that person.

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[76] It remains an open question whether or not we ever do have an *absolute* incapacity to care about things, or whether we simply haven't learned *how* to care about them. It might be the case that we have the capacity to care about anything, given the right conditions, and what prevents us from caring about any particular thing is simply that the right conditions haven't obtained (e.g., the extreme cynophobe simply hasn't met the right dog yet, or visited the right psychologist, or been visited by the right aliens who have the capacity to re-arrange the neural network of her brain in such a way as to make her care deeply about dogs.) But even if it is the case that, given the right conditions, we always have the capacity to care about any particular object, all this means is that our capacity to care about various things *can be* expanded by the environment, not that it *will be*. As such, it still remains the case that a foundation for a more meaningful life will not ultimately be provided by concerns which one never ultimately develops, even if one had the capacity to live in accordance with such concerns *if* one did have them. In the absence of the right dog, the right psychologist, neural-network rearranging aliens, etc., the capacity alone to take care of a dog will not serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life for an extreme cynophobe; nor will going simply going through the motions of taking care of a dog if one doesn't end up caring about doing so.

A second reason why not all concerns can serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life is because one lacks the capacity to live in accordance with some concerns. For example, one can imagine Stephen Hawking as having developed the deep concern to win the Olympic gold medal in women's gymnastics. Assuming that he cannot live in accordance *at all*[77] with such a concern, it seems right to say that coming to care deeply about winning the Olympic gold medal in women's gymnastics would not provide a foundation upon which Steven Hawking could come to live a more meaningful life[78].

So far I have argued that some deep concerns cannot provide the foundation for a more meaningful life for someone in cases where that person has no capacity whatsoever to have those concerns, or in instances where that person is completely incapable of living in accordance with those concerns. Taking a step further, I next wish to argue that the extent to which a concern can serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life is

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[77] There is, of course, plenty of room to deny the assumption that Stephen Hawking would be *completely* unable to live in accordance with a deep desire to win the Olympic gold medal in women's gymnastics. He could, for example, rehearse in his mind what moves he would make during his performance or decide which costume he would wear in front of the judges. However, as I shall soon argue, the degree to which he could live in accordance with such a concern is scant, and, correspondingly, so is the amount of meaning in his life that could be provided by such a concern.

[78] If, however, Steven Hawking cared deeply *about caring deeply about things*, then his caring about winning the Olympic gold medal in women's gymnastics *would* give rise to his coming to live a more meaningful life (even if such a concern were completely futile), because his *caring* about winning would itself be an instance of his coming to live in accordance with the *other* deep concern he had *about having deep concerns*. Given that many, if not most, people do presumably care deeply about having deep concerns, for these people, simply *coming to have* deep concerns is sufficient to coming to live more meaningfully. However, as I shall argue, this does not change the fact that, on the whole, some deep concerns can give rise to a greater amount of meaning than other deep concerns can.

restricted by the limited capacities one has to care about things and live in accordance with those concerns. If one had only a relatively small capacity to care about dogs, for example, the extent to which such a concern could serve as a foundation for a more meaningful life would be smaller, *ceteris paribus*, than if one had a larger capacity to care about them. Similarly, if Stephen Hawking had only a relatively small capacity to understand astrophysics (e.g., if he lived during the Dark Ages and his brain was such that he had a severe learning disability), then the extent to which a concern for understanding astrophysics could serve as a foundation for a more meaningful life for him would be smaller, *ceteris paribus*[79], than it could if he had a greater capacity to understand astrophysics.

Both types of capacities (i.e., to have deep concerns about particular things and to act in accordance with these deep concerns) play a role in determining the extent to which any concern can serve as a foundation for a more meaningful life. Which individual concerns could give rise to a greater amount of meaning for a particular person is a function of the capacities that that person has to care deeply about various things *and*

[79] The *ceteris paribus* relates to the fact that having an enormous capacity to live in accordance with a particular concern might prevent one from actually developing a deep concern for the object in question. If one's capacities to act in accordance with a particular deep concern are too high, one might never adopt (or one might stop having) that concern: Part of the reason that very few people come to care deeply about flipping light switches back and forth is because doing so is *too easy*. People often come to care about *challenging* things (e.g., relationships, careers, various intellectual and physical pursuits, etc.). That being said, if an increase in capacity to live in accordance with a particular concern does not diminish the degree to which one cares about the object in question, that concern will provide a greater foundation upon which one could build a more meaningful life, *ceteris paribus*. "Michael Jordan with amazing basketball skills" has a greater foundation upon which he could build a more meaningful life than does "clumsy Michael Jordan", *all other things being equal, including the degree to which the two versions of Michael Jordan cared about the game.*

of the capacities that that person has to live in accordance with these concerns. One's capacities to care deeply about things must *align* with one's capacities to act in accordance with those concerns in order for those concerns to serve as a foundation for a meaningful life, and, *ceteris paribus*, the extent to which these capacities do align determines the extent to which the concern in question can give rise to meaning in that person's life.

I have said that some concerns *can* serve as a foundation for a more meaningful life, not that they *will* do so. The reason for this is because simply having the capacity to live in better accordance with deeper concerns does not entail that one *will* actually do so. One might care deeply about becoming a lottery winner, for example, and one might have the capacity to win (i.e., one has a spare dollar with which to buy a ticket, and there is nothing which absolutely prevents one from picking the winning numbers); however, having this concern and the ability to live in accordance with it does not entail that this concern *will* serve as a foundation by which to come to live more meaningfully – indeed, it almost certainly won't. However, given the fact that one does have a slim possibility of winning (and hence coming to live much more meaningfully), it has to be said that a deep concern about winning the lottery *can* serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life (even though it probably won't). The problem is not that one lacks the capacity to care deeply about winning or that one has no capacity to act in complete accordance with that concern; rather, the problem is that it is simply *very difficult* to live in accordance with that concern. In broader terms, what prevents one from coming to live more

meaningfully in this manner is that one fails to meet the conditions of meaning which were discussed in the first chapter.

Another way of putting this point is that the *probability* of living in accordance with one of one's deep concerns has no effect on the size of the foundation upon which one could build a more meaningful life; on the other hand, the hard limits of the degree to which it is *possible* to live in accordance with a deep concern does. *Ceteris paribus*, a deep concern in which one had a 10% chance of living in perfect accord would provide an equal-sized foundation upon which to build meaning as an *equally deep* concern in which one had a 90% chance of living in perfect accord. That the latter concern should *end up* giving rise to more meaning than the former is only a question of odds, not necessity. And whether (and to what degree) one succeeds in playing (or beating) the odds is a question of whether (and to what degree) one meets conditions of meaning discussed in the first chapter, i.e., it is a question of whether (and to what degree) one succeeds in living in accordance with the deep concerns in question.

§4.4: Befitting Concerns

One's being able to care deeply about a particular thing and one's having a certain capacity to live in accordance with that concern are *necessary* conditions for that concern's being able to serve as a foundation upon which to build a more meaningful life. However, simply meeting these two conditions does not *entail* that that concern would serve as a foundation upon which one could build a more meaningful life; that is to say that coming to both care deeply about something and live in accordance with that concern

does not entail that one's life *on the whole* will be made more meaningful by doing so. To return to a previous example, a man who cares deeply about his family, his volunteer work as a Boy Scout leader, and his work as a brain surgeon presumably has the *capacity*, given the right conditions, to care deeply about getting a crystal meth hit (and then another, and another, etc.) and he also has the capacity to live in accordance with such a potential concern (at least for a while). However, such a concern would almost certainly not provide a foundation upon which he could build a more meaningful life than the one he was already living.

The reason for this lies in the fact that our capacities to care about particular objects and to act in accordance with those concerns are not hermetically sealed from our other actions and concerns, and as a result, the overall extent to which one is able to live in accordance with all of one's deep concerns can actually *decrease* if one comes to care (or to care more) about something, and/or live in accordance with that concern. There are four ways this can happen. First, given one's finite mental abilities, the amount of mental focus and energy required to simply care (or to care more) about one thing (even if one doesn't live in accordance with this concern) can diminish the amount of mental focus and energy available to care deeply about other things: in directing one's thoughts towards crystal meth, for example, one is simultaneously *not* directing one's thoughts towards one's job, family and Boy Scout troupe. Second, one's ability to live in accordance with particular concerns can be diminished by living in accordance with other particular concerns: by repeatedly taking crystal meth, for example, one's mental and physical abilities to perform brain surgery will be diminished, especially if one ends up in

jail. Third, caring (or caring more) about one thing can also diminish one's capacity to act in accordance with other concerns: the mental energy involved in simply caring about getting the next hit of crystal meth (even if one doesn't actually live in accordance with that concern) can diminish one's capacity to think while one is performing brain surgery. Finally, living in accordance with certain concerns can also diminish one's ability to care about other things: repeatedly taking crystal meth can reduce cognitive functioning, including the capacity to care deeply about, say, performing brain surgery.

The upshot of this is that our capacity to care about things and/or to live in accordance with these concerns is limited not only because there are some things we are simply (and perhaps constitutionally) unable to care about (e.g., Justin Bieber's music) or do (e.g., win a medal in the 1921 Olympics), but also because there are, it seems, some things *we can't help caring about*, just as there are some things that *we can't help doing*, and these inescapable concerns and actions simply don't leave room for some other competing concerns and actions. Correspondingly, the amount of meaning in one's life can be limited not only because one *doesn't* care about things and/or act in accordance with these concerns, but also because one *does* care about certain things and/or act in accordance with them.

This all goes to show that coming to adopt concerns which serve to expand the foundation upon which one could come to live a more meaningful life is not simply a matter of adopting *additional* deep concerns (or increasing the depth of any of one's current concerns) with which one is able to live in accordance, because doing so may alter one's capacities (as we have just seen, doing so may diminish the aggregate extent

to which one cares deeply about things, and/or the aggregate extent to which it is possible to live in accordance with these concerns). Rather, then, it should be said that expanding the overall foundation upon which one could come to live a more meaningful life is a matter of adopting a *set* of concerns which increases the *overall* extent to which one has deep concerns which align with one's capacities.

