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## The Value of a Meaningful Life as a Response to the Problem of Evil

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## The Value of a Meaningful Life as a Response to the Problem of Evil

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# THE VALUE OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE AS A RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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We argue that the good of a meaningful life has a role in theodicy by serving as a contributory reason for an all-good, all-powerful God to allow the existence of evil. If a meaningful life is a more valuable good than competing goods such as pleasure, power, etc., then the good of a meaningful life could have some theodical value for explaining a world where personal pleasure and power are often threatened and undermined. Thus, a world including deeply meaningful personal lives along with the existence of evils like pain and suffering, could be superior to a world without pain and evil but with less meaningful lives. This view is especially plausible if our argument successfully demonstrates that certain kinds of evils are necessary conditions for certain kinds of more valuable, more meaningful lives.

It is widely held that a personally meaningful life is a valuable and important personal good. Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Victor Frankl, along with Rabbi Harold Kushner have suggested that, “Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the considerable value of a meaningful life is a central intuition in a range of both secular and religious philosophies, including those of Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, and Søren Kierkegaard. Even Bernard Williams’s criticism of the value of immortality assumes that a meaningful life has superior value to a meaningless life regardless of comparative length.

If a meaningful life is a more valuable good than competing goods such as pleasure, power, etc., then the good of a meaningful life could have some value for explaining a world where personal pleasure and power are often threatened. An ambitious theist might argue that that good of personal, meaningful lives is such a great good that evils like pain and suffering can be entirely justified in light of this good. Instead, we argue for

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<sup>1</sup>See Harold Kushner in Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, x. He appears to be paraphrasing Frankl’s own thoughts describing the assumptions behind the psychology of logotherapy on 98–99.



comparatively modest claims: that the existence of evil increases the range of possible meaningful lives, and the meaningfulness of some of these lives is qualitatively superior to those that would be possible without evil. Thus, the increased quantity and quality of types of meaningful human lives made possible by evil are goods that would give God *some* reason for allowing evil that must be weighed in any discussion of the problem of evil. Presumably, other theodical goods exist such as human free will, more valuable human relationships, a more valuable type of relationship between God and humanity, superior kinds of virtue development, and so on, but nothing in our argument will depend upon these goods existing.

We proceed by documenting a variety of philosophies that view a meaningful life as a great good, showing how the good of meaningfulness might help address the problem of evil, examining various types of meaningful lives that require the existence of evil, and addressing two potential objections to our argument. Finally, we will conclude by arguing that the good of a meaningful life serves as a partial constituent in a plausible theodical explanation for God's allowance of evil in this world.

### 1. *Is a Meaningful Life Valuable?*

It has been under-noticed that the plausibility that should be attributed to the problem of evil increases or decreases based on which theory of the good one holds, including one's theory of human well-being. For example, philosophers who hold to simple hedonistic theories of human well-being often find the problem of evil quite compelling. If pain is the only or central evil for humans and pleasure is the only or central good for humans, then the existence of considerable pain—and frequent lack of pleasure—in the world needs explaining and is an obvious *prima facie* problem for theistic belief in an all-powerful, all-good God. It is no coincidence that Epicurean hedonism created the oldest known version of the problem of evil and contemporary hedonists are still attracted to it.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, when philosophers hold to a perfectionistic account of human well-being, which views the development of ideal human virtues as the sole or central good for humans, then evil in the form of physical/mental pain is a less serious problem for theism. Since pain itself is no longer evil, its existence is no longer in direct tension with the existence of a good God. Furthermore, virtue is the central good according to perfectionism and developing virtue plausibly requires a choice between morally virtuous and morally vicious options, often resulting in pain or pleasure. Therefore, those holding a perfectionistic view of well-being are less likely to view the problem of evil as a significant threat to theism.

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<sup>2</sup>For example, Laura Ekstrom's *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will*, presupposes that pain and suffering have tremendous disvalue. She acknowledges that theism has a pragmatic benefit of providing "a sense of value and mission," but does not seem to think this is a central value.

