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Desire and Meaning in Life: Towards a Theory

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1. Introduction

One theory that some young, beginning philosophy students, in their unearned world-weariness, find very attractive is called “psychological hedonism”. This is the view that when we act, we always aim - either in a smart or in a stupid way – at maximizing pleasure for ourselves and minimizing our displeasure, a goal that I will refer to as “Improving one’s Pleasure Balance”.

Conclusive arguments against psychological hedonism already exist¹ and it is not my aim to add to them or summarize them. Instead, let us focus on the things people want *besides* a good Pleasure Balance. When talking to my students about hedonism, discussion soon turns to heroic altruistic acts, but I do my best to point out that non-hedonistic motivation occurs elsewhere as well. In addition to desiring the wellbeing of others, people also intrinsically want the victory of their sports teams, to fit in or to stick out, to please their parents or to enrage them, to break a Guinness record by building the world’s biggest ball of twine, the demise of their enemies, and countless other things, and often they are willing to let their Pleasure Balance get worse for the sake of obtaining these things.

Here are three cases of this kind:

1. *Endurance*. Joseba is an excellent endurance athlete. He spends much of his time training for ultra-marathons and so experiences severe pain quite often. His passion is costly in a variety of other ways as well. He wins a race every few years, but his sport does not make him a millionaire or give him mainstream fame, and many people think he is “crazy”. Still, Joseba is devoted to ultra-marathons. Finishing the races successfully, the occasional win, and the knowledge of what he can do are *worth* every moment of pain to him.
2. *Parenthood*. Phirose is aware of the studies indicating that parents who are taking care of children do not tend to be any happier than people who do not have children. In fact, parents appear to experience, during the years in which they raise their children, more moments of misery and drudgery and fewer moments

¹ The most famous one is in Nozick (1974) p, 43

of pleasure than people in similar circumstances who do not have children. Phirose's intuition, based on his experience, aligns with the studies: "why am not surprised?", he thinks, reviewing his years of child rearing. Still, he says, if he were given another life, he would have children again, because for him the rewards of parenthood have been *worth* the displeasure (one should note that while good parenthood involves a lot of altruism, the choice to have children is, typically, not itself altruistic).

3. *The Long Wait*. Marcia's favorite baseball team, the Boston Red Sox, went through decades in which it did not win the World Series. Still, Marcia had watched nearly all games, enduring endless mood swings and various forms of cruel heartbreak as a result. Her friends who do not care about baseball told her to try and stop being a fan as it had obviously done her more harm than good. Her friends who follow other teams teased her relentlessly. Then one day, finally, the team wins the Series. "it was all *worth it!*", Marcia declares sincerely, "now I can die in peace". She does not change her judgment after the following baseball seasons turn out to be painful emotional roller coasters as well.

My introductory level ethics students, charmed as they are by psychological hedonism, are quick to try and explain away these cases by pointing out that Joseba enjoys winning, Phirose does not deny that parenthood has its joys, and Marcia eventually experiences happiness made sweeter by the anguished wait. Hedonism, after all, does not deny that one can choose to endure some displeasure for the sake of a better Pleasure Balance, usually in the future. One might, for example, dislike exercising but exercise for the sake of the joys that being healthy to an old age can provide, as the agent predicts that they would outweigh the pain. Perhaps being an endurance athlete, raising children, and being the loyal fan of a team with mixed fortunes all involve moments, days, weeks or months of incredible pleasure that simply *outweigh* the many years spent in displeasure. This, however, is implausible, and anyone taking on a grueling pursuit or encouraging an emotionally costly attachment in herself for the sake of this supposed ecstasy is bound to be bitterly disappointed long before accumulating Joseba's, Phirose's or Marcia's rich experience with their pursuits. Our brains only allow us a certain amount of pleasure in each moment, and it makes no biological sense to talk about months of pleasure that is so intense that mere months of it somehow improve the agent's Pleasure Balance despite years of displeasure.

However, there do seem to be things that can make even a long stretch of disproportional displeasure, or downright suffering, *worthwhile* for a person. I think finding meaning in life is finding things that are *worth it* for you in the same way that being an endurance athlete is "worth it" for Joseba, being a parent is "worth it" for Phirose and being a Red Sox fan is "worth it" for Marcia.