There are three ways that one can increase the overall extent to which one has deep concerns which align with one's capacities. First, one can increase *the depth* to which one cares about things in accordance with which one has some capacity to live (e.g., one can come to care more deeply about one's job and/or the people in one's life), without thereby significantly decreasing the number of things one cares about and/or without thereby significantly diminishing one's capacities to act in accordance with these concerns. Second, one can increase *the number* of things one cares about in accordance with which one has come capacity to live (e.g., one can develop a concern over a newly acquired hobby and/or a newly introduced person), without thereby significantly decreasing the depth at which one cares about things and/or without thereby significantly diminishing one's capacities to act in accordance with these concerns. Third, one can *exchange* a concern in accordance with which one has a smaller capacity to live for a concern in accordance with which one has a larger capacity to live (e.g., a frail intelligent boy might abandon a deep concern to play on the football team and adopt in its place an equally deep concern to start a robotics club. Because his capacity to live in accordance with the latter concern is presumably greater than his capacity to live in accordance with the former concern, adopting the latter concern over the former will presumably increase

the overall extent to which it is possible for him to live in accordance with the deep concern he adopts), without thereby significantly decreasing either the number of things one cares about and/or without thereby significantly diminishing the depth at which one cares about them[80,81].

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[80] The recurring phrase "increase the overall extent to which one has deep concerns aligning with one's capacities" is admittedly a bit gauche, but I couldn't think of a better way of succinctly phrasing what I wanted to get across. In essence the phrase is used to communicate *both* that increasing the extent (i.e., the number and/or the depth) of one's concerns in accordance with which one has some capacity to live will, *ceteris paribus*, increase one's potential to live meaningfully, *as will* coming to have deep concerns in accordance with which one has a greater capacity to live, *ceteris paribus*. In cases where increasing the extent to which one cares about particular things ends up decreasing one's overall capacity to act in accordance with one's deep concerns (e.g., in the case of an untalented football player who falls more and more in love with playing, and whose doing so causes him to perform less well in school – which is itself something he cares deeply about), and in cases where one trades in a deep concern in accordance with which one has a lower capacity to act for one in accordance one has a greater capacity to act, but at the cost of decreasing the total extent to which one cares about things (e.g., a person who is passionate about playing football but has no talent for it might bring himself to start caring instead – though to a lesser extent – about being an accountant, which is something for which he does have significant talent), one simply has to try to gauge whether what is gained is greater than what is lost if one is to determine whether one's overall potential for living meaningfully will thereby increase or decrease.

One can think of the foundation upon which one can build a meaningful life as being a solid existing along a three dimensional axis (where the *x*-axis is a measurement of the depth of one's deep concerns, the *y*-axis is a measurement of the number of one's concerns, and the *z*-axis is a measurement of the extent to which one has the capacity to live in accordance with one's deep concerns). As such, increasing one's potential to live meaningfully is a matter of increasing the total *volume* of the foundation: one's overall potential to live meaningfully can be increased by, for example, increasing the number of concerns one has along the *y*-axis, if doing so does not thereby cause the measurements along the *x* and/or *z*-axes to decrease to such an extent that the total volume of *xyz* either stays the same or decreases. In trying to refine this model a little bit further, I fear that my intuitions are not clear enough to be able to say that the three axes are at perfect right-angles to each other, or whether the angles of some axes occur at a greater or lesser angle. In other words, I am not sure if doubling the magnitude of any of the three variables will, *ceteris paribus*, double the total volume of the foundation, or whether doubling the magnitude of one of the variables might not have as large an effect on the total volume as doubling the magnitude of another variable, *ceteris paribus*; e.g., doubling the total aggregate depth at which

As such, in view of the fact (if it is a fact) that coming to live in accordance with a deep concern about getting another hit of crystal meth would actually *decrease* the overall extent to which one had deep concerns which aligned with one's capacities, it can

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one cares about things might increase the potential one has to live meaningfully more so than would coming to have deep concerns in accordance with which one has twice the capacity to live, *ceteris paribus.*

Despite the apparent precision offered by the aforementioned graphical model, it should be noted that I am not claiming that it is possible for us to somehow accurately *measure* how befitting particular sets of concerns are or, for that matter, that it is possible for us to accurately measure on some scale how meaningful various lives are. There is no tool, for example, for giving an accurate, objective measurement of how much an individual cares about a particular object, or to measure the extent to which that person is living in accordance with that concern. Furthermore, I am not claiming that my account offers epistemic resources which are sufficient to provide more than a somewhat rough guide for *ordering* the befittingness of concerns, or for ordering the amount of meaning in different forms of life. Nonetheless, because my account is based on types of features which seem to be universally attributable (e.g., it can be said of both Jones and Smith that they have deep concerns, even though they care about different things, just as it can be said of both Jones and Smith that they live in accordance with these deep concerns, even though their doing so consists in different actions), it does provide us with a rough guide for comparing different lives, as well as the same lives at different times, and it allows us to say of any lives at any particular time that coming to live more meaningfully will always require that that person come to live in better accordance with the deep concerns she has; come to increase the overall extent to which she cared deeply about things in accordance with which she had some capacity to live; and/or to come to adopt deep concerns in such a way so as to increase the overall extent to which she was capable of living in accordance with what she cared deeply about.

[81] One might also be tempted to mention a fourth way of increasing one's overall potential to live in accordance with one's deep concerns, i.e. increasing one's capacity to live in accordance with the deep concerns one already has (e.g., a boy who cares deeply about playing on the football team can practice and exercise so as to be better able to live in accordance with this concern). However, mentioning this possibility here would be redundant, as this aspect of coming to live more meaningfully is already contained within ideas already discussed in the first chapter: i.e., increasing one's potential to live in accordance with the deep concerns one already has is quite simply a means by which to come to live in better accordance with the deep concerns one has. The second method for coming to live more meaningfully (the method discussed in this chapter), it should be recalled, is a matter of adopting the "right" concerns, so to speak; the first method (which was discussed in chapter one) is a matter of coming to live in better accordance with whatever concerns one happens to adopt.

be said that it is *unbefitting*[82] for one to come to care about it. In other words, an unbefitting concern is a concern whose adoption would diminish the overall foundation upon which one could build a more meaningful life. Adopting unbefitting concerns diminishes the potential one has to live meaningfully, because doing so decreases the overall extent to which one cares deeply about things in accordance with which one has some capacity to live, and/or it decreases the overall extent to which one is able to live in accordance with what one cares deeply about. Conversely, to say that a concern is befitting for a person is to say that a) it is possible for that person to care deeply about the

[82] The way that I am using the term "befitting" here is somewhat of a departure from the way that the term might be used in everyday parlance. To say that a concern is befitting (or unbefitting) is not to say that, all things considered, one *ought* (*or ought not*) to adopt that concern. To say that a concern is befitting is only to say that adopting that concern would expand the overall foundation upon which one could build a more meaningful life, which is a metaphorical way of saying that adopting that concern would increase the overall extent to which one has deep concerns aligning with one's capacities (i.e., by increasing the aggregate extent to which one cares about things in accordance with which one has some capacity to live, and/or by "exchanging" one's concerns in such a way so as to increase the aggregate extent to which one was able to live in accordance with one's concerns). It is worth reiterating that adopting a befitting concern (or set thereof) does not in any way guarantee that one will *succeed* in living in accordance with the concern(s) in question (e.g., it does not entail that one will win the lottery); as such, coming to have befitting concerns does not, by itself, *entail* that one will come to live a more meaningful life. Coming to adopt a more befitting concern (or set thereof) merely increases the amount of meaning that one *would* arise in one's life *if* one succeeded in living in accordance with one's concerns. It is, we should say, a measure of *potential* meaning.

The way I am using the term "befitting" here is also somewhat of a departure from the way the term is used in everyday parlance in that one might normally say that it is unbefitting to care about immoral things. But here again, as I am using the term, to say that a concern is befitting (or unbefitting) is not to say that, all things considered, one *ought* (*or ought not*) to adopt that concern. Given the way I am using the term, it might very well be cogent to say that there are many befitting concerns which we shouldn't adopt, because there is more to our practical deliberations than considerations about meaning; e.g., there are also moral considerations. The question of how to decide which concerns to adopt *all things considered* is not one which I shall try to answer. I am only here concerned with the narrower question of how to come to live more meaningfully, and, as such, I am using the term "befitting" in a correspondingly narrower sense as well.

object of that concern; and b) that person's doing so would increase the overall extent to which she cared deeply about things in accordance with which she had some capacity to live, and/or her doing so would increase the overall extent to which she was able to live in accordance with what she cared deeply about. In simpler terms, adopting a befitting concern augments the potential one has to live meaningfully.

It should be noted that not all befitting concerns are equally befitting; some concerns are more befitting than others. There are two reasons for this. The first is that it is possible to care for and/or live in accordance with particular concerns to a lesser or greater extent: one might only care a little bit about making gourmet food and/or have a limited capacity to do so. On the other hand, there seem to be instances where one develops (or stumbles upon) objects of deep concern which align greatly with one's capacities. To give a few examples of individuals seeming to acknowledge concerns which they found to be particularly befitting for them:

> "The first time I ever acted, it felt right, as if that's what I'm supposed to do with my bones." – Charlize Theron[83].
>
> "I skip to work." – Warren Buffett.
>
> "I love cars. I couldn't wait to get to work in the morning." – Lee Iacocca[84].

It can almost certainly be said that for Charlize Theron, acting is a more befitting object of concern than is directing an automotive company, even if neither concern, if

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[83] Quoted by Lynn Hirschberg in the "Women's Fashion 2008" section of *New York Times Style Magazine*.

[84] Buffett and Iacocca quoted by J. Barry Griswell and Bob Jennings on P. 162 of *The Adversity Paradox*. 2009. New York: St Martin's Press.

held, would *decrease* the overall extent to which meaning could be added to her life. It's just that her ability to act is probably greater than her ability to lead an automotive company, and the depth of her concern for acting is probably greater than the depth of her concern for leading an automotive company would be. In other words, she almost certainly has a greater potential to live meaningfully by caring about acting than she does by caring about running an automotive company.