For perfectionism, the existence of pain has a straightforwardly plausible explanation: a good God allows it because pain/suffering itself does not constitute evil, instead moral virtue is a central good for humans, as soul-making theodicies typically claim. Furthermore, those evils that do actually exist—such as vice—are similarly needed for the sake of developing moral virtue since virtue requires a choice between virtue and vice. In any case, those with perfectionistic value systems like the Stoics do not typically embrace the problem of evil, even if they are agnostic concerning the existence of God. Accordingly, we should be attentive to the relevant value theories including views of human well-being assumed in any discussion of the problem of evil.

One plausible theory of well-being includes the good of a meaningful life as an important part of human well-being.<sup>3</sup> This type of theory has been well documented in psychology through Crystal Park's work. Her work shows that possessing a more meaningful life is correlated with a number of desirable phenomena, such as causing one to have fewer incidents of depression<sup>4</sup> and increasing individual resilience in the face of difficulty.<sup>5</sup> In philosophy, David McPherson and Susan Wolf have defended similar views portraying the experience of life's meaningfulness as a central, direct aspect of well-being. Furthermore, there are a wide variety of historical philosophers who endorse the general idea.

For simplicity's sake, we focus primarily upon Wolf's account of meaningfulness as an important contributor to human well-being. Her view is one within the larger family of objective list views of well-being. This family of views claim that there are several distinct goods which collectively and objectively make up human well-being such as virtue, pleasure, fulfilled desires, friendship, knowledge, meaningfulness, and other potential goods. Wolf's distinct claim within this family of views is that possessing a meaningful life is an important good among the objective list of things that make life go well for a person.

Wolf explains that, "...meaningfulness is a nonderivative part of an individual's good, and that meaningfulness consists in active engagement in projects or activities of worth."<sup>6</sup> How does meaningfulness consisting in active engagement in worthwhile projects beneficial to a person? A meaningful life has *purpose* and *significance* directly experienced by the person due to the agent's active engagement in projects that they have identified as worthwhile. A meaningful life is experienced as making coherent sense to the person living it, rather than as random, absurd, or empty. Such a person's sense of purpose provides context for making decisions and understanding life as a coherent narrative. Such a life is significant because it is centered upon life goals and related activities that the individual values, comprehends, and

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<sup>33</sup> See George and Park, "Meaning in Life as Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering," 205–220.

<sup>4</sup>Park et al., "Meaning in Life Predicts," 3037–3049.

<sup>5</sup>Park, "Meaning Making and Resilience," 162–172.

<sup>6</sup>Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," 213.

are indeed objectively valuable. Even pain and disappointment within such a life can lead to less psychological suffering since the individual has a coherent, meaningful narrative to make sense of such negative experiences.

Wolf explains that, in addition to the subjective embracing of activities and projects as meaningful, there must also be objective value to such projects if they are actually going to provide meaning. She elaborates,

That a meaningful life must involve “projects of worth” will, I expect, be more controversial, for the phrase hints of a commitment to some sort of objective value. This is not accidental, for I believe that the idea of meaningfulness, and the concern that our lives possess it, are conceptually linked to such a commitment. . . . there can be no sense to the idea of meaningfulness without a distinction between more and less worthwhile ways to spend one’s time, where the test of worth is at least partly independent of a subject’s ungrounded preferences or enjoyment.<sup>7</sup>

Wolf herself does not provide an explanation for the cause of the objective value of various goods and activities, but does not think theism is required to provide such a grounding. However, at minimum, theism has resources for explaining the existence of such value. The existence of objective value could be explained by theism in several possible ways, between which we remain agnostic. Objective value might simply be explained by God’s choosing to imbue certain goals and related activities with value. Alternatively, or possibly simultaneously, God might have designed human nature such that certain goals and activities are good for, worthwhile to, and/or meaningful to humans. It could also be the case that certain activities are objectively valuable because they bring about ‘being’ and/or ‘goodness,’ which the older classical models of theism have used as a ground of objective value.<sup>8</sup> The connection between the objective value of projects of worth that provide meaning might be explained by any of these theistic grounded accounts, some combination of them, or some other connection we have not identified. But we will not speculate further.