2. A Theory Sketched

My goal in this chapter is to sketch a way in which a thing being worthwhile for a person in this manner – and thus contributing to the meaningfulness of the person’s life to that person - can be explained in terms of the person’s desires. My sketch will have to draw, to some extent, on a theory of desire developed by Timothy Schroder (2004) and also summed up in a less technical way in Schroder’s and my book *In Praise of Desire* (2013). There is of course no room in the chapter to argue for that theory – I’ll have to do with showing how, given some tenets of our view of what desire is – hopefully not the *most* controversial ones - one can explain the idea of meaning in life in terms of desires and objects of desire. The resulting view, it will seem, has some things in common with theories, such as Harry Frankfurt’s², that anchor meaning in life in what one cares about or loves, and some who would object to my view might still accept some versions of the claims I make here provided that they are put in terms of *caring* rather than of desiring. I, however, subscribe to the neo-Humean view that caring about something just is intrinsically desiring it, or, in some cases, intrinsically desiring its wellbeing.

Here, then, is the view I want to sketch. One desires a good Pleasure Balance, but there are things for which one has strong intrinsic desires such that one desires them even under some conditions when having them causes one’s overall Pleasure Balance to become significantly worse. Things that a person desires this way, when they are present in her life, contribute meaning to her life, in the sense that they make her life more meaningful *for her*. A person’s life is meaningful to that person to the extent that things are present in it the presence of which increases the net satisfaction of her intrinsic desires even under conditions when it results in a significantly worse Pleasure Balance.

When saying that the objects of intrinsic desires can give your life meaning I mean to exclude one group of them - roughly, those that mice possess as much as humans. By saying that intrinsic desires which humans share with mice do not make their objects the sort of things that contribute meaning to an agent’s life I mean to exclude our intrinsic desires, if such they be, for things like air, correct body temperature, the right amount of sugar in the blood, the right amount of water, and so on. These desires belong with an older part of the brain which is not distinctly human, making their exclusion almost an Aristotelian move.

Some clarifications are in order.

² See Frankfurt (1982) (2004). Frankfurt also relates love to desire, but in a more complicated way.

Assumptions about desire. When I speak of desires, I do not speak of urges, longings, or what philosophers call “occurrent desires”. I speak of desires of the sort that one can have without experiencing them, as when one is fast asleep or overcome by an irrelevant emotion. If I tell you, for example, that Tim intrinsically desires his father’s wellbeing, or simply that Tim wants his father to be happy, you would not provide a refutation of what I say by pointing out that Tim is asleep. Tim wants his father’s wellbeing even when he, Tim, is asleep, and even when his fear of missing a flight is all he can think of – in fact, it might be that, even as it is the fear of missing the flight that he vividly thinks about, his desire for his father’s wellbeing is much stronger than whatever desire or desires motivate him to catch the plane.

When I speak of intrinsic desires, I speak of desires that are not derivative. One could want money only as a means to buy books, in which case one has an *instrumental* desire for money. One could want to avoid the flu in a way that is non-instrumental, but is still *derivative* from one’s intrinsic desire to be healthy in general – what Schroeder and I have called a *realizer desire*. An intrinsic desire is a different matter.

Desires are not the same as dispositions to act, though they cause dispositions to act. Most importantly for our present purposes, some dispositions to act are not desires. A case that Schroeder and I use is the case in which Travis is disposed to turn left when he drives through a certain intersection. Travis is so disposed because normally he uses the intersection to go to work, and to get to work he needs to turn left. However, due to the force of habit, Travis turns left in that intersection even on the few occasions in which he knows he ought to turn right, seeing that his destination is not his workplace. Imagine an occasion in which Travis, yet again, complicates his life by turning left instead of right. We can imagine him muttering a curse under his breath as soon as he realizes what he has done. Travis, on such an occasion, did not *desire* to turn left. His disposition to do so is not a desire to do so³.

Relatedly, one cannot always assume that a person’s action reveals what they most desire to do. Imagine, for example, a teenager who finds himself unable to talk to the peers he most desires to talk to – the more physically attractive ones, say. When approaching them, the very strength of his desire makes him tongue-tied. As a result, the teenager ends up spending his socializing time talking with the people with whom he second-most desires to talk. We don’t always act on our strongest desires, and the best way to look at desires is not as some sort of decision-theory style revealed preferences.

³ Arpaly and Schroeder (2013) p. 83

Incredulous Stare. Even with these clarifications in place, one is still bound to ask: how can meaning in life be a matter of desire satisfaction? It seems that a classical occasion for doubting the meaning in one's life would be an occasion in which one obtained or received what one has always wanted and something is still missing. Perhaps, let us imagine, David has always wanted to be rich, and wanted it much more than he wanted anything else. He wanted it intrinsically, not just as a means to some other thing that it would help him obtain. David becomes rich, and after a while, he notices that something is missing, and he is bitterly disappointed. Despite having, it seems, all he wanted, he does not feel satisfied with his life, and he begins, for the first time, to question its meaning to him. It seems like a reasonable thing for him to do. How would a desire-based theory of meaning in life explain it?

