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*Morality and the Meaning of Life: Some First Thoughts**

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Although there may be many questions about the meaning of life that will ultimately prove intractable, I think that there are some questions that can be answered. Furthermore, I think that progress towards answering them can be made through work that has and will be done in moral philosophy. In support of this I shall articulate a set of questions that I think are often at issue when people ask about the meaningfulness of life. These questions give rise to a set of conditions that a fully adequate answer must satisfy. Among other things, these conditions explain why a familiar theological answer to the meaningfulness of life seems so attractive. However, they also create problems for this answer, as well as for an answer that has appeared attractive to a number of contemporary philosophers, that the meaning of life is created by the choices that people make and the desires that they have. I shall suggest that work in moral philosophy may provide an answer that falls between these two camps – that a moral life is a meaningful life. I shall sketch a theory of morality that satisfies the conditions that have been set out. If this sketch can be filled out, then a moral life will be at least part of what can make a life meaningful. Whether this account of the moral life leaves out anything important for the meaningfulness of life will be the subject of some concluding remarks.

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I

To see what questions are being raised when people wonder what makes life meaningful, it will be useful to look at two extremes: the first, the view that life is made meaningful by its relation to some transcendent purpose; the second, that life is not meaningful at all.

As an example of the first extreme, I shall take a familiar theological answer to the question of the meaningfulness of life, that of orthodox Christianity. Human life was created by God for a purpose, to stand in a relationship of fellowship or communion with God. In order for this relationship to be of the sort that fits God's purpose, it must be freely entered into. But people invariably abuse this freedom, turning away from God and undermining their chances for fellowship with Him. God in His mercy has provided a remedy for this abuse, in the form of His son Jesus Christ. All people have to do is repent of their abuse, receive God's forgiveness, and this relationship with God will be restored. Full and complete restoration can occur only after death, but until that time people have a mission to fulfill on earth. They are to obey God's commands, acting towards others in ways that respect their dignity as creatures of God, and displaying towards them the same compassion that God has Himself shown towards human beings. To someone who has acknowledged all of this, has asked God's forgiveness, and with the help of God is trying to carry out God's mission in her life, life can be lived with a new sense of purpose, one that allows her to approach her daily tasks both with a sense of tranquility and with enthusiasm. Whatever sufferings or misfortunes befall her, she knows that her relationship with God makes it all worthwhile. Here, is a set of claims which if true seem to provide life with a meaning in a sense in which people have often looked for it.

In contrast, the denial of the meaningfulness of life has taken a more and a less extreme form. In its more extreme form it holds that not only is there no such purpose to life as that outlined above, life is not worth living at all. If a person were rational, he would simply end his life.[1] People are in a no-win situation. Whatever desires they have are hardly ever satisfied. When they are satisfied, whatever significance this has is wiped away by the sands of time. Even if they are satisfied, that is not the end of the matter. New desires arise again, most of which also remain unsatisfied. The apparent point of all of this even seems

1 This view is drawn from Arthur Schopenhauer. See, e.g., his 'On the Suffering of the World,' and 'On the Vanity of Existence,' in *Essays and Aphorisms*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books 1970), 41-50, 51-4. These essays are reprinted in Steven Sanders and David R. Cheney, eds., *The Meaning of Life* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1980), 25-32, 33-6.

to turn against itself. Complete satisfaction of desire turns out to be boring, a boredom whose tedium can be relieved only by a new outbreak of desires, most of which, again, are bound to be frustrated. Taken all in all, the suffering and anguish in life outweigh whatever pleasures are experienced. Even if there were a God who put us into this predicament, the character of our predicament shows that his purposes aren't worth achieving. If we were rational, we would spite him and put an end to the whole irrational show. Life is not just meaningless; it is better not to be lived at all.

The less extreme form acknowledges that a person's life may exhibit more pleasure on the whole than pain or suffering, but maintains that without some further point to which these pleasures contribute, there is no reason to go on living.[2] Faced with the inevitability of death, even a person like Tolstoy, whose life was filled with the pleasures of art, the love of family, and the attainment of success, can wonder whether her life has any meaning. Given death as its end, given that her pleasures and accomplishments will be of little or no consequence to future generations and certainly of no consequence when human life itself is extinguished from the earth, her life appears to be without meaning. Without some further point to which her pleasures and successes are related, a point of some more enduring quality than those pleasures themselves, it would seem to make no difference how her life has been spent or, indeed, whether it was spent at all. Had her life been spent in a different way, it would be of as much (and that is to say of as little) consequence as the way it was spent. Since there is no good reason to live her life one way rather than another, she might just as well end it. Life of any sort appears to be bleak and meaningless.

One does not have to grant the cogency of any of these views to see what some of the questions are that are being raised when it is asked whether life is meaningful and these views are taken as possible answers. To ask whether life is meaningful is at least to ask whether there isn't a certain way of living that gives one's life *value*, a value that outweighs whatever disvalue there may be in the suffering or misfortune contained in that life, a value it would lack if it were led in some other way. I.e., to ask whether life is meaningful is to ask whether there isn't a way of living one's life that in retrospect allows one to say that it was *good* that one lived it in that way, *better* than had one lived it in some other way, and *better* than had one not lived it at all.

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2 What follows is taken from Leo Tolstoy, *My Confession*, translated by Leo Wiener, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons 1905), excerpts of which are reprinted in Sanders and Cheney, 15-24, and in E. D. Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press 1981), 9-19.