From the first personal viewpoint, a meaningful life is understood in terms of a coherent narrative shaped by significant values that matter to the person living it and grounded in objective reality. It entails a fulfilling life experience that has value to the agent in light of its meaning and significance in spite of, or even because of challenges and hardships within it.<sup>9</sup> As Wolf explains,

If a person is or has been thus actively engaged, then she does have an answer to the question of whether her life is or has been worthwhile, whether

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<sup>7</sup>Wolf, “Happiness and Meaning,” 209.

<sup>8</sup>For example, this is Thomism’s traditional explanation concerning the basis of objective value. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*. I.5.1-6.

<sup>9</sup>Our account of a meaningful life is influenced by George and Park’s, “Meaning in Life as Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering,” 205–220. While its focus is on the experiential and subjective components of meaning in life, the model is agnostic concerning the matter of objective meaning and is therefore compatible with our broader claims on that issue.

it has or has had a point. When someone looks for ways to add meaning to her life, she is looking (though perhaps not under this description) for worthwhile projects about which she can get enthused. The account also explains why some activities and projects but not others come to mind as contributors to well-defined and goal-oriented tasks.<sup>10</sup>

Not every activity can give life meaning. Most people identify investing into relationships, creating products or innovations that will benefit others, and reading great literature that helps one understand history and culture as common examples of meaningful activities. Yet, it is not enough to merely find the right activities in order to make life meaningful, but the agent must have a certain disposition towards those activities. They must be engaged, enthused, and value the activities in the right way. However, other activities are inherently meaningless even if we value them. Such inherently meaningless activities plausibly include binge-watching television shows, idle gossip, and late night internet scrolling.

What reasons can be given for thinking a meaningful life possesses great value? There are at least two reasons for thinking that a meaningful life is an important good. First, if the meaningfulness found in some activities is an important life good, then this fact would have explanatory power for making sense of many common decisions that might otherwise be viewed as irrational. Second, there is value attributed to life's meaningfulness found in a wide variety of competing philosophical and psychological sources, which would be well-explained if a meaningful life actually possessed such value.

First, we should observe that many people make important life choices preferring what they judge to be meaningful—and thereby fulfilling—rather than that which obviously results in maximizing pleasure, money, amusement, popularity, or other similar goods. Wolf offers several examples:

A man opts for the more challenging of two possible careers, even at the cost of stress and insecurity. A woman chooses to work for less pay at a job she believes is morally valuable. People arrange their lives so as to give a few hours a week to Meals on Wheels, or to practicing piano, or to keeping up with their book group, even though it means going with a little less sleep, less flexibility, less straightforward fun. Why? Because, they will say, they find these things fulfilling.<sup>11</sup>

To Wolf's examples, we could add many others: people give money to charities they view as worthwhile rather than spending it to directly benefit themselves, people volunteer for military service and unnecessarily risk injury or death while fighting for causes they find valuable when they

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<sup>10</sup>Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," 211–212.

<sup>11</sup>Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," 219–220.

might otherwise have lived peacefully,<sup>12</sup> people invest their time and efforts into aiding friends instead of more directly self-oriented activities, etc. Religious activities might also be partially explained by this value of meaningfulness. Why spend significant time in prayer, meditation, singing, and studying religious texts? It is unlikely to result in increased income and might not be directly pleasurable, but we might choose these activities because they are meaningful and therefore important to us. Such activities are viewed as meaningful because, in some important sense, we think these practices bring us into closer contact with a larger reality. The value and pursuit of meaningfulness is a plausible way to explain such patterns in decision making. One implication of meaningfulness possessing inherent value is that even facing challenges typically thought of as 'evils' within a particular life might be transformed into positive contributors to the meaningfulness of that life's narrative thus contributing to well-being. The pursuit of some meaningful goals often justifies enduring evil. Everyday human decision making frequently embodies this principle.