The second reason that some concerns are more befitting than others for an individual (or why some concerns are more befitting for some individuals than for others) is because some actions and concerns work synergistically with other actions and concerns. There are (again, as was the case with actions and concerns that limit our capacities to perform other actions and/or have other, or deeper, concerns) four ways this can happen. First, adopting a deep concern (or deepening the concerns one already has) can increase the extent to which one cares deeply about other things: coming to care (more) deeply about baseball, for example, may increase the extent to which one cares deeply about a boy one has "adopted" in the big brother program if one learns that the boy also cares deeply about baseball. Second, adopting a deep concern (or deepening the concerns one already has) can increase the extent to which one can live in accordance with one's other concerns: for example, coming to care (or care more deeply) about a significant other can, by itself, help one be more effective at one's job as a couples therapist, as having the knowledge of what it is like to care deeply for someone will allow one to *take seriously* the problems facing the couples. Third, living in accordance with a deep concern might increase the extent to which one cares about other things: one might

take one's son camping because one's son cares about camping and one cares about one's son… and in so doing, one might come to care about camping itself, and then come to care about being a Scout master. Finally, living in accordance with a deep concern might increase the extent to which one can live in accordance with other deep concerns: living in accordance with one's concern about one's job as a neurosurgeon can help one live in accordance with one's concern for one's family, e.g. by being able to financially provide for them. This all goes to show that, *ceteris paribus*, befitting concerns which are synergistic with each other will, as a set, provide a greater foundation for meaning than will befitting concerns which simply don't get in each other's way.

§4.5: Objections and Responses

My account of meaning is structuralistic: as has been discussed in this chapter, coming to live more meaningfully can involve adopting a set of concerns which align with one's capacities in such a way so as to increase the overall extent to which one has deep concerns and/or in such a way so as to increase the overall potential one has to live in accordance with one's concerns, and, as was discussed in the first chapter, it is a matter of coming to actualize that potential to live in accordance with the deep concerns one has. My account (unlike, e.g., Wolf's) does not rely on notions of "inherent goodness" or "worthiness" as a means of distinguishing between more and less meaningful forms of life. The parsimony of my account will certainly give rise to several objections, though I do believe they can be adequately addressed.

One possible objection which may be put forward is that my account seems to support the counter-intuitive claim that push-pin can be as expedient to meaning as poetry, or that, to give more contemporary examples, one's life might be made more meaningful by leading the life of a "shallow" celebrity who only seems to care about partying than it would be by working to solve world hunger. That is to say that even if, for example, one had the capacity to solve world hunger, doing so would not make one's life more meaningful if one didn't have the capacity to care about doing so. Similarly, my account seems to leave room for the possibility that leading a "shallow" existence could provide the most meaningful life possible for someone, if that person was able to care more deeply about, say, endlessly partying than she was able to care about any other set of things, and she was able to live in accordance with this concern about endlessly partying.

As a response to this objection, it should first of all be noted that while my account makes theoretical room for the possibility that the foundation for a more (or even the most) meaningful life would be provided by coming to care exclusively about an abnormal and/or socially useless objects (e.g., endlessly going from club to club), it also offers the means by which to explain *why* such concerns would almost certainly not *in fact* serve as the foundation for a more meaningful life. It is almost certainly the case that the degree to which one could care deeply about endlessly partying, for example, pales in comparison with the degree to which one could care about (and live in accordance with) other sets of things (e.g., fostering relationships with strong emotional bonds, building a career, walking the Pacific Crest Trail); that is to say, while one may enjoy clubbing and

want to do it all the time, I suspect that it is in fact psychologically difficult to *care deeply* about such an object. In addition, having and living in accordance with such a deep concern *among other things* would almost certainly diminish the *overall* extent to which one could have and live in accordance with the entirety of one's deep concerns. The problem with having a deep concern about endlessly partying is not that doing so could provide absolutely no foundation for meaning whatsoever for anybody; rather, the problem is that in adopting such a concern, one would almost certainly be aiming unbelievably low in terms of increasing one's potential to have deep concerns and live in accordance with them. A relatively meaningful life simply *doesn't have room in it* for one to live in accordance with a deep concern about endlessly partying, given the capacities and limitations that one almost certainly has.

I do concede, however, that my account does, *in theory*, leave open the possibility that deep concerns about objects which are generally considered to be abnormal and/or socially useless (e.g., endlessly partying) could provide a better foundation for a more meaningful life than could deep concerns about objects which are widely considered to be normal and/or socially useful (e.g. becoming a doctor; raising a family; solving world hunger). Perhaps it is the case, for example, that the most befitting set of deep concerns for individuals such as Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian consists of a single deep concern for endless partying; on my view, this would indeed that their lives would end up being the most meaningful they could be if they lived in perfect accord with these concerns.

In saying this, however, there are two things that should be noted. The first is that the maximum amount of meaning that could be present in the life of someone whose most befitting concerns were for endlessly partying might itself pale in comparison with the maximum amount of meaning that could be present in the life of someone who cared deeply about other things (raising a family, etc), even if the former lived in perfect accord with her deep concern and the latter didn't. This is because it is quite possible that the depth of the former's concerns might pale in comparison with the depth of the latter's deep concerns; i.e., even if the former couldn't care about anything else more than she cared about partying, she still might not in the end be able to care very *deeply* about partying, and so coming to live in perfect accordance with such a concern might not provide her life with nearly as much meaning as someone who lived in accordance with deeper concerns for other objects.

The other (and more important) thing to note is that when we are not careful, our intuitions about what types of lives are meaningful end up being biased towards what we ourselves care deeply about. This is, it seems to me, because we often judge whether another person's life is meaningful by imagining ourselves behaving as the person in question does while continuing to have our *own* deep concerns, rather than imagining being that person, behaving as that person and having *that person's* deep concerns. As such, given the deep concerns that most people have, if they imagine themselves endlessly partying, they will most likely get the sense that they would not be living a very meaningful life, because they would be imagining themselves as utterly failing to live in accordance with what they themselves care most deeply about (e.g., raising a family,

making a difference in the world, etc.). But such incomplete imaginings do not show that there is no meaning in the life of, e.g., Paris Hilton, given the deep concerns she has (presuming she *has* deep concerns, that is); rather, it only seems to show that Paris Hilton's life would not be particularly meaningful if she had the deep concerns that "I" have[85].

A similar potential objection to my account is that it doesn't take into consideration whether the actions and concerns in question are moral or immoral. It seems to repugnantly entail that anyone's life can be made more meaningful simply by coming to care about murdering someone, committing the murder, and not having it diminish the extent to which one has (and lives in accordance with) other deep concerns.

There are several things to say in response to this objection. The first is that most people are, in fact, I would like to believe, incapable of caring deeply about murdering other people (on the contrary, I would like to believe, the well-being of others is something that most people do in fact care about, to a greater or lesser extent); and, in

[85] The fact that there can be intuitive disagreements about which forms of life are meaningful might lead one to ask what roles these conflicting judgments have in my account of meaningfulness and how my account might help to resolve these conflicts.

In response to these questions, it is important to note that the aim of my account is not to give an accurate psychological description of how individuals come to judge how meaningful particular lives are, nor is to give an accurate psychological description of what the conditions are for occurrently judging any particular life to be meaningful. Rather, my account is normative. I am arguing that particular lives *ought* to be judged as being meaningful relative to certain features of those lives (i.e., the extent to which the people in question care about things and the extent to which they live in accordance with said concerns.) As such, while I justify the claims of my account by appealing to the fact that it tends to track common intuitions about which lives are meaningful, those common intuitions do not themselves end up being a constitutive part of my account, and so my accoubt ends up functioning independently of anybody's particular judgments about how meaningful particular lives are. The fact that my account might sometimes hold particular judgments to be mistaken (e.g., that Paris Hilton's life is not meaningful) is not therefore problematic, nor would it be problematic if certain lives never happened to be judged to be meaningful or meaningless at all.

addition, even if they did have such a concern, most people would, in fact, probably be incapable of living in accordance with that concern without thereby diminishing the overall extent to which they had deep concerns which aligned with their capacities (e.g., because they would be unable to act on their concerns while in prison). As such, it seems false to say that *anyone's* life could be made more meaningful by coming to have and live in accordance with a deep concern for murder.

Nevertheless, given the existence of psychopathic serial killers, it does seem possible for *some* individuals to care deeply about murder, and some of these individuals do seem to have a large capacity to live in accordance with this concern. What should we say of these cases? *Ceteris paribus*, would such a person's life be more meaningful if she came to deeply care about murdering, and succeeded in doing so without thereby diminishing the extent to which she was able to care about everything else, and live in accordance with these concerns?

A broader question which faces us here is whether to judge profoundly immoral lives in any positive terms whatsoever. While there may be *moral reasons* to abstain from making such judgments (e.g., allowing the use of some positive terms to describe immoral lives might diminish the aversion that some individuals have towards adopting a similar form of life), I would argue that some extraordinarily immoral lives can be *accurately* described using some positive terms. It would probably be accurate to say that Ted Kaczynsky was in some respects intelligent, that Elizabeth Báthory was beautiful, that Atilla the Hun was courageous, and that George W. Bush was happy, even though it seems quite fair to say of each of these individuals that they performed

profoundly immoral actions. Along the same lines, I would argue that there is nothing inherently contradictory about saying of a particular life that it was both immoral and meaningful, and that it is indeed possible for one to lead an immoral, yet meaningful life – indeed, the immoral actions and concerns might even be *the source* of that life's meaning. It is probably accurate to say of Genghis Khan, for example, that he led a meaningful life, despite his apparently immoral actions and concerns – indeed, what made his life so apparently immoral is also what made his life so apparently meaningful. Or, to give a more mundane example, it seems possible to increase the amount of meaning in one's life by having a passionate extra-marital affair while being in a "dead" marriage, even though doing so would seem to be immoral.

It again bears reiterating that I am not arguing for the simple claim that people ought to do whatever it takes to live a more meaningful life, nor, more specifically, am I claiming that living morally is, or ought to be, subordinate to living meaningfully. It would be nice if meaning could be defined in such a way so as to always be congruent with morality, as doing so would make practical deliberation easier; however, defining meaning in this way would simply not accurately track the complexities of our circumstances and considerations. For the most part, I would like to think that meaning and morality are compatible, but in cases where they are not, one is often simply left with the difficult eternally-recurring underlying question of *what to do*. Coming up with a general, systematic answer to that question is not something I aim to do in this dissertation, though, as I will further discuss in its final section, the question of how the

idea of meaning does and/or should fit in to our practical deliberation is a philosophically rich one which deserves further attention.

§4.6: Which Concerns Ought One to Adopt in Order to Live Most Meaningfully?

I have argued that coming to live a more meaningful life can involve adopting a more befitting set of deep concerns, i.e., a set of deep concerns whose adoption would increase the overall extent to which one has deep concerns which are aligned with one's capacities. As noted before, befittingness is a function of *possibility*, not of *probability*. A concern whose adoption would moderately increase the overall extent to which one cared about things in accordance with which it is possible, *but highly unlikely*, for one to live in complete accord would be a more befitting concern than a concern whose adoption would "slightly less than moderately" increase the overall extent to which one cared about things in accordance with which it is *highly likely* for one to live in complete accord.