The importance of bringing in a purpose to life in the theological view that we have considered is that fulfillment of a purpose is something that can be seen as *good*. Things do seem to be good to the extent to which they fulfill a purpose, and a purpose provided by someone with the credentials of the God of Christianity does seem worth fulfilling. Furthermore, the fact that full attainment of this purpose occurs after a person's death prevents whatever misfortune a person may suffer from interfering with the fulfillment of this purpose. The character of the relationship that constitues fulfillment of this purpose, perfect fellowship with God, makes it outweigh the disvalue of any such suffering. Finally, according to this view, it makes a difference what kind of life one lives. Not only must one repent and ask God's forgiveness to achieve the purpose of human life, it is part of God's plan that people act in certain ways towards one another. Not any and every sort of life can fulfill these purposes.

This is confirmed by the two views we have considered that deny the meaningfulness of life. According to the more extreme view, there is nothing in human life that can make up for the suffering and frustration found in it. Life is on the whole *bad*. Like a cruel joke it ought to be ended rather than played out to its conclusion. On the less extreme view, life is not held out as something bad in itself. Rather, without some further point or purpose of the sort mentioned in the theological view we have considered, there is nothing in any way of life to single it out as *good*, allowing it to overcome whatever pain or misfortune that may occur, nothing that on balance would make it preferable to some other way of life.

Thus, to ask whether life is meaningful is at least to ask whether there is a way of lving one's life that will make it overall good, good in spite of the existence of suffering or misfortune, and good in a way in which it would not be had it been led in a different way. Given that this is so, one can see why one might look to moral philosophy for some help in seeing what makes life meaningful. One of the things that has occupied the attention of moral philosophers is what it is that brings value into a life. That one should look to moral philosophy for such help is, perhaps, not so surprising. Its importance is that once it is recognized, there is a chance of finding life to be meaningful without having to bring in the kind of transcendent purpose mentioned in the theological view. Not everything that has been thought to be good has been thought to be good in virtue of some purpose external to it. Some things appear to be worth doing for their own sakes. Indeed, if this weren't so, one could not claim that achieving fellowship with God by itself gives value to human life. On the face of it, there is no reason why such intrinsically valuable activities can't occur within human life itself.

II

However, there is more to an adequate answer to the meaningfulness of life than simply an answer to the question I have just articulated. There is some reason to think that any adequate answer must meet at least two further sets of conditions.

The first member of the first set of conditions is that whatever the value life is said to have that makes it worth living, it must be something that, once its nature is understood, a person will want to realize. Ronald Hepburn puts the point this way:

> To give life meaning cannot be just a matter of pursuing worthy projects, ... it is quite possible to make various value-judgments in cold blood, while yet suffering from a sense of meaninglessness. One may fill one's days with honest, useful and charitable deeds, not doubting them to be of value, but without feeling that these give one's life meaning or purpose. It may be profoundly boring. To seek meaning is not just a matter of seeking justification for one's policies, but of trying to discover how to organise one's vital resources and energies around these policies. To find meaning is not a matter of judging these to be worthy, but of seeing their pursuit as in some sense a fulfillment, as involving self-realisation as opposed to self-violation, and as not less opposed to the performance of a dreary task. ... The author is asking how he can relate the pursuit of various valuable ends to the realising of a certain kind of form of life, the thought of which evokes in him the response; "The pursuit of these goals really concerns me, matters to me."[3]

If Hepburn is right, then any attempt to understand the meaningfulness of life in terms of value that might be realized within a life will have to meet the condition that this value is of the sort that when its nature is understood, a person will want to realize it. I shall call this the *internalist* condition, since it makes desire or motivation internal to what is said to be valuable.

The second member of this set of conditions is that value judgments of the appropriate sort turn out to be *objective*. As I am using the term 'objective,' value judgments are objective just in case for any two people if they were to disagree over a particular evaluative matter, one of them must be mistaken. I.e., to say that value judgments are objective is to say that there is a single correct answer to particular evaluative disputes. There are three conditions that suggest that judgments about a value must be objective if it is to contribute to the meaningfulness of life.

The first comes from considerations that lead Thomas Nagel to the

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3 R.W. Hepburn, 'Questions about the Meaning of Life,' Klemke, 212-13, Sanders and Cheney, 116-17

conclusion that life is absurd.[4] According to Nagel, the absurdity of life arises from the recognition that there is no way of justifying a single conception of what it is that is valuable. Whatever standpoint it is from which a given conception of value may appear to be justified, there is another perspective from which the original standpoint appears to be arbitrary or unjustified. However, to say this is to say that the objectivity condition fails. Thus, a plausible condition on the meaningfulness of life seems to be that judgments about the value that is supposed to contribute to the meaningfulness of life be objective.

The second consideration arises from a discussion of Richard Hare of the thesis that nothing matters.[5] A young acquaintance of Hare's has been convinced by reading a novel of Camus' that nothing matters. Hare tries to help him by calling attention to the logic of the concept 'mattering.' Hare argues that what matters always matters to someone, and that to say that something matters is to express one's concern. If this is right, then to be in a position to say that nothing matters would be to be completely detached, to have no concerns whatsoever. Since it is rare, if even a genuine possibility, that people will be so completely detached, it looks as if it is safe to reject the thesis that nothing matters.