A second argument for the value of a meaningful life can be made from surveying the many diverse thinkers from competing traditions in philosophy and psychology that attribute a high value to possessing a meaningful life. From agnostics like Bernard Williams and Albert Camus, to Christians like Søren Kierkegaard, Jewish thinkers like Harold Kushner and Victor Frankl, and many others, a wide variety of traditions endorse the value of a meaningful life. The best explanation for this pattern is that a meaningful life does indeed possess value, even apart from the framework of these various traditions.

According to Bernard Williams's argument against the attractiveness of an immortal heavenly existence, a meaningful life is literally more important than existence itself. He claims that an immortal life would eventually become intolerable, meaningless, joyless, and boring. Ultimately, he claims a meaningless life would be worse than death. "Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless. . . .immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable."<sup>13</sup> He cites the playwright Karel Capek's *The Makropulos Affair* to illustrate his claim. In this story, Elina Makropulos has used an immortality elixir for over 300 years. Yet, her unnaturally long life is deeply unsatisfying, intolerable, tedious, and empty. Ultimately, she stops using the elixir because death becomes preferable to her meaningless, yet immortal, life. Williams explains, "Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference, and coldness. Everything is joyless."<sup>14</sup> His concern that it would be impossible to avoid

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<sup>12</sup>What is relevant to our argument is that some soldiers have traditionally volunteered for service out of idealistic values they found personally meaningful. It is irrelevant to our argument that many other soldiers volunteer for more practical reasons.

<sup>13</sup>Williams, "The Makropulos Case," 82.

<sup>14</sup>Williams, "The Makropulos Case," 82.



meaninglessness in heaven is listed as one of only two critical issues in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* entry on heaven.<sup>15</sup>

Williams's article has received many responses,<sup>16</sup> but what is salient to our current discussion are two claims grounding his argument: First, that a meaningful life is a greater good than an infinite quantity of existence without meaning. Second, that without certain evils like death, or limiting life's duration, life risks becoming meaningless. These are precisely the two philosophical claims needed to argue that a personally meaningful life is a good that would help justify God in allowing the existence of evils such as death. If meaningfulness is a more important, greater good than life itself, and death is necessary for a meaningful life, then the meaningfulness that evils like death allow could be part of a morally sufficient reason for allowing such evils.

Albert Camus similarly attests to the same high value of a meaningful life, albeit indirectly. As Camus says, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question in philosophy. All the rest. . . comes afterwards."<sup>17</sup> But why might suicide be an appropriate response to the realities of life? According to Camus, the inherent, meaningless 'absurdity' of life leads to the question of whether it is preferable to preserve rather than end one's own life. An absurd life is not a meaningful life. Such a life is of such dubious value that he suggests it might not be worth living at all.

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, ordinary human life is compared to the inherently meaningless and endless task bestowed upon the mythical Sisyphus as a punishment for his hubris. His infamous punishment was infinitely rolling a boulder up a hill only to have it return to the bottom again. It is a punishment of eternal, meaningless, purposeless toil. For Camus, the task of the human life is to imbue life with meaning and purpose through our subjective response to it, despite life's objective meaningless absurdity. If one fails to make life meaningful in this subjective way, then suicide is viewed as a reasonable alternative. If Camus is correct in attributing such a high value to a meaningful life, then the good of meaningfulness could justify many hardships, pains, and evils if they are needed to avoid a meaningless, absurd life.

Søren Kierkegaard similarly recognizes the value of a meaningful life, even over the value of pleasure. He claims that the need for a personally meaningful life is a central motivation for personal development. The value of meaningfulness motivates individuals to reject the short-term hedonistic pursuits of the aesthete in favor of the limited commitments of the ethical life. Notably, this view implies that meaningfulness is to be

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<sup>15</sup>See Talbott, "Heaven and Hell in Christian Thought."

<sup>16</sup>For one response to Williams's argument see Silverman, "Conceiving Heaven as a Dynamic Existence," 13–29.