The fact that there are varying probabilities of being able to live in accordance with different deep concerns leaves us with a difficult question: which concerns, if adopted, *will end up providing* the foundation for the most meaningful life possible? Is it simply those concerns which are the most befitting? The answer to this question is "probably not". The reason for this is that even though, by definition, it is *possible* to live in accordance with our most befitting concerns, it is probably *highly unlikely* that we would succeed in doing so. It might be the case, for example, that, for a particular person who has an enormous capacity to care about gambling and space exploration, coming to

live *the most meaningful life possible* would be a matter of adopting these concerns, and then winning every major lottery and thereby acquiring the funds by which to become the first person to voyage to Mars and back. However, even though the most befitting concerns possible for such a person would be for lottery winning and space adventure, it would be most *imprudent* for him to actually foster such concerns, because the odds of successfully living in accordance with them are simply too small. If one is to be prudent, one will foster befitting concerns with which one is not only merely *capable* of living in accordance, but also with which one is *likely* to live in accordance. Prudently fostering befitting concerns thus increases the odds that one will come to live a *moderately* meaningful life, but at the same time, it most likely decreases the odds that one will come to live an *extraordinarily* meaningful life, because such lives are, most likely, extraordinarily difficult to effect. Of course, all I have been trying to do is describe, in general terms, what one would need to do in order to live a life which is more meaningful than the life one is currently living. Whether one *ought* to be prudent, or whether one ought to "shoot for the moon" in one's attempts to live more meaningfully is an open question which I shall not try to resolve; it is up to the reader to choose his or her own adventure.

Chapter Five: On the Possibility of Living a Carefree Meaningful Life

According to the account I have put forward, living meaningfully depends upon caring deeply about at least one thing. In this chapter, I will consider two potential challenges to this view, both of which stem from the idea that meaning can (or must) be grounded in things beyond one's own deep concerns and that, as such, it would be conceivable to live an at least somewhat meaningful life despite the fact that one did not care deeply about anything. The first potential objection I will address stems from the view that other people's deep concerns can also by themselves be the source of meaning in one's life: on this view, one's life can have meaning simply in virtue of the fact that it means something *to* or *for* others. The second potential objection that I will address posits that living a meaningful life *tout court* is not equivalent to living a life which is meaningful *for oneself* (or, for that matter, anyone), and that by trying to cash out the concept of meaning in terms of one's own concerns, my account unsuccessfully tries to substitute an account of the former for an account of the latter.

§5.1: Can Meaning in One's Life Stem from Other People's Deep Concerns?

On my account, living meaningfully stems from living in accordance with one's own deep concerns. While it is possible on my account to live meaningfully by living in accordance with other people's deep concerns (e.g., living so as to make one's own mother proud), in these cases, the meaning derives from the fact that one *cares deeply about* living in accordance with the deep concerns of others, i.e., it derives from the fact that one adopts other people's deep concerns as one's own. In this section, however, I

will address an objection to my account which stems from the view that one's life can also have meaning *simply* in virtue of the role it plays in other people's lives. More specifically, I will address the view that a life can have meaning simply in virtue of the fact that it means a lot *to* or *for* other people.

§5.11: On Meaning a Lot to Someone Else

Sometimes in our everyday conversations we claim that particular individuals (e.g., a grandparent, a friend, or even a pet dog) "mean a lot" to us. Sometimes parents go so far as to say "My children mean the world to me." What are we to make of such locutions? Are they simply ways of expressing affection towards the individuals in question, or do they literally assert the presence of meaning in somebody's life – and if so, whose life is being said to be imbued with meaning, the person who uttered the expression or the person being referenced by it?

If it makes sense to say that the life of the individual being referenced is itself meaningful, then this presents a problem for my account, as it seems quite possible for the referenced individual to not care deeply about meaning a lot to others – or, for that matter, about anything at all. To illustrate, it might be right to say that my dog means a lot to me (or, at the least, it's not the case that he "means nothing" to me), even if it is the case that he lacks the mental capacity to care deeply about anything, including me – he might simply get excited at the sight of various things and feel pleasure in interacting with them. Along the same lines, a newborn might "mean the world" to her mother, even if the child has not yet attained the cognitive complexity required to care deeply about

anything, including her mother – she might simply laugh when she feels pleasure and cry when she feels discomfort.

Indeed, if "meaning a lot" to somebody else automatically makes one's life more meaningful, this would be especially problematic for my account in that it would seem to allow for an individual to live an *extraordinarily* meaningful life (or, at least, one which is more meaningful than the life of someone who, to a fair extent, did live in accordance with their own deep concerns) even if that individual were completely apathetic towards everything and everyone. One can perhaps imagine the latter-day Elvis as being such an example, or someone like the misunderstood titular character in *The Life of Brian*.

Expressions such as "he means a lot to me" are quite common, and, I concede, it would probably not be nonsensical (though it might be a bit linguistically awkward) to change the verb "means" into the adjective "meaningful" and thereby say that a life can be "meaningful to" someone other than the person whose life it is: It probably wouldn't be incoherent, for example, for an earnest (if not slightly pretentious) mother to say, "My childrens' lives are very meaningful to me."

The question, however, is whether the extent to which a particular life has been "meaningful to others" is something which must be considered if one is to fairly and accurately ascertain the extent to which that life has been meaningful *tout court*. Put more simply, does meaning a lot to others entail that one's life is meaningful? Would we consider the life of the latter-day Elvis to be meaningful, for example, if he were completely apathetic and simply performing on autopilot?

It seems to me that the answer to these questions is “no”. The reason for this, I would argue, is that to say that A’s life is meaningful to B is just to say that B cares deeply about A. But being an object of someone’s deep concerns is not normally what we *essentially* have in mind when we think about how meaningful one’s life is; we wouldn’t consider a person’s life to become more meaningful, for example, if she unknowingly picked up a stalker (e.g., someone she was completely unaware of, or, perhaps, a former lover whom she detested) who genuinely cared deeply about her.

To give another example which shows that living a life that is meaningful to others is not in and of itself sufficient for living what we normally think of as being a meaningful life, one may think of the case of Terri Schiavo, whose life apparently became an object of deep concern for a large number of people after she fell into a coma from which she never awoke. While her life was only of instrumental political concern to some, there were certainly some individuals who came to care deeply about Terri Schiavo herself. If we assume both that Terri never knew or cared deeply about mattering to all these people and that their coming to care deeply about her did not help her live in accordance with the deep concerns she did hold, would it still be natural for us to conclude that her life ended up being more meaningful than it would have been had her case never attracted media attention?

Intuitively, it seems to me that the answer to this question is "no": while Terri Schiavo's life ended up meaning a lot to people she never met or knew about, their coming to care deeply about her did not make her own life more meaningful[86].

Granted, of course, it is quite possible, on my view, for A's life to be imbued with meaning by fostering relationships with other people, i.e., if A cares deeply about (and succeeds in) doing so. It is probably also possible on my account (though this is perhaps more debatable[87]) for A's life to be imbued with meaning if A cares deeply about (and succeeds in) living in such a way that A becomes an object of other people's deep concerns. In these aforementioned instances, however, the amount of meaning derives from the fact that A cares deeply about fostering relationships and living in such a way so

[86] One might object here by saying that even though Terri Shiavo's life didn't end up being more meaningful after she became famous, the reason for this was *not* because she didn't care about being an object of deep concern for other people; rather, it was because at the time she started to mean a lot to the other people in question, she was no longer really alive, and hence, it was too late for her life to be imbued with more meaning. Be that as it may, however, there do seem to be instances in which individuals do become an object of other people's deep concerns even though they themselves do not care about that. Newborns, for example, may not care deeply about whether they are cared about deeply by others (though it goes without saying that they will suffer both physically and emotionally if they are not taken care *of*); and while the baby might mean an enormous amount her mother, it would be suspicious to say that the baby was already at the point in her life where she was able to live a meaningful life. Or, to give another example, Isaac Newton (or, perhaps, Greta Garbo) certainly lived a significantly meaningful life, but he did not really seem to care much about fostering personal relationships with others; and even though it seems right to say that Newton's life was indeed meaningful, the amount of meaning in his life did not seem to derive from the fact that other people in his time cared deeply about him personally (assuming that they did, that is).

[87] The reason it is more debatable is that it the amount of meaning in A's life here depends on how other people emotionally react as A wants them to. As such, it seems particularly clear in this situation that how meaningful his life ends up being will, to some degree, be out of his hands. This is in line, however, with what I argued in previous chapters, i.e., that luck plays a substantial role in determining the amount of meaning in one's life.

as to become an object of B's deep concerns, respectively. In instances where it in no way matters to A that B cares deeply about A (e.g., the case of Terry Schiavo) or in cases where B's caring deeply about A goes against A's deep concerns (e.g., the case of the stalker), then A's life will not be made more meaningful by becoming an object of B's deep concerns.

§5.12: On Meaning a Lot for Someone Else

The previous section discussed whether one's life could be imbued with meaning simply in virtue of the fact that one's life was meaningful *to* someone else, i.e., despite the fact that one did not have any deep concerns about anything or anyone. I argued that it could not. In this section I discuss whether there is another (though similar) possible means by which to live a relatively meaningful life despite having a lack of deep concerns. What I have in mind is the possibility that one's life could be imbued with meaning simply in virtue of the fact that one's life means a lot *for* other people, even if one's life didn't mean a lot *to* other people.

To illustrate such a possibility, one may consider the life of Henrietta Lacks, a woman who, by unwittingly providing the source for an immortal line of cells shortly before she died of cancer, was instrumental to researchers' being able to achieve a large number of medical and scientific breakthroughs, including the development of the polio vaccine. Given her significant historical impact (which most people would think of as being aggregately positive), one might be tempted to conclude that she ended up living an extraordinarily meaningful life.

If the life of Henrietta Lacks was extraordinarily meaningful, however, it was presumably not (or, at least, not simply) because donating her cells allowed her to live in accordance with the concerns she had – she never learned that she had become the progenitor of an immortal line of cells and almost certainly never cared at all about achieving such a feat. In fact, she might not have even had an eye towards making a lasting contribution in the world at all. Indeed, for the sake of inquiry, one might even go so far as to imagine her as not having cared deeply about anything; and even if that were the case, the role she played in so many medical and scientific advancements would not have been diminished. That is to say that if her life were extraordinarily meaningful, its meaningfulness would not have sprung from her own deep concerns.