The problem is that if all there is to mattering is what Hare says there is, then I think that there is still a sense in which nothing would matter. One of the things I think people have in mind when they ask whether anything matters is whether the fact that something matters to them is enough to make it really matter. Suppose, e.g. that one were to wake up one day with a new set of concerns. What matters to one on that day is different from what mattered the day before. Would this make any difference to what matters? If it wouldn't then it looks as if *what* matters to a person isn't important. But if this is so, then I think that there is a sense in which nothing really matters. For something to really matter, it must matter that it matters. If this is right, then in order for life to be meaningful it must make a difference *what* we take to be valuable. A necessary condition of this is that not any and every value judgment can be as good as any other. This in turn will be true if judgments about the values that are supposed to make life meaningful are objective.[6]

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4 Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd,' *Journal of Philosophy* **63** (1971) 716-27, reprinted in Klemke, 151-61, and in Sanders and Cheney, 155-65

5 R.M. Hare, 'Nothing Matters,' *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan 1972) 32-9, reprinted in Klemke, 241-7, and in Sanders and Cheney, 97-103

6 Note that I am not claiming that acknowledging the objectivity of value judgments is the only way of adding what Hare's account seems to have left out. I am only

The third reason for accepting this objectivity condition arises from a challenge that one would expect an adequate answer to the meaningfulness of life to be able to meet. Suppose a person has devoted most of her life to her work, recognizing the challenges that lay in front of her, throwing herself eagerly into meeting them, and succeeding by dint of concentration and sustained effort. In the process she has had to sacrifice a number of personal relationships. At the time she thought it was worth it, but on reflection she wonders whether it was. Is a life spent in pursuit of this kind of success worth it when it was achieved at the expense of personal relationships? One would expect an adequate account of the meaningfulness of life to be able to answer such a question. This does not mean that the answer must be affirmative. There need be no guarantee that a given life is meaningful. But the question should be answerable. Such an answer will be forthcoming if the value judgments in question are objective, for to say that they are objective is to say that there is a single correct answer to questions like 'Is the life described above worth living?' If the value judgments in question turn out not to be objective, then any proposed answer to such a question would seem to be undermined by the fact that its denial can also be correct.

These last two considerations suggest a third condition, that what matters to a person must have a certain *kind* of value. Stephen Darwall has argued recently that what makes a life meaningful must have a certain kind of *importance*.[7] If, e.g., I enjoy building model airplanes, then it may be valuable for me to spend some of my time building them. But this kind of activity hardly seems important enough to insure that my life will be meaningful. For one thing, it is not the sort of thing that would be valuable for everyone else to spend their time at. The value that it has in my life seems to depend on the mere fact that I like building model airplanes. Not everyone else will share this desire. As one way of expressing this third condition, one might suggest that for something to have the kind of importance it needs to make a person's life meaningful, its value must not depend on particular desires a particular person or a particular subset of persons happen to have.[8]

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claiming that it is one such way. Nevertheless, this together with the other two considerations I offer does, I think, provide grounds for taking the objectivity of certain value judgments to be a necessary condition for the value in question to contribute to the meaningfulness of life.

7 Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1983), 164-6

8 Two other points might be noted in connection with this third condition.

First, there is some question as to whether it is independent of the first two. The mere objectivity of value judgments will not insure its satisfaction; but on

The second set of conditions includes the condition that the meaningfulness of a particular life depends on contingent features of that life. It is not something that will hold necessarily of every life. If I am right in saying that what makes life meaningful makes one kind of life meaningful rather than other kinds and that it makes continuing to live preferable to ending one's life, then it can't be true that no matter what kind of life a person lives it will turn out to be meaningful. That is why an attempt to spell out the meaning of life in terms of a good end that the world is inevitably moving towards will ultimately fail to provide the kind of meaning that I am concerned with. If this purpose will be achieved no matter what kind of life one has lived, then it can not provide one with a reason for living one kind of life rather than another. If there is something that makes life meaningful in the way that most people have hoped for, then it must be something which may or may not be realized in a given life. The meaningfulness of a life must depend on contingent features of that life.[9]

The second member of this second set of conditions is that a meaningful life be within the grasp of most people. Unlike the previous conditions, this is not a necessary condition for life's being meaningful

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one understanding of the internalist condition, it looks as if it together with objectivity will insure the importance of the values in question. If one takes the internalist condition to say that whatever it is that makes something valuable, the recognition of it will make anyone want to realize that value, then it looks as if what makes something valuable will be independent of the particular desires that any given person might happen to have. If it weren't, then someone without the relevant desires wouldn't want to realize the value in question. However, on another understanding of the internalist condition, it together with objectivity does not yield this third condition. Suppose that my spending my time building model airplanes has objective value because I enjoy spending my time that way. If the internalist condition only implies that anyone would want to spend their time building model airplanes *if they too enjoyed it*, then the importance condition will not be satisfied. The value of building model airplanes under these circumstances does depend on desires that are peculiar to certain people.

Second, it might be suggested that this formulation of the importance condition is too weak, and that a substantive account of what makes a value important should be included within it. It is, I think, premature to respond to this suggestion at this stage of the argument. For more on this see Section V below, including nos. 22 and 25.

9 It may be that on some occasions when people have asked about the meaning of life they have been looking for something that would provide their life with meaning no matter how their life might be lived. But if so, all this shows is that one will not be able to give a single answer to all of the questions people have in mind when they have asked about the meaning of life. That is one of the reasons why I have concerned myself with just one set of questions that people have asked when they have wondered about the meaning of life.

in the sense we are looking for. One can grant that a person who spends his life developing a cure for cancer, or achieving the artistic output of a Bach, will lead a meaningful life. A life of this sort of achievement will not be within the average person's grasp. Nevertheless, this appears to be a reasonable condition to accept given what we are looking for. When most people ask what makes life meaningful, they seem to be asking for something that could characterize *their* lives, making *those* lives worth living. If this is right, then for life to be meaningful in the way that most people have hoped for, what makes life meaningful should be within the average person's grasp.