It would say that in ordinary life, an agent who behaves like David only seems to be a person who got all he wanted. Instead, a real life David would be a person who faces the fact that he does not have some things that he intrinsically wants. Though it is natural to say that being rich was all David ever wanted, it is also natural to say that being rich turned out *not* to be *all* he wanted – or, in some possible variations of the story, simply that being rich turned not to be *what he wanted*. On one variation the case can take, the life of a rich person is not what David took it to be, and therefore not what he wanted. Perhaps, for example, he imagined that wealth will bring with it freedom from worry, but found that at least in his case, this is not the way it works. On another variation, David might not have been mistaken about what it is like to be rich but he nonetheless made a mistake about *himself*: he believed that all he wanted was to be rich, or that he wanted it so badly that no other desire really counted, but of course, being human, he had always wanted other things, like loving relationships, which he failed to pursue due to his error. Now that he is rich, the absence of these other things he intrinsically desires makes itself known through his mood. A third possibility is that David made a more concrete type of error about what he wanted, or at least what he wanted intrinsically. He did not, in fact, want intrinsically to be rich, or did not want it as much as he thought. He has always wanted something else - say, the respect of his sneering childhood neighbors, or of people resembling them - which he thought could be gained by becoming rich. Now that being rich does not give him that he does not quite understand why he is disappointed – didn't he want to be rich? I will say more in section 4 about ways in which a person can “miss out” on meaning in life due to these kinds of errors.

Awareness. When I say that the things that increase intrinsic desire satisfaction need to be “present in the person's life” in order for her life to be meaningful to her, I mean to imply that she needs to be aware of them. Imagine that Urumina intrinsically desires

social justice. Social progress made during her lifetime but of which she is not aware does not contribute meaning to her life. This is true even if, unbeknownst to her, she contributes to the progress. Perhaps a talented writer is secretly chronicling Urumina's life who is interested, among other things, on the injustices she suffers. The writer publishes a fictionalized account of her life and some features of her character catch the interest of readers, some of whom are moved to agitate against structural sexism, with some success. Urumina, however, has no idea: perhaps she had died in the meantime. In such a case, the story might make Urumina's life more meaningful to the world, her country, or the revolution. One can even say that it makes Urumina's life meaningful "on her own terms", but it does not make it any more meaningful *to her*.

Opacity. While the subject needs to be aware of the things that make her life meaningful to her, she does not need to know *that* these things make her life meaningful to her. A "forbidden" passionate same-sex affair can contribute meaning to Gilbert's life even if Gilbert believes that same-sex relationships are not only wrong but, of necessity, shallow and meaningless. Conversely, a person might be of the opinion that her life is meaningful to her but be wrong. Perhaps she does things that she correctly believes are valuable but which leave her cold, having too little to do with her desires ("how can my life be meaningless if I work at a charity?" she might wonder). A related truth is that a person can have plenty of meaning in her life who does not particularly wish for meaning in her life.

It should not seem strange that a person can have a meaningful life even if she applies a false theory of meaning to her life. A person who risks strong public disapproval can be brave even though she mistakenly believes that "bravery" means risking bodily harm. A person who sees that being a philosopher would be better for him in the long run than being a lawyer can be prudent even if he mistakenly believes that prudent people always go for the more lucrative option, and similarly a person's life being meaningful or meaningless to her does not hang on her favored theory of meaning in life.

The Role of Displeasure I do not mean to say that a meaningful life has to involve suffering, or a bad Pleasure Balance, as a matter of definition. One can in principle be so lucky that the satisfaction of one's strong intrinsic desires, the ones that outweigh the desire for a good Pleasure Balance, always improves one's pleasure balance or leaves it the same, and such a person can have meaning in her life. It is also not necessary for the intrinsic desires in question to be such as to *always* outweigh the desire for a good Pleasure Balance – one needs to be ready to incur a significantly worse one, but one does not need to be ready to incur an extremely bad one. In other words, one need not be willing to die or be tortured for the sake of something in order for it to contribute meaning to one's life, though one needs to be willing to suffer for it.