Furthermore, it should be noted that despite her influence, most people have never heard of Henrietta Lacks, and just about everyone who has doesn't really care about her personally – they don't care about what kind of person she was, whether she had a good life, etc. The only thing that matters to most people who know of her is that her cells continue to play an important role in a large number of medical and scientific advancements. As such, if it is right to say that her life was particularly meaningful, its meaningfulness would not have derived from the fact that it was particularly meaningful *to* anyone[88].

[88] Of course, as I argued in the previous subsection, even if her life were meaningful to other people, this by itself wouldn't have made her life more meaningful. The point of this comment is to acknowledge that if my argument failed (and if it is the case that one can live meaningfully simply in virtue of being an object of someone else's deep concerns), the case of Henrietta Lacks might be shown that there is an *additional* source of meaning that my account fails to consider.

From whence could the extraordinary amount of meaning in her life have come, then, if her life could be said to have been extraordinarily meaningful? Despite the fact that being the progenitor of an immortal cell line probably didn't help her live in accordance with the deep concerns she had, and even if her life didn't mean a lot *to* other people, it still seems right to say that her life has meant a lot *for* other people. And, returning to what was stated in the previous subsection, it would probably not be nonsensical to change the verb "means" into the adjective "meaningful" and thereby say that her life has been "meaningful for" a lot of other people. Can we conclude from this, however, that her life (or any life which is meaningful for other people) was meaningful *tout court*?

Again, I suspect (though, I must admit, I find it less obvious this time to say) that the answer to this question is "no": leading a life that means a lot for others does not by itself entail that one is leading a meaningful life. Losing one's life savings on a bet, for example, does not by itself imbue one's life with meaning, even if doing so allowed the winner of the bet do something that was really important to that winner.

It might turn out, however, that my intuitions on this matter are aberrant, and that the lives of, say, a blind man's seeing-eye dog, one's newborn child, and Henrietta Lacks would normally be thought of as being meaningful, even if none of these individuals cared deeply about what they did. If that were shown to be the case, then I would be forced to retreat to a fallback position stating that it is possible to have different things in mind at different times when we use locutions such as "a meaningful life". It would have to be said that the bulk of my dissertation has focused on elucidating what, broadly

speaking, one must do in order to live a life that is more meaningful *for oneself* and that the question of what one must do in order to live a life which is more meaningful *for others* is a separate question.

To proffer an answer to this latter question (a question which, to repeat, only need be raised if, *contra* my argument, it makes sense to say that lives can be meaningful simply in virtue of the fact that they are meaningful for others), it seems to me that to live a life which is meaningful insofar as it is meaningful for others amounts to living in such a way so as to increase the extent to which other people have befitting concerns and/or live in accordance with their deep concerns, i.e., it is a life which useful insofar as it helps[89] other people live more meaningful lives[90]. If I am correct here, then the operative

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[89] To clarify, I do not intend to say here that what X does is ever sufficient in and of itself for Y to live more meaningfully. Regardless of what X does, Y still needs to care deeply about something and live in accordance with that concern in order for Y's life to be made more meaningful. In other words, X *by himself* cannot be a meaning generator in Y's life; all X can do is influence Y in such a way that Y will come to have more befitting concerns (e.g., by exposing Y to new things), or X can help Y live in accordance with Y's deepest concerns (e.g., by paying for Y's college tuition).

[90] One might object here to such a view by saying that living a life that has a lot of meaning for others does not entail that one helped anyone else live a more meaningful life. In saying that someone's life had a lot of meaning for others, one might only intend to say that that person's life was *significant* for others in some (not necessarily positive) sense; according to this use of the term, for example, a concentration camp guard's life might be said to be meaningful for the prisoner whose life he has unjustly wrecked.

While I do not deny that the term "meaningful" might occasionally get used as a synonym for the term "significant", I do not think this is the primary (or, even, a very common) way for the term to get used. It seems to me that normally when we say things such as "that person means a lot for me" or, perhaps when we think of someone's life as being "meaningful for me", we normally think of it as having a positive influence on us in such a way that it helps "straighten us out" (i.e., it helps us come to have more befitting concerns) or it provides a means for us to live in better accordance with our deep concerns. It is for this reason that it seems more intuitively correct to say "Gandhi's life meant a lot (or "was meaningful") for the people of

notion of this fallback position (i.e. "meaningful for others") can itself be explained by appealing to the account of meaning which I have presented in the previous chapters of this dissertation (i.e., what would be referred to in the fallback account as "meaning for oneself")[91].

§5.2: Must a Meaningful Life be Meaningful *For* Someone?

What I have just argued opens up the way to an objection, though, for it seems fair to say that on my view, in order for a life to be meaningful, it must be meaningful *for* someone: i.e., my account asserts that a meaningful life is one that is meaningful for its subject, whereas my fallback position asserts that a meaningful life is a life that is meaningful for individuals (i.e., oneself or others). One might object to this by saying that the idea of what makes a life meaningful *tout court* cannot be condensed in this way and that, as such, one might accuse my account of being overly reductionistic.

My own view is that, outside of attempted discussions about "The" meaning of life, it does seem to me that when we talk about meaningful lives, we are normally in fact

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India", but not "Pol Pot's life meant a lot (or "was meaningful") for the people of Cambodia", despite the arguable fact that Pol Pots's life had a more significant influence on the lives of the Cambodians than Gandhi's life did on the lives of the Indians.

[91] It should be noted that the position I am actually advancing (i.e., that A's life cannot be made meaningful simply in virtue of the fact that it means a lot *to* or *for* B) as well as my potential fallback position (i.e., that A's life can, in one sense, be said to be meaningful in virtue of the fact that A's life means a lot *for* B) both appeal to the ideas which underlie my account of meaning: regardless of whether or not living a life that means a lot *for* others constitutes living a meaningful life, living a life that means a lot for others amounts to helping others live in accordance with their deep concerns and/or it helps them come to have more befitting deep concerns.

working with an agent-relative conception of meaning. While it is admittedly difficult to establish the truth of this claim outright, it is possible to argue towards it by revealing the shortcomings of competing accounts which cash out the notion of meaning as not being relative to anyone. The following three sub-sections will attempt to do so by addressing the possibility of defining meaning simply in terms of doing specific types of things; of achieving certain types of effects; and, more broadly, of pursuing what is objectively valuable, respectively.

§5.21: Meaning as Achieving Certain Types of Effects

One potential way to cash out the idea of meaning without making it relative to individuals is to define it simply in terms of achieving certain effects with one's life and without thereby specifying to whom or for whom those effects "mean a lot". There are any number of possible formulations which might fit such requirements, though some are more intuitively plausible than others, e.g.: to live meaningfully is to leave the world a better place than it was when you found it; to die with the most toys; to maximize the number of pennies lying at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

While it is impossible to address every conceivable formulation, I will focus on one possibility that seems intuitively promising. The formulation I have in mind is based on an expression which is commonly used during eulogies, i.e., the notion of "making a difference". Intuitively, one might think that the ideas of "making a difference with one's life" and "living a meaningful life" do seem to be connected in some way, and so one might be inclined to define meaning simply in terms of the difference one makes in the

world. Such a formulation would seem to explain why many people judge individuals such as Mother Teresa, Gandhi, and Albert Einstein to be paradigms of meaningful lives, for they all obviously made a difference in the world. It would also explain why life as a perennial couch potato is not normally thought of as being very meaningful, for such a form of life does not make a difference.

In order to assess the view that living a meaningful life is a matter of "making a difference", one needs to arrive at a workable understanding of what the latter expression amounts to. In order to do this, let us first consider the possibility that the phrase should be interpreted more or less literally, i.e., that "making a difference" is simply a matter of having a causal effect on the world. It does seem intuitively acceptable to say that "making a difference" entails that one has a causal effect on the world[92] (e.g., if Abraham

[92] There is room to question this assertion by bringing up possible counter-examples in which individuals "made a difference" *in virtue of the fact* that they didn't do anything at all. For example, one might be tempted to say of the parents of Hitler or Bin Laden that they could have made a big difference by simply remaining abstinent. In other words, they could have made a difference without having had a causal effect on the world.

It is not ultimately a problem for my own account of meaning if such counter-examples do in fact hit their mark, because my account is not ultimately based on the idea of "making a difference". However, to offer a defense of the competing claim, one might argue that it is not possible to make a difference by doing nothing, as doing nothing amounts to not making a difference at all. As such, if the parents of Hitler or Bin Laden had abstained, it would not have been correct to say that they made a difference; it would have only been correct to say that they abstained from making a detrimental difference.

If this defense is unconvincing, an alternate line of argument would claim that by abstaining, the parents of Hitler or Bin Laden would indeed have had a causal effect, i.e., their inaction would have brought about a different world – and it is in virtue of this that their inaction would have made a difference. Broadly speaking, according to this line of argument, it is hard to say why non-action can result in making a difference, but cannot result in making causal changes. Even in cases of non-action, it seems that one must accept either that non-action doesn't make a difference, or that it makes a difference *in virtue of the fact* that doing nothing has causal effects.

Lincoln hadn't done anything, he wouldn't have made a difference), just as it seems fair to say that making an increasingly larger difference entails that one has an increasingly larger causal effect on the world. The question at hand, though, is whether the converse is true: in other words, does simply having a causal effect on the world entail that one "makes a difference" in a sense that is relevant to the idea of living meaningfully? And similarly, does having an increasingly larger causal effect on the world entail that one "makes an increasingly larger difference" in this relevant sense?

It seems to me to be a lot easier to have a causal effect on the world than it is to "make a difference". One can have a causal effect on the world by mindlessly stepping on a twig, and yet doing so does not seem to make a difference in the relevant sense: it is difficult to imagine that anyone's life will be made more meaningful as a result of the fact that a twig has been mindlessly broken, or perhaps only slightly moved; one could spend the entirety of one's life slightly moving millions of twigs and make no more of a difference than someone who did absolutely nothing. This seems to show that "making a difference" is more than simply having a causal effect on the world.

One might try to salvage the idea that making a difference is simply a matter of changing the world by claiming that a minimum threshold of change is required before one can be said to have made a difference. Moving twigs does not meet that threshold, for example, but creating Mount Rushmore does.