There are, however, tensions that arise within both of these sets of conditions. The greatest tension occurs within the first set of conditions. If a value that makes life meaningful must meet the objectivity condition, then if someone denies that a life that displays this value is meaningful, that person will have to be mistaken. There would then seem to be something about this correct conception of value that in principle she could recognize that would make her realize that she was mistaken.[10] If the relevant value also meets the condition of internalism, then the recognition of its nature should also make her want to realize it. But if what moves people to act varies from person to person, a recognition of the nature of this purported value may fail to produce the relevant desire. Relying on the condition of internalism, the person can then deny that she is mistaken in rejecting the value in question, since an understanding of its nature fails to move her. Given the variability of what moves people to act, the condition of internalism threatens to undermine the objectivity of value judgments. But if both of these conditions can not be met, then it looks as if life can not be meaningful in the way that most people have hoped for.

This tension is only increased if we add in the third member of this set of conditions. If what makes life valuable is independent of the particular desires that particular people happen to have, then for any person, it looks as if it will be possible for something to be valuable without its being the object of any of the particular desires that the person happens to have. But if what moves people are just those particular desires, then it looks as if for any person it will be possible for something to be valuable without the recognition of its nature making him want to realize it. That is, it looks as if one will not be able to satisfy both the internalist condition and the importance condition.

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10 This carries with it the epistemological assumption that the value of whatever makes life meaningful can be recognized. But it seems to me that this assumption is one that one should be argued out of rather than into, if for no other reason than that it is what one would expect of the kind of value that would make life meaningful.

There is also some tension between the members of the second set of conditions. If life can be meaningful only if it exhibits values that depend on contingent features of a person's life, then it may turn out that in most human lives external factors will prevent these values from being realized. The person may not have the right sorts of values in the first place. And even if she does, a premature death or circumstances beyond her control may prevent their realization. If realizing them depends at all on the success of a long-term project, then the possibilities of this project's being interrupted raise the question of whether a meaningful life will be within the grasp of the average person.

Whether life can be meaningful, thus, depends in part on whether there is a conception of value that satisfies all of these conditions. Given the tensions that arise between them, it is by no means clear that life can be meaningful. However, given these conditions, a large part of the question of whether life can be meaningful or not falls squarely within the provence of moral philosophy. E.g., one of the central problems in recent moral philosophy has been whether moral judgments can meet both the conditions of internalism and objectivity.

III

That an adequate conception of what makes life meaningful should satisfy the conditions set out above explains in part why the kind of theological answer to the meaningfulness of life summarized earlier has appeared so attractive. This in turn provides additional confirmation that these conditions are reasonable conditions for the meaningfulness of life.

Given God's nature, a perfect union with God does seem sufficient to outweigh whatever suffering a particular life might contain. His nature also seems to provide an objective basis for the evaluative judgments in question. What is valuable is to do what God desires or commands; and, given His goodness, it should be valuable to satisfy those desires and carry out those commands. Since what God commands does not seem to depend on any particular desires that people happen to have, it looks as if the importance condition will be satisfied. Once people understand their own nature and what God has done for them, they will be filled with love for God. Not only will this lead to the right sort of relationship between them and God, it will also provide the necessary motivation for them to live the kind of life they ought to live towards others, and to live it cheerfully and with en-

thusiasm. Thus, the internalist condition seems to be met. Furthermore, since whether a person achieves the right sort of relationship with God depends on whether he asks for God's forgiveness, and since it will only be by being filled with God's love that a person will be enabled to live properly towards others, the kind of value that makes life meaningful will depend on contingent features of that person's life. Nevertheless, because of the grace of God, a meaningful life is within everyone's grasp.

However, despite the way these conditions explain the appeal of this theological answer, they also provide part of the basis for some serious problems for it. If the value that makes a life meaningful can not be one that is realized in any sort of life, then there is some reason for thinking that the desires, purposes, and commands of God, fulfillment of which are supposed to make a person's life meaningful, can not themselves be arbitrary. If they were, then it looks as if any sort of life could turn out to be meaningful. All that would be required would be for God to command that people engage in it; and God could command this since His commands are arbitrary. If God's commands were arbitrary, this would also raise the question of whether the importance condition would be satisfied. If His commands were arbitrary, then it looks as if the value of obeying them would depend on particular desires that God happens to have. Of course, it is not ordinarily thought that God's commands are arbitrary, or that He would command just any old way of life. God is *good,* and His commands flow from that goodness. But if this is correct, then there are conditions that God's commands and desires must meet that make them the commands of a good God, conditions which if they aren't met cast doubt on God's goodness. Once this is granted, the sort of problems I have in mind arise.

Fellowship with God and obedience to His commands may have value if God is good, but the existence of evil in the world raises the question of whether God is good. If God is omnipotent and some of the evil we find in our world is avoidable, how can God be good? Wouldn't a good God prevent avoidable evil? The situation in which people find themselves needing God's forgiveness also leaves God's goodness open to question. If the need for forgiveness is due to original sin, a condition that people can not avoid, then how can it be fair to demand that they avoid it and that they ask forgiveness for not avoiding it? Would a good God make demands that are beyond people's nature, especially when He as their creator was at least partly responsible for that nature? But if God is not good, then how can His nature provide an objective basis for the goodness of union with Him and obedience to His commands? Furthermore, if God is not good, then there is no reason for thinking that when people recognize God's nature they will

want to enjoy union with Him or want to carry out those commands.[11] There is, thus, some reason to wonder whether the theological answer we have been considering can be an adequate answer to the meaningfulness of life.