Irrationality. A thing that contributes meaning to the life of an agent is a thing which the agent desires intrinsically even on (some) occasions in which having it results in a significantly worse Pleasure Balance. Such cases need to be distinguished from cases in which an agent acts so as to worsen her Pleasure Balance not because she wants something more than she does a good Pleasure Balance but because of such forms of irrationality as hyperbolic discounting (i.e. underestimating displeasures and other harms that are going to take place in the future), self-deception, blind habit (as with Travis) or failures of self-control (as might happen when a person who is somewhat drunk literally can't hide her opinion of Michael Jackson to save her job, even though, drunk or not, she wants the job more than she wants to express her opinion of Michael Jackson). Without being able to read an agent's mind it can be very hard to tell if a person who buys a beautiful suit knowing that she might have to skimp on meals during the coming weeks is someone who is irrational in one of these ways or someone who, with no illusions, really does want good clothes to the point of being ready to go through a hard time rather than completely forgo them.

"Higher" Pleasures? I am unable to trace where I have read that pleasure cannot contribute meaning to a life as people on their deathbed do not reminisce about "donuts" and "hot baths". One must avoid such an impoverished vision of pleasure. It seems likely that Casanova and the Marquis de Sade found their adventures worth reminiscing upon. It might seem as if, on my view, there is no room for something like the monkfish in savory vanilla sauce that I had eight years ago in the Basque Country to contribute meaning to my life. This, however, would be wrong. A good Pleasure Balance does not in itself contribute meaning to a life, but a *particular pleasurable experience*, for which one is willing to compromise one's overall Pleasure Balance, can contribute meaning to a life, and that includes some experiences of sensual pleasure.

You might ask how that is possible, seeing that mice, and not only humans, have desires for food and for sex. However, contra Aristotle and Mill, humans have gastronomical and sexual desires they do not share with other animals. Food can be an aesthetic experience or, alternately, a Proustian fountain of memories from one's old home. While mice can have sex, they cannot fall in love, nor can they experience the thrill of casting aside social conventions. Quintessentially human pleasurable experiences can become the stuff of memories – and also a component of a life that makes considerable suffering *worthwhile* ("ah, what I won't give to have that experience again").

The Relationship Between Pleasure and Desire Satisfaction. In many circumstances, getting something that we intrinsically desire results in pleasure. If Marcia desires that the Red

Sox win, she will normally feel pleasure when she believes they just won and displeasure when she believes they just lost. A paradigmatic fan, she does want glory for the Red Sox intrinsically. It would not do to say that she wants Red Sox victories *because* they give her pleasure, as this would be reversing the causal order: Red Sox victories cause Marcia pleasure only *because* she intrinsically wants the Red Sox to win. Those who lack that desire do not find Red Sox victories pleasurable. However, if Marcia is a typical human, she would develop, on top of her desire for the glory of the Red Sox, a desire for the pleasure that she experiences when they win, or, at least, an aversion to the displeasure she experiences when they lose. Thus, she might want the Red Sox to win next week both due to her intrinsic desire for the glory of the Red Sox *and* due to her desire not to be miserable.

Such second layers of motivation easily springs into existence on the countless occasions where getting what one intrinsically wants is pleasing, or losing it is displeasing. If Hande intrinsically desires the right and the good she will do right things and promote the good for their own sake. Under many circumstances, that would mean that she would feel at least some pleasure at successfully promoting the good or doing right. Under these circumstances, she might easily develop a second layer of motivation, as when she finds that it cheers her up, when mildly depressed, to volunteer for a cause, because promoting the right and the good causes her pleasure. In such a case she would be doing her good works both for the sake of the right and the good themselves *and* for the pleasure that doing right and promoting the good gives her. This is one thing that can easily give my beginning students the impression that we only ever do good for the sake of the warm fuzzy feeling we get from it.

But if all of this is true, how come there can be cases where increasing your net intrinsic desire satisfaction actually worsens your Pleasure Balance?

The answer is that not every satisfaction of an intrinsic desire brings pleasure with it. For example, the object of your desire might fail to give you pleasure if you are used to it. A friend of mine who travels to poor countries informs me that when he comes back to the so-called first world, he derives great pleasure from using running water. I, too, desire to be comfortable, but I never had to go for very long without running water, and so having it is unlikely to cause me pleasure. For another example, desire satisfaction can fail to give you pleasure because it is hard to grasp vividly. A person who desires money might feel great pleasure at the sight of a check in her mailbox, but fail to feel any pleasure upon finding a loan at a 3.4% interest rate instead of 3.5%, even though the latter means a much larger financial gain for her.