Such a consideration may be somewhere near the right track, but nonetheless, it seems that the idea of "making a difference" requires more than simply bringing about

any change of significant magnitude. To illustrate this point, consider the case of Thomas Midgley, Jr., who, after having discovered that adding lead to gasoline reduced engine knocking, went on to work on a team which invented chlorofluorocarbons, the infamous ozone-depleting compounds used in refrigerants. In analyzing the effects of his life's work, the environmental historian J.R. McNeil claimed that Midgley "had more impact on the atmosphere than any other single organism in Earth history." (McNeil 2001, p. 111.) Similarly, consider Joseph Hazelwood, the captain of the Exxon Valdez; or the beekeeper who released the first Africanized honey bees into the wild; or the first person who transmitted the human immunodeficiency virus; or the person who came up with the "Kill a Sparrow Campaign" during China's "Great Leap Forward" – a campaign which led to a massive proliferation of locusts and, consequentially, widespread famine (Dikötter 2010, pp. 186 – 188). There is no doubt that these individuals all led causally momentous lives, and in that sense, it can be said of all of them that they "made a difference": the history of the world would have been noticeably different if they had lived otherwise, or if they had never lived at all. However, the sense in which it is right to say that these individuals "made a difference" is not the sense which is appealed to as a means of describing a life as having been well-lived. If, during a eulogy at his funeral, someone were to say that Joseph Hazelwood "really made a difference with his life", it would be hard to digest such a statement without interpreting it as being a form of ironic derision or general cynicism. Along the same lines, it's hard to see how inadvertently causing widespread, completely detrimental environmental devastation would by itself make one's life more meaningful, i.e., insofar as "meaningful" is a term used to describe the success of a life.

This leaves us with the question, then, of why the creation of Mt Rushmore would amount to "making a difference", but causing the Valdez disaster wouldn't (and, according to the proffered account, why doing the former would make one's life more meaningful whereas the latter wouldn't).

It is difficult to answer this question without appealing either to the notion of objective values (the possibility of which will be discussed in section §6.23) or to the concerns of individuals. By appealing to the latter, the answer to the question is easy: the creation of Mt. Rushmore aligns with what matters to people, whereas the creation of the oil spill does not[93]. Of course, if one tried to make sense of the notion of "meaning" in terms of "making a difference" (or, more broadly, the effects of one's actions), and then one tried to make sense of the notion "making a difference" in terms of individuals' concerns, then one would once again be working with a relativistic account of meaning (which, critics of my account might say, is problematic).

The same thing, it seems to me, could be said for any other formulation which attempted to distinguish between more and less meaningful lives in virtue of the causal effects of that life (e.g., leaving the world a better place; dying with the most toys; maximizing the number of pennies lying at the bottom of the Mariana Trench). It seems that any formulation of meaning which appeals to causal effects and which succeeds in tracking our intuitions about which types of lives are meaningful and which ones aren't will either appeal to the idea that some causal effects matter to individuals more than

[93] To say that the creation of the oil spill does not align with what matters to people is not to say that the creation of the oil spill is not something which matters to people. Rather, it is to say that creating the oil spill does not serve people's interests: quite the contrary, in fact.

other causal effects do, or it will appeal to the idea that some causal effects are more objectively valuable than other causal effects are.

As such, if one wanted to argue that it is possible to live a life which is meaningful *tout court*, and not just a life that was meaningful for oneself (and/or for others – a position against which I have already argued) by cashing out the notion of "meaning" in terms of the effects of that life, it seems one would have to appeal to the idea that some effects are more objectively valuable than others (a possibility which will be discussed in the subsection after next).

§5.22: Meaning as Doing Specific Types of Things

One potential way to cash out the idea of meaning without making it relative to individuals is to define it simply in terms of performing specific types of actions and without specifying to whom or for whom such actions matter. There are any number of possible formulations, or combinations thereof, which might illustrate this, e.g., to live meaningfully is to live adventurously; to pursue justice; to spend one's time creating beauty, even if it is ephemeral; to spend one's time distinguishing between true and false propositions; and so on.

Such a view has some intuitive force behind it, for it does seem possible to live meaningfully by doing the aforementioned activities. And since these activities do not specify to or for whom the actions matter, one could argue that the concept of meaning does not fundamentally stem from individuals' deep concerns. As such, it could be said

that it is possible to live a life which is meaningful *tout court*, and not simply a life that is meaningful to or for someone, simply by performing such actions.

My response to this line of thinking mirrors my response to the view that meaning can stem from the achievement of certain ends, as was discussed in the previous subsection. It seems intuitively clear that one's life would be made more meaningful by doing any of the aforementioned activities than by doing other certain types of things (e.g., spending all of one's time counting blades of grass, rolling around in the mud all day, endlessly watching television reruns, etc.) The question is, in virtue of what do we make this distinction? Why does it seem intuitively plausible to say that the creation of beauty and the pursuit of truth are meaningful activities, whereas counting blades of grass all day is not?

Again, as far as I can tell, there are two only two possible ways of answering this question. The first is to appeal to the idea of objectively valuable actions or behavior. On this view, some actions (e.g., creating beauty, pursuing truth, etc.) have *inherent* value whereas others (e.g., rolling around in the mud all day) do not; and it is in virtue of this distinction that we are able to say that some activities are meaningful whereas others are not. This view will be discussed in more detail in the following subsection.

The other possible way of answering the question of why some activities seem meaningful whereas others do not appeals to the idea that *we* value some things but not others. On this view, what determines whether or not an activity carries meaning is how that activity fits in with what we value. Some activities (e.g., creating beauty, pursuing

truth) are activities which we value for their own sake or which serve ends which we value (e.g., the existence of a just society), whereas others activities (e.g., rolling in mud) do not align with what we value.

Of course, if one appeals to the idea that people value some things but not others as a way of explaining why some activities seem meaningful whereas others do not, then it seems one would be left with a relativistic account of meaning. If we say that a particular person's life is meaningful in virtue of the fact that it was full of beauty-producing activities, for example, and that beauty-producing activities are considered meaningful in virtue of the fact that people value beauty, then the meaning of these activities stems from the fact that individuals value of beauty: in other words, if producing beauty were irrelevant to what people valued, it would be a meaningless activity, just as rolling in the mud is a meaningless activity; and conversely, if people valued rolling in the mud (or valued being covered in mud), then rolling in the mud would provide some amount of meaning to their lives. More broadly, it can be stated that if meaning amounts to performing actions which are valued by individuals, then the types of lives which ought to be called meaningful will be determined by individuals' (perhaps changing) values.

With this in mind, it would seem that if meaning were simply a matter of performing valued actions, then it would probably be more precise to say that life can be meaningful for the people who valued those actions than it would be to say that life can be meaningful *tout court*. Nonetheless, if living a meaningful life is essentially just a matter of performing actions and behaviors which are valued, then saying that one led a

meaningful life *tout court* might simply be a shorthand way of saying that one lived a life which consisted in the performance of valued actions.

§5.23: Meaning as Pursuit of the Objectively Valuable

As noted before, it is conceivable that the way we distinguish between more and less meaningful lives is by ascertaining the extent to which the activities and/or achievements of those lives were objectively valuable. On such a view, we would say that a life which was spent looking for (and/or which succeeded in finding) the cure to a widespread deadly disease would be more meaningful than a life which was spent endlessly watching reruns of *Bonanza* because we are able to see that the former is more objectively valuable than the latter. And, on this view, because we are able to determine this without appealing to the valuings of particular individuals, it might be said that a life can be meaningful *tout court*, rather than just being meaningful simply insofar as it is meaningful for its subject (or, perhaps, for others – though, again, this is a position I have argued against).

The main problem with basing an account of meaning on the idea of objective values is, as I argued in chapter two, that such an account is not ontologically parsimonious. If an account of meaning can be given without appealing to such things as objective or inherent value, so the objection goes, then *ceteris paribus* it would be better not to do so. And, indeed, as I myself have argued via this dissertation, it is possible to give an account of meaning which tracks our intuitions about which types of lives are

meaningful without appealing to the idea of objective values; as such, one would stand on epistemologically firmer ground by accepting the simpler explanation.

It should be said, though, that while appealing to ontological parsimony does seem to carry some argumentative weight, it does not prove the non-existence of objective values: it might still be the case, after all, that some things are in fact more inherently valuable than others, and that some lives are more meaningful than others in virtue of this fact. While it seems to be generally reliable, Occam's razor is not an infallible guide to truth.

There are, however, two additional reasons to doubt that living a meaningful life fundamentally amounts to performing objectively valuable actions and/or achieving objectively valuable ends. The first is that (at least many of) the types of actions and achievements we judge to be inherently valuable seem to lose that status in circumstances in which those actions and ends no longer fit in with what anyone values. For example, one might be tempted to say that finding a cheap effective remedy against the transmission of malaria would be a way to live a meaningful life. However, if one happened to find such a cure the day after the last mosquito on earth had died (e.g., from a type of highly-contagious disease which only affected mosquitoes), then this achievement would suddenly no longer seem to be particularly meaningful. As another example, one might think that a blind-from-birth man who had an uncanny ability to unknowingly create original paintings in the style of da Vinci or Michelangelo would lead a meaningful life if he spent his time making these paintings; the same thing could be said of a Beethoven-like deaf musician. However, if one were to learn that everyone

in the painter's world was blind as well, or that the painter was the last living person in his world, then it instantly becomes more difficult to view this aspect of his life as being meaningful; the same thing could be said of the deaf musician. Examples such as these seem to suggest that our concept of meaning tracks what is valued, rather than what has inherent value.

Of course, one might argue, there are some things which, regardless of circumstances, never seem to lose their intrinsic value, e.g., (achieving) knowledge, justice, and/or pleasure, and that we judge a life to be meaningful in terms of doing or achieving these things. If such things exist, however, it is doubtful that they prove a point, for the things which seem to never lose their inherent value regardless of circumstances also seem to be the same things which are either always valued, and/or which always have instrumental value with respect to what is valued. In order to clearly show that living a meaningful life amounts to pursuing what is objectively valuable, we would need to find examples of actions or achievements valued by nobody (including ourselves) and which lack instrumental value, but which we nonetheless recognize as being inherently valuable, and which also forms the basis for at least one meaningful life. There may be such examples, but I myself cannot think of any. And, again, the fact that there do seem to be cases in which a life no longer seems to be (as) meaningful when we learn that it consists in the pursuit of something that, as it turns out, is of no value to or for anyone seems to provide some reason to believe that meaning stems from valuing, not from inherent value.