There is also reason to wonder whether an answer suggested by a good number of contemporary philosophers, that the meaning of life is created rather than discovered, is an adequate answer to the meaningfulness of life.[12] The problem that arises here is essentially the problem that arises in the tension between the conditions of internalism and objectivity. According to the view in question, meaning is created because what is valuable is ultimately a matter of a person's basic *decisions* or *desires*. It is by wanting certain sorts of things or by making certain decisions that certain activities *become* valuable. They become valuable because one *takes* them to be valuable. There is no fixed pattern of life that anyone must live in order for their life to be valuable. To insist that there is, is to intrude on a person's autonomy as a moral agent. It should be clear that this conception of the meaningfulness of life meets the internalist condition. Whatever it is that makes life meaningful will be something that a person will want to achieve, because what makes life meaningful just is the object of one of her basic wants or decisions. The difficulty comes in meeting the objectivity condition. To take the most obvious example, how is one to deal with someone whose chosen way of life essentially involves interference with the chosen ways of life of others? How can something be valuable when by its very nature its existence prevents the existence of value in the lives of others? But there appears to be no way of ruling out as incorrect the claim that such a life is valuable, since it can be the object of someone's basic desires or decisions.

For similar reasons the importance condition fails to be satisfied. On

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11 These are, of course, familiar problems, and various solutions to them have been proposed. The points I want to make here are that without solutions to them the theological view summarized above will not provide an adequate answer to the meaningfulness of life, and that the conditions I set out in Section II provide an important part of the explanation of why this is so.

12 See, e.g., Hazel Barnes, *An Existentialist Ethics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1967), excerpts of which are reprinted in Sanders and Cheney, 105-12, along with Hare, 'Nothing Matters.' To a large extent this answer can also be found in Paul Edwards, 'Meaning and Value of Life,' *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, Editor in Chief (New York: Macmillan 1967), 467-77, reprinted in Klemke, 118-40, an abridged version of which is reprinted in Sanders and Cheney, 87-96, and in Kai Nielsen, 'Linguistic Philosophy and the Meaning of Life,' *Cross Currents* **14** (1964) 313-34, revised versions of which are reprinted in Klemke, 177-204, and in Sanders and Cheney, 129-54.

the view in question what is valuable is what is taken to be valuable, and what is taken to be valuable depends on the particular desires that a person happens to have. But how important is it to be engaged in behavior that merely satisfies desires that a person happens to have, especially if in doing so the person prevents value from being realized in the lives of others? Won't the imprtance of a life at least depend on what a person's basic desires are desires for?

IV

The question remains whether there is a chance for a position that falls between these two camps, one that finds the value that makes life worthwhile in something other than a transcendent purpose and yet satisfies all of the conditions that have been set out. In what follows I shall sketch a view which, if the sketch can be filled out, shows that there is such a possibility. The view is that life is meaningful if it exhibits moral behavior, where moral behavior is understood as one species of rational behavior.

The central feature of this view is that it bases the value that is supposed to make life meaningful on people's rational nature. There are certain desires or motives that a person will come to have if she exercises reason correctly. These are *rational* desires. Action in accord with them is rational. Action contrary to them is irrational. What is valuable is to act in accord with them. This conception of value seems to satisfy all of the conditions that have been set out. Since there are only certain ways in which reason can be exercised if it is to be exercised correctly, there are only certain desires or motives that one can have and act in accordance with if one is to be rational. This provides a basis for the objectivity of the value judgments in question. Second, in so far as the correct exercise of reason carries with it certain desires or motives, the kind of value in question is one that if recognized (i.e. if reason *is* exercised correctly) will lead one to want to realize it. Third, since what is valuable depends only on its being the object of rational desires, and since rational desires arise from people's common rational nature, the value in question does not depend on particular desires that particular people happen to have. Thus, the importance condition is satisfied. Fourth, in so far as the mere capacity for rational desires doesn't guarantee that one will have them, let alone act in accord with them, the contingency condition is met. Finally, in so far as a person's rational nature gives her the capacity both to have and to act in accord with rational desires, the kind of value in question is accessible to the average person.

Two key questions need to be answered if this view about the meaningfulness of life is to be at all plausible. Are there rational desires of the sort this view says there are? Can such rational desires provide the basis for moral behavior? Let us begin with the first of these.

Can the correct exercise of reason contribute to a person's having certain desires? To see that it is not wildly implausible to say that reason can play this role one need only consider theoretical rationality. It seems plausible to say that when a person recognizes an inconsistency in his beliefs, not only will he want to remove it, but that the desire to remove it is a result of his recognition of that inconsistency. It is because one's rational nature leads one to want to revise an inconsistent set of beliefs that we say that it is *irrational* to hang on to such a set. It will be plausible to talk about rational *behavior*, if reason can play a role in contributing to *desires* similar to the one it plays in contributing to beliefs.

The most plausible candidate for reason's playing such a role is its contribution to the desire to adopt means to already existing ends. Acknowledging such a role would explain, e.g., why imprudence is regarded as a species of irrationality. Imprudence can at least initially be thought of as the failure to adopt appropriate means to one's long-term ends. However, if reason's role in contributing to desire were confined to the recognition of means to already existing ends, it is doubtful that one could give an affirmative answer to the second of our two key questions, allowing rational desires to provide a basis for moral behavior. If it were so confined any form of behavior could turn out to be rational, provided a person held an end to which the behavior in question would be an appropriate means. If there are to be certain sorts of behavior that will be moral for anyone to pursue because it would be irrational not to act in those ways, then it looks as if there must be certain *ends* that are rational to pursue and irrational not to pursue. But how is one to make sense of such rational ends?

There are at least two ways in which the exercise of reason might play a role in the acquisition of ends. The first is by providing people with certain specific ends. The second is by limiting or expanding the pursuit of already existing ends.