Neo-Aristotleans suggest that a good person often enjoys doing what is right, and if the good person is, as I have argued elsewhere, a person who desires the right and the good then it seems reasonable. However, even if Hande desires the right, or desires to do the right, there will be plenty of cases in which doing the right will fail to please her. She might, for example, be as used to telling the truth as I am to having running water, so that no pleasure comes to her when she tells a person a painful truth that she morally ought to tell. Furthermore, crying face of the recipient of that truth can be vivid in her mind in a way that the long-term good that she *might* be doing him is not vivid at all. Thus the knowledge that she is doing right, as she wanted, is not enough to make the interaction *pleasant* for her. In the cases of Joseba, Phirose and Marcia it stands to reason that knowing one might win a race, as one wants, knowing that one might raise a child to be a happy person, as one wants, and knowing that the Red Sox are likely to win sometimes in one's lifetime, as one wants, are not enough to make the relevant slogging periods pleasant.

"Projects?" On some views of meaning in life, the clearest representative of which would be Antti Kauppinen⁴ one only finds meaning in life through successful "projects" in the sense of intentional, extended courses of action in which goals are set and achieved. This is wrong. The Red Sox winning the World Series is a wish come true for Marcia, a desire satisfied, but it is not, strictly speaking, a goal achievement or the culmination of a project for her (nor, for that matter, would the second coming of Jesus been an achievement of hers, though witnessing it surely it would have charged her life with meaning).

Personal relationships such as friendship and romance contribute meaning to life, and while they have some project-like components, they are not projects in the sense cited above. Compare the sentence "I am working on my dissertation" with the sentence "we are working on our relationship". Just listen for connotation. If one is working on one's dissertation things are as they should be. If one is working on one's relationship, it's generally a sign that something has gone wrong. Dissertations are projects, and the natural thing to do with a project is work on it. While all is well with a loving relationship you do not think of the relationship as a project, and much of the meaning the relationship brings to your life hangs on things that sneak upon you as you make other plans, and so cannot be shoe-horned into such terms as "meeting relationship goals"⁵.

⁴ Kauppinen (2012) (2013)

⁵ Kauppinen (2013) presents a project-like model of relationships. Kauppinen (2012) does not, but seems to see the role of relationships in a meaningful life as indirect and auxiliary to that of projects.

Unendorsed and Alien-Feeling Desires. I have mentioned before that a same-sex affair of which one disapproves can give one's life meaning. The same is true about art made when one believes one should be a businessperson, time spent with one's children when one believes one should be helping starving kids in Africa instead, anger at social injustice in someone who thinks good girls should not get angry, and in general things that one does not endorse. This can be true even if one feels alienated from one's unendorsed desires and actions⁶.

Wellbeing. There is, famously, a view of wellbeing that makes it out to be overall desire satisfaction, a view many consider problematic⁷. One need not be committed to such a view of wellbeing in order to accept my view of the meaningful life. On any reasonable theory of wellbeing or happiness, a meaningful life need not be a happy life or a life of wellbeing. On commonsensical grounds, I take it that some meaningful lives are simply too filled with suffering to be considered lives of wellbeing. There are agents whose meaningful lives included sacrificing their wellbeing, sometimes in dramatic ways such as being tortured or imprisoned for their causes. There are also people like Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, after what appears to have been a life of relentless, severe depression, claimed once to have had a wonderful life, but of whom it is hard to believe that he meant to say that his life was a life of wellbeing (presumably, he believed that his genius, most important thing in his world by far, made it all *worthwhile*).

3. The Question of Objective Value

But is it enough for a meaningful life for one to have things in one's life that one desires in a certain way? Shouldn't these things also be objectively valuable? Countless philosophers agree that part of what gives lives meanings consists of "attachments" or "attractions" or some other desire-like attitudes, but maintain, as Susan Wolf (2010) puts it, that for a life to have meaning "subjective attraction" has to meet "objective attractiveness".

Not all things that people say give meaning to their lives have that intuitive flavor. Consider the case of Marcia. Let us grant that baseball is an objectively valuable pursuit. The victory of any particular sports team is still not an objectively valuable thing and what the fan desires deeply is success for a particular team, a desire that, whatever its

⁶ Schroeder and Arpaly (1999) argue that feeling alienated from a desire or an action is not a metaphysically significant feeling but simply a reaction to the fact that the relevant desire or action does not fit in well with an agent's visceral self-image, as when a person might feel alienated from the new white hairs on his head, that are nonetheless his.