The second cause to doubt that living a meaningful life fundamentally amounts to performing objectively valuable actions and/or achieving objectively valuable ends is that, as has already been discussed throughout this dissertation, whether or not we take a life to be meaningful seems to depend on our understanding of what the subject's attitude towards what it is that he or she is doing and/or accomplishing. To illustrate, one may imagine two workers, one of whom was a volunteer and the other a slave, who labored side by side building the Great Pyramid of Giza. One can imagine the volunteer loving what he did and proud to be serving his king by creating a memorial which would last for as long as he could imagine; conversely, one can imagine the slave hating what he did, not caring at all about the king or the fact that what he was doing would last for as long as he could conceive. Even if the two workers' lives were otherwise equal (i.e., they were equally efficient, had equal living conditions, lived equally long, etc.), it would still seem right to say that the life of the volunteer was more meaningful than the life of the slave; indeed, it might be right to say that the life of the slave was completely meaningless, even if it were the case that his actions and achievements were objectively valuable.

This seems to show, at the very least, that living meaningfully is not *simply* a matter of doing and/or achieving what is objectively valuable[94]. Furthermore, if the

[94] This effectively is the view of Susan Wolf, according to which living meaningfully amounts to doing/achieving objectively valuable things, and, in addition, to valuing what one is doing/achieving. In spite of the objections I have raised, such a view might end up being correct. However, even if that is the case, the fact that the one needs to love, on the whole, what one is doing in order for one's life to be meaningful would seem to show that living meaningfully requires living a life that is meaningful for oneself. As such, even if Wolf's account of meaning is correct, it is not a non-relativistic account, even though it relies on the notion of objective values.

amount of meaning in a life is essentially based on valuings [and not (merely) objective values], and if, as I have argued, the values on which the meaning in a life is based is not ultimately the valuings of other people, it seems to follow that the amount of meaning in a life is essentially based on one's own valuings, which is to say that living a meaningful life is essentially living a life that is meaningful for oneself.

§5.3: Conclusion: Meaning as Pursuit of Purpose

In popular discourse, the notion of meaning seems to be quite closely linked to the notion of "purpose", a term which is used to refer to an aim or a plan. In this chapter, it could be said in retrospect that I have considered the possibility that meaning in one's life can arise simply in virtue of the fact that one (even if inadvertently and unknowingly) conforms to purposes which are beyond one's own.

I first considered the possibility that one's life could be made meaningful simply in virtue of the fact that one's life conforms to the purposes of other people. In discussing the examples of Henrietta Lacks, the losing gambler, and the Egytian slave, I argued that behavioral conformity to the purposes of others does not by itself entail that one's life is itself meaningful (or, at least, saying that one's life is meaningful in such circumstances is simply a shorthand way of saying that one helps to make other people's lives more meaningful).

After having considered the possibility that one's life could be made meaningful by living in accordance with the purposes of others, I went on to consider the possibility

that one's life could be made meaningful in virtue of the fact that it was lived in accordance with a purpose which was not the purpose of some individual. More specifically, I considered the possibility that meaning could be provided simply by performing specific activities and/or by bringing about specific ends which have objective value; the underlying thought of this line of reasoning is that our lives already have a purpose (i.e., to pursue that which is objectively valuable), and that living meaningfully amounts to doing so. In addition to noting the dubiousness of objective values (and therefore casting doubt on the idea that that purpose is generated by them), I argued that what we take to be objectively valuable activities and/or achievements also seems to be things that people *happen* to value (or which have instrumental value relative to the things that people happen to value), and as such, if these things do give rise to meaning, there is no way of knowing that the meaning was generated by objective value, instead of individual valuings. I also went on to argue that intuitively, we wouldn't think that doing or achieving objectively valuable things would imbue a person's life with meaning if there was a complete disconnect between what is objectively valuable and what that person valued. Even if the construction and/or completion of the Great Pyramid were objectively valuable, for example, it is dubious that the lives of Egyptian slaves were made more meaningful by being forced to work towards its completion against their will.

Furthermore, on a more abstract level, it seems dubious that one's life could be made meaningful in virtue of the fact that it was lived in accordance with a purpose which was not the purpose of some individual(s). Living in accordance with a purpose

which was not generated by an individual would seem to require that one's life had a teleological function which was not determined by the wills of individuals. It is not clear, however, how this could be the case[95].

If it is true that meaning is a matter of living in accordance with a purpose, and that purposes are always tied to individuals, then it seems to cast doubt on the possibility of living a life that is meaningful *tout court*. It would only seem to be possible for one's life to have meaning which is relative to *someone's* purposes. And if I was correct in arguing that one's own life cannot be made meaningful in virtue of the fact that it conforms to someone else's purposes, then it follows that if meaning amounts to the pursuit of purpose, then meaning amounts to the pursuit of one's *own* purposes.

It seems to me, however, that the idea of meaning is not ultimately best cashed out in terms of the pursuit of purposes. My own position, as has been argued in this dissertation, is that meaning is a function of living in accordance with deep concerns. Having purposes (i.e., having plans and aims) is not identical to caring deeply about

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[95] It should also be noted that even if life did have a teleological function which was not rooted in the plans and aims of individuals (e.g., if the teleological function of life was to procreate, regardless of whether any individuals had any intention of doing so, and regardless of whether doing so fit in with anybody's aims), it seems that this would only be a fact directly relevant to the cosmological question "What is *the* meaning of life?"; it does not seem directly relevant to the more humble type of questions which people tend to ask in times of emptiness or defeat: "Why does my life seem so meaningless?" and "What can I do to make my life more meaningful?" Individuals generally ask questions such as these when they themselves have failed to adopt a purpose (or purposes), or when they have not succeeded in pursuing the purposes they have adopted. The question of whether there are impersonal teleological purposes is irrelevant in such contexts, unless the individual in question has made it her own purpose to adopt/pursue these impersonal purposes… at which point, however, the purposes in question would no longer be merely impersonal.

something, and pursuing one's purposes is not identical with living in accordance with one's deep concerns. While some purposes are born of deep concerns, not all are (i.e., I am clearly pursing a purpose when I reach for the remote to change the channel, but it is unlikely that my doing so ultimately makes my life any more meaningful), and one would ultimately need to appeal to how deeply one cares about things in order to distinguish between purposes whose pursuits make one's life meaningful and those which don't.

In addition, it seems that there are some things that we care deeply about (e.g., playing a musical instrument, going on a hike with one's dog and watching the sun set) even though it's not clear that such things consist in the pursuit of a purpose. It might be that some of the meaningful aspects of our lives are done spontaneously and without aim.

Roads Ahead

Throughout this dissertation, I have focused primarily on giving an account which explains what is essential to the idea of living meaningfully, and what, broadly speaking, is involved in coming to live a more meaningful life. What I have said is certainly incomplete. There is more that can be said about the ways in which the notion "meaningful" is used, what the conceptual relationship is between meaning and other evaluative concepts, and how the quest for meaning ought to fit in to our practical deliberations. In the remainder of this dissertation, I will offer seven suggestions for further work that can be done on the topic of meaning, and I will offer some preliminary thoughts on each.

1. One way in which the term "meaningful" gets used which I haven't touched upon is the notion of a "meaningful experience" – or, rather, what might be better called an "experience of meaningfulness". The question I have in mind here is whether there is a class of experiences which we are apt to label as "meaningful" simply in virtue of the phenomenological qualities of those experiences. Might we be apt to label a particular mystical experience, for example, as being meaningful simply in terms of the subjective qualities of that experience? If so, are those qualities the same ones that underlie all the other individual experiences which we would be apt to label as meaningful simply in virtue of *their* subjective qualities (e.g., a particular experience of finally and unexpectedly receiving a wedding proposal; a particular experience of holding one's long-wanted newborn baby for the first time; a particular experience of a "psychological

breakthrough", etc.)? If so, what precisely are those subjective qualities? Would we be apt to describe any experience which had those subjective qualities as being meaningful? Furthermore, what, if anything, would be the relationship between experiences which were phenomenologically meaningful and lives (or periods thereof) which were meaningful? Is the one a necessary or a sufficient condition for the other?

I suspect that we do sometimes label particular experiences as being meaningful simply in virtue of the phenomenological character of those experiences. I also suspect that some types of phenomenological qualities are present in nearly all such experiences (e.g., the presence of relatively rich cognitive content, a sense of aesthetic beauty, a sense of connection, relatively intense feelings in the chest), whereas other types of phenomenological qualities are common but not always present in these types of experiences (e.g., a sense of "eureka"; a sense of sadness). I would argue that "phenomenologically meaningful" experiences are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for living a meaningful life (nor *vice versa*); however, it seems to me that thinking about one's own life and judging it to be meaningful *can* give rise to a sense of meaning, and, conversely, that it is *possible* for one to care deeply about having these types of experiences and thereby come to live a more meaningful life in virtue of the fact that one comes to have them.

There is a lot to be said here, though it is admittedly difficult to formulate philosophical arguments in support of any position, as the data in question (i.e., the qualitative nature of individual experience) is not easy to verify, compare or even discuss. However, if the emerging field of experimental philosophy could ever be said to be of

any use, it would certainly be of use when it comes to answering the question of what is at the heart of qualitatively meaningful experiences.

2. A somewhat similar matter for further discussion centers around the questions of whether there is a conceptual link between meaning and happiness, and if so, what that link is. It might be the case, for example, that people have different conceptions of happiness in mind at different times, and that the concept of meaning might help to provide a way distinguish between these conceptions. The difference between the type of happiness that consists in "simple pleasures" (e.g., drinking a milkshake) and what people sometimes refer to as "real" or "true" happiness might be that the latter necessarily has meaningfulness as its object and cause; in other words, on such a view, it might be conceivable to experience a relatively shallow and likely ephemeral sense of happiness simply by having one's senses stimulated in the right way, but in order to find "real happiness", one needs to experience a certain satisfaction in honestly and accurately assessing one's life as having been a meaningful endeavor[96].

If there is a form of happiness which results from living meaningfully, this also gives rise to the normative question of what ultimately matters more: living meaningfully

[96] There is, in addition, an empirical psychological question here which is worthy of pursuit, i.e., does living a meaningful life (and, perhaps, experiencing "real" happiness as a result) have an impact on one's ability to experience the type of happiness that consists of simple pleasures? In line with John Stuart Mill's views on happiness, it may be the case that simple pleasures would start to pale in comparison to the happiness that results from living meaningfully and recognizing oneself as doing so. Alternatively, it may be that one is released from a certain form of anxiety when one comes to accept one's life as being meaningful, and, as a result, one may be in a better position to experience and appreciate the simple pleasures in life.

or the psychological payoff of doing so. If the only thing that matters is the psychological payoff, then living meaningfully might itself be threatened with irrelevance as long as the mere belief that one's life was meaningful persisted.