<sup>17</sup>See Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 3.

prioritized over pleasure as a central life value. Ultimately, such considerations can lead one to pursue the authentic religious life in Christ, which he views as the only reliable source of ultimate meaning. Kierkegaard portrays meaning as a greater good than many of the short-term physical pleasures, comforts, and interests the aesthete pursues. The experience of a meaningful life is among the most valuable earthly goods.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, David McPherson's *Virtue and Meaning* argued that the search for meaning distinguishes humans as a species. Thus, we are not merely rational animals, nor dependent rational animals, but also meaning-seeking animals. McPherson explains, "I want to characterize "happiness" in terms of a "meaningful life."<sup>19</sup> For McPherson, the meaningful life *is* the happy life. Full stop. To have a meaningful life is to have a good life even if such a life is otherwise tragic. Such claims fit well with the idea that meaningfulness should play a role in theodicy since the greater good of a happy life is only possible if that life is meaningful. If such a life is otherwise full of evils, such evils are insufficient to undermine the deeper happiness that is present through the good of life's meaningfulness.

A similar perspective connecting meaning and happiness has been endorsed in psychology. Roy Baumeister argues that humans are essentially cultural animals, with meaning comprising an essential part of culture. The centrality of meaning to human motivation supports the conclusion that the *telos* of life, which is typically thought of as happiness, is deeply connected to experiencing life as meaningful.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Baumeister and colleagues, following a tradition within positive psychology, distinguish between one sense of happiness understood as a pleasurable emotion connected to the satisfaction of desires, and another sense of happiness understood as meaningfulness.<sup>21</sup>

In various ways, these thinkers each attribute great value to life's meaningfulness. Yet, what exactly is it about meaningfulness that makes it so valuable? A meaningful life allows us to subjectively experience the world we live in as valuable. Conversely, even if our activities possess objective value, we do not fully benefit from those actions if we fail to experience them subjectively as valuable and meaningful. This negative experience of meaninglessness is an aspect of clinical depression.<sup>22</sup> The depressed person experiences no activity as valuable even if they abstractly attribute value to them and even if these activities are objectively valuable. Since the objective goodness one attributes to activities does not ensure

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<sup>18</sup>See Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Parts I & II*.

<sup>19</sup>McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning*, 47.

<sup>20</sup>Baumeister, *The Cultural Animal*.

<sup>21</sup>Baumeister and Vohs, "Recent Empirical Findings on Meaning and How it Differs from Happiness," 87–94.

<sup>22</sup>See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.)*, 180. While the entry on depression does not use the language of 'meaningfulness,' it is reasonable to interpret the marked diminished interest in and pleasure from activities as an experience of 'meaninglessness.'

the subjective experience of enjoying those activities as meaningful, we can see that the ability to experience valuable activities as meaningful is a distinct, but related, good. Through meaningfulness we experience life as full of goods that are worth pursuing. Meaningful goods provide goals, ends, and worthwhile activities. In contrast, if nothing possesses value as a worthy end, then no activity is worthwhile in pursuit of that end.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, a meaningful life is among the most important goods one could experience since it links worthy external goods and goals, to our inner subjective experience.

If certain life goods have objective value—as has traditionally been thought—there is still a need to experience that value subjectively through the meaningfulness they provide. If our virtues, relationships, goals, and the people around us are only objectively valuable it is still possible that we might fail to experience them as valuable. Through the meaningfulness of life, one *subjectively experiences* the value of plausibly objective goods like virtue, relationships, ideals, persons, etc.

## 2. *The Good of a Meaningful Life and Theodicy*<sup>24</sup>

The problem of evil centers on the tension between two claims held by traditional theists:

- 1) There exists a perfectly good, loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God.
- 2) Evil exists—such as personal suffering.

Skeptics argue that the existence of evil is either logically incompatible with the existence of God or at least offers substantial evidence against it.<sup>25</sup> One type of response to this challenge is to offer a theodicy by adding a third statement demonstrating that the first two statements are not really in tension with each other. One simple theodical response might be:

- 3) A perfectly good, loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God allows evil to exist for a good, loving, and morally sufficient reason.<sup>26</sup>

Statement three demonstrates the logical compatibility of the first two statements. Yet, it does not specify a reason for evil's existence, making it easy for skeptics to reject it or to demand further argumentation. Here we propose the theodical statement:

- 3a) A perfectly good, loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God allows evil to exist, in part, because it is necessary to achieve the greater good of a more meaningful life.