An example of the first way can, I think, be found in Aristotle.[13] According to this view, there are certain ends that people aim at by nature. These are ends that people 'really want,' in the sense that their conscious desires and dispositions can be seen as more or less successful attempts at securing them. By reflecting on their own actions and the actions of others, people can make an inductive inference to what it

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13 See, e.g., Norman O. Dahl, *Practical Reason, Aristotle, and Weakness of the Will* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1984), Chs. 3-6.

is that they are aiming at by nature, and thus to what ends they should have. This inductive inference leads to a desire to have one's conscious desires and dispositions in accord with these ends. Although such self-conscious determination of what ends a person should aim at may be atypical, the more common modification of one's ends in the light of satisfaction or dissatisfaction obtained from the pursuit of them can be seen as the unreflective analogue of this self-conscious determination of ends. If asked for an example of what one such rational end would look like, I would suggest the ability to determine what happens to one by means of one's own decisions or choices (i.e. a desire for one's own autonomy). According to this suggestion, one of the things people 'really want' is not just that their actions turn out well in some sense of 'well,' but that whatever success they have, that success is due to them. People want their actions to turn out well because of decisions *they* have made. *They* want to determine what happens to them.

If asked where this capacity for rational desire comes from, one can say that people are not simply creatures who want certain things. They are creatures who can reflect on what they want and determine whether they want to have certain desires or not. It is this capacity to reflect on what desires one has that is at the basis of one's capacity to make value judgments.[14] E.g., we evaluate certain desires (and the actions they prompt us to perform) in terms of how well they promote our long-range ends. If the suggestion I have drawn from Aristotle is correct, this reflective capacity extends to our long-range ends as well. We have a way of reflecting on our ends to see if they are ones that we 'really want.'

However, to the extent to which one is looking for a theory of rational ends to provide a basis for morality, the above won't do by itself. It says only that each person ought to pursue her own rational ends. What happens if different people's ends come in conflict with one another? If morality has anything to say, it would seem to have something to say about how such conflicts are to be resolved or minimized. This brings us to the second way in which ends might be said to be rational. Besides views according to which specific ends are rational, there are views that set out *formal* principles of rationality, principles that limit or expand the pursuit of a person's ends, including her rational ends. They are *formal* principles because they require the existence of specific rational desires to serve as their *matter*. The best

14 See, e.g., Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,' *Journal of Philosophy* **68** (1971) 5-20.

example of such a formal principle is Kant's categorical imperative.[15] As I interpret the categorical imperative, it attempts to set out what is rational to do independently of any particular ends a person might happen to have. It says that it is irrational to pursue a given end if the universalization of that pursuit can not consistently be willed to be a universal law.[16] As I interpret what it is to be able consistently to will something to be a universal law, it is for that universalization to be compatible with what one must want in so far as one is rational. This includes whatever rational ends there are. The categorical imperative, thus, restricts pursuit of a given end if everyone's pursuing that end would be incompatible with one of one's own rational ends.

If, e.g., the ability to determine what happens to me by my own choices is a rational end, and if I am contemplating promoting this ability by infringing on someone else's ability to determine what happens to him by means of his own choices, then the categorical imperative prohibits such an action. It says that it is irrational to want to pursue that end under these circumstances, because were others to behave in the same way (i.e. promote their autonomy at the expense of mine) this would be incompatible with what I must want in so far as I am rational. If it also leads to promoting others' rational ends (e.g. on the grounds that willing the universalization of not promoting others' rational ends would be incompatible with my rational ends), then the categorical imperative produces a new set of rational desires, one obtained by in a sense expanding on and in a sense restricting the previous set of rational desires. One is provided with the desire to promote anyone's rational ends provided that doing so isn't incompatible with the rational ends of others. Put in terms of the ability to determine what happens to one by means of one's own choices, one ought to promote people's ability to determine what happens to them by means of their own choices, provided this is compatible with a similar ability for others. This, at least, has the beginning of the ring of a moral principle.

If asked where the capacity for this new set of rational ends comes

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15 See, e.g., Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Harper Torchbooks 1964). Other examples of formal principles of practical rationality are Thomas Nagel's principle that if a person has a subjective reason to promote an end, then anyone has an objective reason to promote that same end, in *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press 1970), and John Rawls' principles of justice in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1971) when they are viewed under the Kantian interpretation.

16 For the most detailed and plausible attempt that I know of to argue that it would be irrational to act on principles that one could not will that everyone act on see Darwall, *Impartial Reason*, Ch. 14.

from, one might as a beginning adopt a suggestion of Thomas Nagel.[17] People have the capacity to step back and reflect on themselves as one rational being among others. To the extent to which from this perspective our own rational desires still matter (i.e. are still ones we want ourselves to have), to that extent the rational desires of other rational beings must also matter. If my rational desires still matter from this perspective, then they must matter simply because they are the rational desires of a rational being. But then the recognition of others as rational beings must also make their rational desires matter. The exercise of my capacity to step back and view myself as one rational being among others will, thus, make me want not to interfere with the rational ends of others. This in itself is not enough to make me want to limit the pursuit of my own rational ends when they interfere with the rational ends of others, for from the same perspective I will also want to pursue my rational ends. But it is at least a beginning.