⁷ For a good critique of the view, see Darwall (2004).

beginnings, has become intrinsic. One might protest that the victory of a team can be valuable in various ways: perhaps it helps the economy of a city that needs the help, perhaps the team has morally superior hiring practices for which it deserves to be rewarded, and so on. However, being a fan is not about desiring a better economic situation for your town or a victory for morality. It is not even about desiring to support the sport in general by supporting a team that one takes to be the best. It's about desiring your team to win.

But the philosopher who takes objective value to be a necessary component of things that contribute meaning to a life may point out that there are seemingly clear cases in which a life seems meaningless exactly because it lacks engagement with objectively valuable things. Wolf give various examples, such as that of a person who does nothing in her life but keep a goldfish (2010: 16, 23). Even if the goldfish keeper is "fulfilled" by her project of goldfish keeping, Wolf says, she still has a meaningless life. Another example mentioned in this context is Rawls's example of the Grass Counter – an intelligent man who devotes his time to counting the blades of grass at Harvard's lawns (Rawls 1971: 432). The life of the grass counter also sounds meaningless⁸. How does one explain the sense that these two lives are meaningless? Wolf's answer is simple: because keeping goldfish and counting grass are not objectively valuable. A person sympathetic to Wolf might ask me: don't examples like the Wolf's goldfish lover and Rawls's grass counter show, at the very least, that the intrinsic desires that contribute meaning to a life need to be intrinsic desires for objectively valuable things? If I am to defend the view proposed here, I need an alternative explanation for the sense we have that such lives are not worthwhile – not even for the agents⁹.

First, let me agree that the life of a (very) *broadly normal adult human* cannot be meaningful to her if it is devoted to the keeping of a single, ordinary goldfish or to the counting of blades of grass. Accordingly, no broadly normal adult human has intrinsic desires such that a goldfish-devoted life or a life counting grass would result in a high overall level of desire satisfaction for him. That is true in that no such human has a powerful intrinsic desire to keep a goldfish or to count grass, and importantly, it is also true in that such a human will have many strong intrinsic desires the frustration of which is guaranteed by a goldfish-devoted or a grass-counting life. Broadly normal adult humans seem to intrinsically desire at least some form of relating to other humans – whether it is friendship, romance, parenting, other family relationships, group membership, play, or even simply doing work that other humans find interesting – and

⁸ There are many cases of supposedly meaningless pursuit in the relevant literature – see, for examples, maintaining a precise number of hairs on one's head (Taylor 1992:36).

⁹ My arguments regarding Wolf's Goldfish example appeared in a different form in Arpaly (2010).

all these forms of human relating would be absent from the life of a devoted goldfish keeper or grass counter. Broadly normal adult humans seem to desire tasks in their lives that challenge their intellectual capacities at least to a degree (and if such desires are not satisfied, the result is deep boredom). They are averse to extreme monotony (that is, they intrinsically desire its absence). The goldfish keeper and the grass counter, if they are broadly normal adult humans, do not experience such intellectual challenges – it's too easy to keep a goldfish, it's too easy to count, and both pursuits seem extremely monotonous.

What about humans who are not adults, or who are neurologically unusual? Imagine a 5 year old child, or a person who is disabled to the point of having only the cognitive abilities of such a child. Such a person who learns to raise her own goldfish can probably thereby add a significant measure meaning to her life. It is easy to imagine her gaining a sense of purpose that is absent from peers who spend their days on nothing but passive entertainment. She *is* challenging her intellectual abilities, she does not find greeting the fish every day monotonous, and far from isolating herself from human company, she might avail herself of more meaningful relating, as she can show other people the pretty fish, connect with adults who help her with fish care, and so on.

Bertrand Russell makes a similar point in his self-help book *The Conquest of Happiness*, in which he discusses his gardener, seemingly a person of fairly low cognitive abilities, who seems to derive energizing, enjoyable challenges from the tricky task of outwitting the rabbits that threaten the garden. Russell chides the reader not to think of himself as too superior a creature to derive a sense of purpose this way, because after all, a rabbit is much bigger than a yellow fever bacillus and yet great people have seen it as a worthwhile challenge to outwit the yellow fever bacillus (Russell 2013:133). Imagine a neurologically *very* unusual person for whom counting grass is something they deeply desire to do and not too disruptive of the other intrinsic desires they have. Perhaps they do not mind monotony at all, or perhaps they are built in such a way as not to find grass-counting monotonous. I do not know if such a person exists, but there exist equally unusual brains with unusual disabilities, unusual abilities and unusual combination of abilities and disabilities. Compare her, with her quest to know how many grass blades there are at Harvard, to the respected academics who devote a lot of their lives to finding out how many prime numbers there are. The number of prime numbers is, to you and me, a more interesting question than the number of blades of grass anywhere, but the word "interesting" designates a relational property, not the kind of absolute value that Wolf seems to talk about. I see no reason to deny the possibility that someone who is *not* a broadly normal adult human can derive meaning from engaging in pursuing knowledge that is interesting to her (even if that knowledge does not have much worth *for others*).