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<sup>23</sup>See Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, 82–94.

<sup>24</sup>We focus on the idea of a theodicy rather than a mere 'defense.' While the good of a meaningful life could surely be used as part of a 'defense,' we hope to accomplish more than that. Yet, our thesis remains humble as we do not claim that a meaningful life is sufficient in itself to explain the existence of evil.

<sup>25</sup>Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 150–176.

<sup>26</sup>For a similar response see Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 24–29.

In order to *help* resolve the problem of evil, it is not necessary to show that the good of meaningfulness by itself is sufficient for theodicy, but merely that it is a contributory greater good along with other goods like free will, freely developed moral and spiritual growth, improved relationships, etc. We should note that the good of a meaningful life has particular salience to addressing the problem of so called 'pointless' evils, which have become a focus in recent discussions of the problem of evil.<sup>27</sup> We claim that sometimes the 'point' of a 'pointless' evil is to find meaning in facing it well and wisely.

As demonstrated in Section 1, there is considerable reason for viewing a meaningful life as a highly valuable personal good. Note further, that finding meaning in difficult times might actually help reduce the suffering within such experiences. As Frankl wrote, "In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice."<sup>28</sup> Physical pain and sacrifice are sometimes unavoidable, but our experience of suffering can be reshaped by how we construe these events. This insight is as old as the Stoics. Our current contribution is focusing upon the role that meaningfulness can have in reshaping the experience of pain and sacrifice so that the meaning of some negative events is not mere suffering.

Another reason the value of a meaningful life is important to the current problem of evil discussion is that the value of a meaningful life appears to be independent of the value of libertarian free will. The value of libertarian free will for grounding theodicy has recently been criticized by Laura Ekstrom who argues that free will alone is an inadequate explanation for evil. Furthermore, she claims that most goods currently cited as a morally sufficient reason in theodicy rely indirectly upon the value of free will. Ultimately, she claims, "Theists, I conclude, need a way to respond to the problem of evil that does not rely solely, or perhaps even prominently, on the value of libertarian free will."<sup>29</sup> Fortunately, whatever value we ultimately attribute to the types of meaningful lives allowed by the existence of evil is independent of rather than derivative from the value of free will, and thereby strengthens the theist's position.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, much of Ekstrom's argument for reducing the value we attribute to free will hinges on using the value of a meaningful life in its place. She argues that if one's dying realization was that free will was an illusion we would not conclude, "Oh darn, all this 'love' and 'meaning' were hollow and empty; after all, it was all driven by a deterministic mechanism."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, if it

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<sup>27</sup>See Trakakis, "Antitheodicy," 365.

<sup>28</sup>Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 113.

<sup>29</sup>See Ekstrom, *God, Suffering, and The Value of Free Will*, 72.

<sup>30</sup>Notably, even Ekstrom herself acknowledges that the good of meaningfulness does not require libertarian free will. See Laura Ekstrom, *God, Suffering, and The Value of Free Will*, 217n2 and 225.

<sup>31</sup>Ekstrom, *God, Suffering, and The Value of Free Will*, 64.

is ‘meaning’ and meaningfulness that are truly important rather than free will, surely we should consider the degree to which evils are necessary for a deeply meaningful life.

### 3. *Kinds of Meaningful Lives*

The existence of evil allows for certain types of meaningful lives that are especially valuable and could not otherwise exist. Here we focus on the value of the *meaningfulness* allowed by these narratives, distinct from and in addition to any other goods referenced by the narratives such as virtues, free will, or human relationships. A few narratives allowing especially valuable kinds of life meanings include the following nine examples.