If all of this can be filled out (i.e. if one can see that the correct exercise of reason will lead to certain ends, and to the expansion and restriction of these ends, if one can identify what these ends are and what the expansions and restrictions on them are, and if finally the result of all this yields anything like a plausible set of moral principles), then it looks as if there will be a way of spelling out a moral value that can be exhibited in human life that is objective, independent of particular desires that people happen to have, and one whose recognition would lead a person to want to exhibit it. If what results are things like the demand that we promote people's ability to determine what happens to them by means of their own choices without thereby restricting a similar ability in others, then it appears to be a demand that can be achieved, without the guarantee that it will be achieved. Thus, there appears to be a way of understanding moral value according to which it does satisfy all of the conditions I have set out for a meaningful life.[18]

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17 Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Chs. XI and XII

18 One might wonder whether the theory really does satisfy all of these conditions. E.g., what is to be said in response to the kind of challenge to the objectivity of moral value raised by Nagel in 'The Absurd'? It may be that a moral life will appear to be valuable from the perspective of the rational nature of human beings. But, it might be argued, one can always step back and view this kind of life from another perspective. From that perspective it will appear to be arbitrary that human beings have a rational nature that leads them to take such a life to be valuable. Indeed, from this new perspective, a moral life may not appear to be valuable at all. Why doesn't this reopen the question of the objectivity of moral value?

I do not have the time to pursue this question in the detail that it deserves, but one or two things can be said at this time. The question we have been considering is what kind of life would be meaningful for human beings to engage

One further comment is needed before my suggestion about what would make a life meaningful is complete. There are two kinds of value that are associated with moral behavior, the value of doing what is right or ought to be done, and the value of being a morally worthy person. This latter can be understood in terms of being an appropriate object of moral praise or respect. In suggesting that life can be meaningful if it embodies moral behavior, I have in mind both of these sorts of values, both behaving as one ought and being a fitting object for moral praise or respect. I take the latter to involve not only doing the right sorts of things, but doing them for the right sorts of reasons. E.g., if a certain action is wrong because it takes unfair advantage of others, then the agent will display moral worth if she foregoes taking advantage of others because she doesn't want to treat people unfairly. One reason this is important is that if a person's life exhibits both the value of having done the right thing and the value of having done it for the right reasons, then it will increase the chances that this value will outweigh whatever suffering or misfortune that may occur in that life.

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in. Any answer to it would seem to have to take account of the conditions of human life, including whatever rational nature human beings happen to have. If from the point of view of that nature a certain life seems valuable, then that life will have a strong claim on being the kind of life that is valuable for human beings to live. Even if from another perspective it seems arbitrary that human beings have such a nature, it need not seem arbitrary that it is valuable for beings with such a nature to live a moral life. In the second place, if the theory I have sketched does provide an adequate basis for morality, then its adequacy will have to be acknowledged from any perspective that yields reliable judgments. If the theory is correct, then whatever perspective one adopts it will have to be true at that perspective that it is valuable for human beings to live a moral life, even if it wouldn't be valuable for someone whose nature puts her at that perspective to live a similar life.

But is the theory correct? Why doesn't the fact that a moral life may not appear valuable when one adopts a different perspective undermine the correctness of the theory I have sketched? To raise this question is just to raise the possibility that the theory might not turn out to be a correct moral theory. Of course it might not. We have not seen all the arguments that could be given in support or in criticism of it. But by the same token, it might turn out to be a correct moral theory. If it is an open question whether this theory provides an adequate basis for morality, then it is an open question. To decide it one will have to look at the particular features of the theory to see just what can be said for and against it.

But doesn't this possibility show that we don't *know* whether the theory I have sketched provides an objective basis for morality? Perhaps it does. But this still doesn't show that morality doesn't have an objective basis. Nor does it show that in the absence of such knowledge it isn't reasonable to assume that morality does have an objective basis. This is an assumption that I think is reasonable. And it is all that is needed to take seriously the project of looking in detail at the theory I have sketched to see just what can be said on its behalf.

Here then is one suggestion about what will make life meaningful that falls between the two camps that we have previously considered. A moral life will be a meaningful life, where moral behavior is understood as one species of rational behavior.[19]

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Strictly speaking, it would be premature to conclude that a moral life is a meaningful life, even if the theory of morality sketched above can be filled out. What follows so far from that theory is that a moral life satisfies a set of conditions necessary for life's being meaningful. Unless one can be assured that nothing important for the meaningfulness of life has been left out, all one is entitled to conclude is that a moral life will be part of what can make a life meaningful. In what follows I shall consider three candidates for what this theory might have left out. We shall see that at least one of them requires further investigation.

One of the consequences of the view I have sketched is that it is possible for a person to be mistaken about whether his life is meaningful or not. This, it has been suggested, is odd if not mistaken.[20] One thing, then, that this theory might have left out is something that will prevent a person who leads a moral life from being mistaken about whether his life is meaningful or not.

The first thing to say is that taking it to be impossible for a person to be mistaken about whether her life is meaningful concedes far too much to one who would argue that life is meaningless. Given this condition, all such a person would have to do would be to raise doubts about the meaningfulness of life. He would not have to provide any further justification for those doubts. This makes his task far too simple. Nevertheless, there does seem to be something odd about a person's being mistaken about her life being meaningful. This can be explained, I think, if we return to the reasons given for accepting the condition of internalism. Someone who recognizes the value of what makes her life meaningful will recognize that achieving that value is something that matters to her. In achieving it she will be 'caught up'

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19 In putting forward this suggestion I am not claiming that the conception of morality I have outlined is the only one according to which a moral life would satisfy the conditions necessary for a meaningful life. Nor, as I have already indicated, am I claiming that a moral life is the only kind of life that can be meaningful. I will be happy if it is acknowledged that the theory I have sketched provides one way of seeing how a moral life can be a meaningful life.