Having heard all that, a friend of mine said: “forget the goldfish and the grass counter, what about my relatives who do nothing but stare vacantly at their TVs? Surely there is something that they are missing”. I agree that this *can* be the case. Desires are not revealed preferences, and a person who, without being forced, spends all her time watching television while drinking beer is not necessarily a person whose sole intrinsic desire, or strongest one by far, is to watch television while drinking beer, or a person whose combined intrinsic desires are best satisfied by this lifestyle. In the next section I would like to discuss the ways in which, given an intrinsic desire-based view of meaning in life, a broadly normal adult human who is relatively free to choose how to live can find herself living without much meaning.

4. How to Miss Out on Meaning

Suppose, then, that meaning in life can be had simply through having things that one strongly and intrinsically desires - apart from a good Pleasure Balance and things that mice desire too. Does that make it easy for one to have a meaningful life? Not as much as it might seem. Some of us might have an easier time than others, but finding meaning in life can be tricky.

There are various sources of difficulty in finding meaning in life. An obvious one is *difficulty getting what one desires*. Such difficulty can often be the result of simple, and sometimes tragic, bad luck.

How dependent is meaning on luck? Do I wish to imply, for example, that a scientist who fails to meet his overarching goal of finding a cure for a major illness has had a largely meaningless life, or at least that her project has contributed no meaning to her life? That would depend on the specific content of the desire or desires that led to this goal. If the scientist is motivated by a desire to be useful or contribute to human knowledge, she might find some meaning in her project having been, to some degree, useful or knowledge-promoting – at least through showing her and other scientists looking for the cure which direction not to take. If she is motivated by a desire to be the first to find the cure, or simply to become famous, she might find that her project failed to provide her with meaning. These various desires can be hard to tell apart – even in oneself.

In addition to simple cases of bad luck – cases that involve the world not “cooperating” with an agent – there are cases in which a person has the bad luck to have particularly strong desires that are unusually hard or simply impossible for him to satisfy. For example, a person might have a strong desire for immortality, or for being universally

liked, or for his narcissistic mother to love him in a way that a narcissist cannot. Desires cannot give a person meaning in life if they cannot be satisfied, which makes it impossible for their objects to be present in a person's life. Related problems involve having two or more strong desires that cannot be satisfied *together*.

So you can have difficulty getting what you desire, due to bad luck with the world or desires that are hard or impossible to satisfy. A different sort of problem with getting meaning in life would be *ignorance of one's intrinsic desires*. Recall David, who believed all he wanted was to be rich and became disappointed with his life when he became rich. There are many other scenarios one can come up with in which a person does not, in a way, know what she wants.

Ignorance about what one intrinsically wants is much easier to come by than philosophers make it seem. Consider another example, also adapted from a real life case. Claire, a young and relatively privileged person, having taken too many economics classes, believes that humans are all selfish. Claire believes that since she is human, she, too, is completely selfish. One day, as she drives her car, she notices a child running into the road. To avoid hitting the child, she swerves into a tree. Afterwards, she realizes that she does, after all, desire things other than her own wellbeing – and always had.

There is no need for a psychoanalysis-style explanation for Claire's ignorance of her unselfish intrinsic desires. We can imagine that Claire, reasonably enough, is glad to realize that she had been mistaken: it is not the case that she knew she was unselfish but wanted to suppress or forget that that fact. She was simply mistaken.