Intuitively, it seems to me that the mere experience of happiness which results from having (or believing that one has) lived meaningfully is not sufficient. It is for this reason that most people would not, as far as I could imagine, decide to plug themselves into a *Matrix*-style experience machine (i.e., one which made individuals think they were living an extraordinarily meaningful life, despite the fact that they were in fact spending the entirety of their lives dreaming in a vat of goo), regardless of how "deeply" happy doing so would make them feel. It does not follow from this, however, that the happiness that springs from living meaningfully is itself of no value or that it provides no reason for living meaningfully. As such, we are left with the normative question of just how closely the value of living meaningfully and the value of being "deeply" happy depend on each other.

3. In pursuing the notion of meaning insofar as it relates to meta-ethics, one might investigate the possibility that there is a conceptual link between the idea of meaning and the idea of virtue. Might it not be the case, for example, that virtue is conceived of, at least in part, relative to meaning? Perhaps the reason why we take some individuals to be models of virtue rather than others is, at least in part, because we believe them to have lived meaningful lives. Perhaps we take some actions and dispositions to be

virtuous at least in part because we believe them to be a generally reliable means by which to live meaningfully.

While I doubt that the idea of virtue could be cashed out completely in terms of meaningfulness, it seems like the idea of meaning could play a defensive role against the claim that the concept of virtue can be cashed out simply in terms of one's willingness and ability to fulfill one's moral obligations. A neo-Aristotelian conception of virtue, for example, might claim that paradigm cases of virtuous individuals are those in which the individuals in question are not essentially moral saints: they are, in addition (or, perhaps, *rather*), individuals who succeeded in living extraordinarily meaningful lives. Theodore Roosevelt could be said to be a paradigm example of someone who had a virtuous character, for example, even though he is not primarily thought of as being a paradigm example of morality (or immorality, for that matter); there is no doubting, however, that his life was meaningful, and it may be the case that he is thought of as having been virtuous in light of the belief that his life was meaningful.

4. While I have not spent a lot of time in this dissertation discussing either the relationship between meaning and our moral obligations or how a longing for meaning ought to fit in to our practical deliberations, there is surely much to be said.
Perhaps the most pressing question to be addressed is how to weigh the often-competing claims of meaning and morality. Those with beliefs in line with Bernard Williams' account of reasons internalism would hold that the apparent claims of morality are subservient to the claims of meaning, and that people cannot be expected to be motivated

to act in accordance with moral norms (or morality itself, if there is a difference) if doing so prevents them from living in accordance with their deep befitting concerns. Those with beliefs in line with Kant's view that the moral law ought never to be broken, on the other hand, will hold that one ought never to pursue meaningfulness if doing so puts them at odds with morality.

An easy way out of this Williamsian-Kantian conflict, of course, would be provided if coming to have a more befitting set of deep concerns coincided with coming to have a set of concerns which was more in line with one's (apparent) moral obligations. If that were the case, then practical conflicts between meaning and morality could be sidestepped: instead of coming to live in better accordance with the immoral deep concerns that one had, one would live a life that was both more meaningful and more in line with one's (apparent) moral obligations by instead adopting and living in accordance with a more befitting set of concerns.

It is far from obvious, however, that there is a strict correlation between the set of one's most befitting concerns and the set of concerns which are most in line with the demands of morality, or that acting in perfect accordance with the demands of morality is equivalent to acting in perfect accordance with the set of one's most befitting concerns. It would be of tremendous social and philosophical importance if such a link could be established, but if it could not (of, *a fortiori*, if it could be shown not to), then there would remain a significant amount of philosophical work that would need to be done in order to provide an answer to the question of when and why morality should trump meaning, and *vice versa*.

5. A further question about the relationship between meaning and morality is whether we have a moral obligation to help other people live more meaningful lives, and if so, in which circumstances such obligations would apply.

For some, morality is seen strictly as a restraining force (e.g., it helps to restrain violence, theft, certain forms of sexual behavior, etc.), whereas for others, it also involves positive commitments to help improve the lives of other people as well (e.g., on such a view, helping those who are suffering is not merely a supererogatory act). The reason for this difference in outlook might be that the latter hold there to be a general moral obligation to help other people come to live more meaningful lives, whereas the former do not. There are certainly philosophical arguments that could be made for and against each side.

If it is widely accepted, or could be established, that we do have a moral obligation to help other people come to live more meaningful lives, then this would seem to make morality a more intimate, less monolithic enterprise, for, as I have argued in this dissertation, there is a great variance (or, at least there is the potential for great variance) in which forms of life will be relatively meaningful for any particular individual. As such, helping other people live a more meaningful life would be greatly facilitated by having an increased understanding of what their circumstances are, what potentialities they have and what they care deeply about.

The possibility that we have a moral obligation to promote meaningfulness would itself certainly give rise to other problems. One such notable problem is the conflict

between the apparent need to respect other people's autonomy and the apparent need to influence them in such a way so that they would come to have more befitting concerns. To some degree, people do try to influence other people's deep concerns for their "own good" (e.g., through education, parenting, religion, and government propaganda). The question remains, though, of just how much mental manipulation would be morally justifiable in cases where doing so would cause other people to have more befitting deep concerns.

6. Closely related to the question of whether we have a moral obligation to promote meaning in other people's lives is the question of how the idea of meaning might justifiably play a more prominent role in political thought and policy than it currently does. Should political institutions be in the business of trying to maximize the amount of meaning in people's lives, e.g., by trying to get people to have more befitting concerns? If so, how might they go about doing so? On the whole, does liberalism or libertarianism provide a more efficient way of promoting meaning in individuals' lives? Is meaning somehow related to justice, and is there any reason to promote a certain level of equality when it comes to the amount of meaning in people's lives (e.g., *ceteris paribus*, given a limited amount of public resources, would it sometimes, always or never be preferable to institute policies which tended to increase the amount of meaning in the lives of people whose lives were the least meaningful, at the cost of decreasing the amount of meaning in the lives of others)?

7. The final topic for further discussion I will offer is the broad question of how the concept of meaningfulness fits in with an understanding of what our *summum bonum* is, if there is such a thing at all. In other words, what normative elements compose the measuring stick by which we judge whether a life has been lived as well or as successfully as possible, and how (and to what extent) does the concept of meaning enter in to such assessments, if it does so at all?

Prima facie, as was Kant's view, it seems that happiness and morality are conceptual elements of the *summum bonum*. I would also argue, though, that meaning is an additional factor[97]. Being forced to endlessly perform what are normally thought of as moral actions while being on a strict regimen of soma, for example, seems to fall short of an optimal life; and, at the very least, a life in which one acted in accordance with a deep concern about abiding by the moral law (or whatever provides the foundation for morality) would seem to be on the whole better, *ceteris paribus*, than a life in which one simply acted in accordance with the moral law (e.g., out of a *small* homogenous desire to obey the moral law as such, and in the total absence of deep concerns of any kind.)

It might seem right to say that a life which is relatively meaningful is, on the whole, better than one that isn't, *ceteris paribus*, just as it might seem right to say that a morally-laudable or a happy life is, on the whole, better than a life that is morally reprehensible or unhappy, *ceteris paribus*. There is perhaps reason to doubt this,

[97] This is not to say that there are no other evaluative elements which we use to determine whether a life has reached its highest potential. Martin Seligman (2011, p. 24), for example, lists *positive emotion, engagement* (i.e., flow), *relationships*, *meaning* and *achievement* as the elements of a well-lived life.

however. It might turn out to be the case that meaning accounts for nothing unless it is fused with morality (i.e., if one lives in accordance with a deep concern about fulfilling one's moral obligations). It might also turn out to be the case that meaning always contributes to a successful or well-lived life, except insofar as the meaning in one's life was generated by living in accordance with immoral deep concerns. If either of these two aforementioned possibilities is true, then there would be cases in which living meaningfully does not contribute towards living well; the life of Genghis Khan would seem to serve as a prime example of this.

It might even turn out that in instances where meaning in one's life springs from immoral deep concerns, living meaningfully would not simply *fail to contribute* towards achieving one's *summum bonum*; rather, it would serve to pull one further away from it. In other words, on such a view, one would be closer to one's *summum bonum* if one acted in accordance with a superficial desire to perform an immoral action than if one acted in accordance with a deep concern to perform that same action, *ceteris paribus*. If this is true, then Genghis Khan's life, for example, would have been better on the whole if he hadn't cared so deeply about causing so much mayhem, even if the amount of mayhem he ended up intentionally causing was the same (i.e., if a superficial and deep concern to do what he did ended up having an equal amount of causal efficacy).

In light of these considerations, questions remain of how big a role meaning plays in our *summum bonum* and whether meaning can itself be thought of as an invariable intrinsic good. What seems to be certain, though, is that we can't ignore the idea of

meaning when trying to ascertain how close a life comes to achieving its highest potential.

It should be noted that one of the difficulties of trying to determine how the idea of meaning fits in with the idea of one's *summum bonum* stems from the fact that what one takes morality to consist in and what one takes to be the constituent parts of one's *summum bonum* seem to be largely determined by what one's deep concerns are. As a result, in looking at one's own life, one is apt to take one's *summum bonum* to always be in alignment with living meaningfully, even as one is apt to see a disconnect between what is meaningful for other people and what their *summum bonum* is. To illustrate, someone like Genghis Khan might be able to recognize that his life would be made more meaningful if here were to succeed in conquering more people by way of mayhem; such a person, however, would also be apt to think of such a goal as being compatible with (if not constitutive of) his *summum bonum*, either because he took his endeavor to be morally permissible, justified or required, or because he would not take morality to be an element of his *summum bonum*. As such, in looking at the life of someone else (say, Mother Teresa), he might be able to recognize that her life was meaningful, but he would also be apt to claim that her life did not reach the *summum bonum*, for she did not succeed in conquering anybody. The inverse, of course, would probably be said by someone like Mother Teresa: while she might be able to recognize that Genghis Khan lived a meaningful life, she would never claim that his life came anywhere near attaining its *summum bonum*, for he spent his life viciously conquering people instead of living morally. The problem, then, with trying to determine how the idea of meaning fits in

with the idea of our *summum bonum* is that what one takes the *summum bonum* to be will likely be influenced by what one cares deeply about. A remedy to this problem would seem to lie in recognizing that even though it's best for us to care deeply about things, the things we care deeply about are not necessarily, at the end of the day, the things which are best for us.

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