20 This has been suggested both in discussion and by a referee.

in what she does, feeling at that time that it does make her life meaningful. This certainly holds true on the theory of morality that I have sketched. A person whose life exhibits the value of moral worth will do what she ought to do for the right reasons. What moves her will be just what makes her actions right. She will typically be 'caught up' in performing those actions, and, at the time, feel that they are important enought to make her life meaningful. However, all of this is still compatible with a person's being mistaken about her life's being meaningful. A person can take something to be valuable enough to make her life meaningful when in fact it isn't valuable enough. A person can exhibit a given value in her life that makes it meaningful without recognizing its nature in such a way that achieving it does matter that much to her. And even if she does recognize its nature in this way, she can stop to reflect on what she takes to be valuable, entertaining doubts about whether it is important enough to make her life meaningful. If these doubts persist, they can infect her active life, robbing it of a good deal of the vitality that allowed her to feel that her life was meaningful. Each of these carries with it the possibility of a person's being mistaken about whether her life is meaningful or not. Thus, in allowing people to be mistaken about whether their lives are meaningful, the theory I have sketched has not left out something important for the meaningfulness of life.

A second reason for thinking that this theory has left something out is that it looks as if according to this theory a person who spends his life working at a Coca-Cola bottling factory, never giving moral offense to anyone but never doing anything else of importance, can still lead a moral life. Such a life doesn't seem important enough to be a meaningful life.[21] This suggestion ignores two important points. A person's life involves much more than his work. And the theory I have sketched does require actions that positively affect others through the requirement that one promote other people's pursuit of their rational ends. E.g., a person who spends his life working at a Coca-Cola bottling factory may, when it comes his turn to schedule overtime, refrain from acting vindictively towards a co-worker, thereby earning the respect and trust of his other co-workers. Or he may have been the first to offer help when a tragedy struck his neighbor, his confident disclaimer that the neighbor would have done the same thing in a similar situa-

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21 This suggestion was also raised in discussion and by a referee. It might also be suggested that this shows that the formulation of the importance condition given in Section II is too weak. Instead one needs a more substantive account of what makes something important enough to contribute to the meaningfulness of life, including, perhaps, making a significant contribution to human well-being.

tion assuring what might not have been true up to that time, that his neighbor would so act. The theory I have sketched does seem to be able to account for the value of these sorts of actions. And a person who affects others in these ways does, I think, lead a life that is important enough to be called meaningful. Given the way people's lives do impinge on one another, a moral life does seem imprtant enough to be called meaningful.

The final consideration for thinking that the theory I have sketched has left out something important arises from a closer look at what is involved in exhibiting moral worth. If there is anyone who displays moral worth, it seems to me to be someone who acts out of compassionate concern for other individuals. It is someone who perceives their particular needs, who provides words of consolation when they are most needed and words of encouragement when they are needed. It is someone who goes out of her way to make a gesture that only the person involved would appreciate, someone who knows how to make others feel that they, with all of their personal peculiarities, are special and worth attention. I am far more confident that someone who acts in this way throughout her lifetime has led a meaningful life, than I am that any adequate answer to the meaningfulness of life must satisfy the conditions I have set down, or that the view I have sketched above has a chance of providing an adequate basis for moral behavior. The question is whether the recognition of the value of this kind of compassionate concern will fit with the kind of moral theory that I have sketched. The kind of compassionate concern I have in mind doesn't seem to arise from a rational desire based on the recognition of another person as one rational being among others. It seems quite different from the kind of respect for others that would lead one not to treat someone unfairly. It is focused on *them* and their *particular* needs and concerns, things that seem to arise from something other than their rational natures.[22]

The problem is not so much whether the kind of moral theory I have sketched can't make room for the value of fostering and acting on such personal attitudes. It can. The problem is whether it acknowledges sufficient scope and weight to this value. Just as Kant argued for a duty of benevolence on the grounds that, given the conditions of human life, there will always be the possibility that one will need the help of others to achieve one's rational ends; so it might be argued that circumstances under which being the object of such personal attitudes

22 For a sustained attempt to argue that the kind of moral theory I have sketched can not adequately account for the moral value of acting on such personal attitudes see Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1980).

will be necessary for the kind of self-respect needed to exercise one's autonomy will give rise to an obligation to foster and act on personal attitudes. Nevertheless, it is not clear that this will be sufficient to explain the value of having and acting on such attitudes on all occasions on which we take them to be valuable. Nor is it clear that this theory will end up giving the proper weight to the value of acting on such attitudes when they come in conflict with other morally relevant concerns, such as the desire to treat people fairly.[23] If it fails in either of these tasks, then there is good reason for thinking that this theory does leave out something important both for morality and for the meaningfulness of life.[24]

That is why these first thoughts that I have on the meaningfulness of life require second thoughts. And these second thoughts undoubtedly will require still further thoughts. But, then, that *is* life.

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23 E.g., a person casting a play must choose between two candidates, one who is slightly better for the part, the other whom he knows will benefit more from being a member of the cast. Without knowing anything else, fairness suggests giving the part to the first candidate, compassion or concern suggests giving it to the second. It seems to me that on at least some occasions like this, considerations of compassion or concern should win out.

Presumably the kind of theory I have sketched would settle such a conflict by considering whether from the impersonal standpoint of a rational being one could choose that everyone act in one of these two ways rather than the other in these and all other similar circumstances. At first sight this might seem to tip the scales in favor of considerations of fairness, since the desire to treat people fairly is a much more direct instantiation of such an impersonal attitude than is compassion or concern. In an as yet unpublished paper, 'Impartialist Ethics and the Personal,' Stephen Darwall argues that there is no good reason for thinking that this is so. This seems to me to be correct. However, even if it is, it still doesn't follow that the kind of theory I have sketched attaches the proper weight to considerations like compassion or concern. To see whether it does or not still requires further investigation.

24 If the theory does fail in either of these two tasks, then I think that one will have to take seriously the suggestion that a stronger importance condition than that formulated in Section II needs to be satisfied before one can be assured that a moral life is a meaningful life.