How can a person be ignorant of something so important about herself? If one accepts the view Timothy Schroeder and I defend, it is not that hard to explain. Desire itself, we say, is not an experience (though an urge or a craving can be). Recall that if you desire the wellbeing of your father, you desire the wellbeing of your father even when you are fast asleep and have no experiences at all. Since desire itself is not an experience, our knowledge of our desires is essentially inferential. You "automatically" conclude that you desire the wellbeing of your father from other things: the tense displeasure you experience when you think your father might be sick, the pleasure you experience when he sounds like he's doing well, the easy time you have recalling to mind what things your father likes or dislikes, and so on. If our knowledge of our desires is inferential, it stands to reason that one will sometimes make a flawed inference – or simply be misled by very complex evidence to reasonably infer things that are not the case. Here are just a few of the ways in which this can happen, illustrated by examples:

1. Bad theories about humans in general – as in the case of Claire above, where the belief that we are all selfish is applied by an individual to herself.
2. Generalizations that make sense given the evidence available to one. Khalil is asexual, but as a young person, he has never heard of asexuality and neither has anyone in his immediate environment. As he grows up, following his observation of people around him, he reasonably assumes that everyone has sexual desires and is thus inclined, for example, to interpret some warm feelings he has towards others as sexual desires, to suspect that his sexual desires are somehow repressed, etc.
3. Taking something for granted (being jaded to it) and thus not noticing that one desires it: Janice does not realize how much she desires to do philosophy until she is thrown into an environment where she has no opportunity to do it.
4. Being hardened to the absence of something, and thus not noticing that one desires it: Silvester falls unexpectedly into a romantic relationship. As he experiences intense happiness, he realizes that after decades of living without romance, he got so used to its absence from his life that he came to assume he no longer wanted it. He was wrong.
5. Mistaking a desire for another one that has similar symptoms: Tonya feels pleasurable excited at the thought of being invited to activities involving the popular girls at her high school and so concludes that she wants to participate in these activities. However, she does not: she only wants to be *invited*, which in turn bespeaks an intrinsic desire for approval.
6. Having an out-of-date self-image: it is rather common to have a visceral image of oneself that does not take into account changes that have been creeping up on one. This is true when it comes to one's hair turning gray and it can also be true about desires. Debopriya used to be very keen on excitement. Looking for places to go on vacation, he still looks for exciting possibilities. However, like many people as they get older, Debopriya does not desire excitement as much as he used to, and his ideal vacation would be a quiet one on a beach.
7. Desiring something "symbolically": Zhu thinks he really wants to keep all of his mementos from his days playing *Dungeons and Dragons* as a young man. After he loses them, he doesn't miss them at all. What he really wants is to have friendships in his life despite being a busy middle-aged person.
8. Doing *what "one does"*: John buys a new car every 3 years because he assumes "one" needs a car every 3 years. In truth, John does not like or care about cars, nor does he even have a desire to keep up with the Joneses that would be frustrated if he bought a car every six years instead, or bought gently used cars. He simply never questions that *one buys a new car* every 3 years. He intrinsically desires to travel the world, and would have been able to do so if he didn't spend money on new cars.

This is by no means a complete list of ways to be mistaken about one's intrinsic desires – and so, potentially, about what kind of thing might contribute meaning to one's life. Thus, in an unexpected place, we find something to say in favor of the (somewhat!) examined life. Perhaps if John, instead of spending all his free time vacantly staring at his TV, occasionally asked himself what he “really” wanted he would have traveled the world instead of buying those needless cars?

5. Some Remaining Questions

A question worth discussing is whether an immoral life can be worthwhile for an agent, and whether any meaning can be gained from immoral actions or from experiences available only to people of bad character. Harry Frankfurt, to whose view of meaning I have most kinship, argues controversially that yes, it is possible for Hitler to have had a meaningful life¹⁰. There were a lot of wrong thing with Hitler's life but we must choose our condemnations carefully. I sympathize with his view, but will not presume to solve the controversy here, nor suggest ways in which a view similar to mine or Frankfurt's can accommodate a strong contrary intuition.

A cluster of important questions concern wellbeing. What is the precise relationship between meaning in a life and wellbeing, on the view presented here? Relatedly, a meaningful life need not be happy, but a lack of meaning in life seems to be distressing for at least some people. How does this work? Can there be, at least for some people, a happy meaningless life?

In addition to those, there are questions that Schroeder and I discuss elsewhere (2013) and concern the nature of desire and the relationship between it and pleasure and displeasure. If a desire is not a disposition to act and not a revealed preference, what is it? What is the relationship between desires and other states that affect action? For a full version of the theory sketched here, we might need to know these things.

The topic of unusual human motivation – the kind that exists, for example, in mental disorders – needs more discussion. Some special questions concern phenomena such as addiction¹¹.

Despite these loose ends, I hope you found reading this worthwhile.

¹⁰ See especially his reply to Susan Wolf (2004).

¹¹ For an attempted solution to the problems posed by addiction for desire-based moral psychology see Arpaly & Schroder (2013) chapter 11.

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