#### *A. Pursuit of God While Striving Against Temptation and Evil*

Theists have often thought that the central goal of human life is the pursuit of a relationship or connection with God. We see this in Augustine, “You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you,”<sup>32</sup> the *Westminster Confession*, “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God and to fully enjoy him forever,”<sup>33</sup> as well as the Qur’an<sup>34</sup> and other sources. Obviously, the pursuit of God—supposing He exists—would be good in any world. Yet, pursuit of God in an environment where such pursuit is opposed, discouraged, punished, or difficult because of the presence of evil is an even more meaningful and valuable good. Such pursuit is made more meaningful by one’s willingness to face the obstacles to it and the willingness to choose it over more immediately tempting alternatives. This meaningfulness is of a qualitatively greater value than the meaningfulness of the pursuit of God without such obstacles and alternatives.

Furthermore, such pursuit of God must be a genuine choice to be truly meaningful. There must be other live options rather than just piety and fellowship with God, if such a relationship is to mean much. We see this theme in the Bible’s story of the Garden of Eden where choosing disobedience to God rather than close fellowship with God is portrayed as a genuine possibility. Accordingly, part of what distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation is the real possibility of either obedience and disobedience. Yet, the real possibility of such disobedience increases the value of faithful obedience. And such obedience, or even partial obedience, is made far more meaningful by the existence of real alternatives with attractions of their own.

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<sup>32</sup>Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, I.1.

<sup>33</sup>Presbyterian Church in America, *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as Adopted by The Presbyterian Church of America*, Q 1.

<sup>34</sup>See Quran 7:172–3.

### B. Courage in the Face of Risk and Danger

Genuine risk is impossible in a world without evil, for nothing truly bad can happen. Both physical and moral courage are impossible in a world without evils and tragedy. The good of the *meaningfulness* of courage is distinct from and in addition to the possible good of the *moral development* of courage in such circumstances. Possessing such virtue might be valuable as in Hick's soul-making theodicy, but our interest is in the value of experiencing courage as a significant source of life's meaningfulness. As Hick points out, struggle and risk are needed for genuine narrative drama, "If we knew in advance that no real serious threat to them could ever arise, the struggle for righteousness and human dignity would become unreal."<sup>35</sup> While he applies this point solely to the issue of the value of moral character, it similarly applies to the value of the meaningfulness such threats and struggles allow. Without genuine threats, the narrative of this world would become one more empty, boring, and meaningless story since it would be clear that nothing is truly at stake.<sup>36</sup>

The type of courage relevant here is found within the cross-cultural concept of heroism. Heroic myths and stories have an important place within literature. Courage has often been defined in terms of one's reaction to danger.<sup>37</sup> But a world without evil would have no danger and, in turn, have neither courage nor heroes. Their absence would eliminate an important route to meaning in life. There is even a small psychological literature exploring the relationship between courage and meaning in life in the context of heroism. Kinsella et al. argue that "Individuals engaged in heroic behavior appear to have a clear purpose, and live a life that is significant and coherent—elements that are central to the pursuit of a meaningful life."<sup>38</sup> In other words, people who exert courage in fulfilling their personally recognized purpose, "personify what it means to live a meaningful life."<sup>39</sup> The authors conclude that engaging in heroic behavior is an important pathway for experiencing meaning in life.

Kinsella et al. go on to argue that, through modelling, heroes also enhance the lives of others by leading them into more meaningful lives. Asking people about their influences often leads to stories about people

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<sup>35</sup>Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 328.

<sup>36</sup>When fictional narratives provide stories without including credible threats to the main characters' goals, critics sometimes refer to this poor writing as 'plot armor.' Characters—for no coherent reason other than the necessity of their own success to the narrative—constantly succeed and survive in unlikely ways. Without genuine evil our own narratives risk becoming similarly meaningless and less worthwhile. Accordingly, a famous episode of *The Twilight Zone* depicts an afterlife where one's every whim is fulfilled without genuine threat of desire frustration as a kind of damnation which a shallow individual might mistake for paradise. See Brahm, "A Nice Place to Visit."

<sup>37</sup>See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a.

<sup>38</sup>Kinsella, Igou, and Ritchie, "Heroism and the Pursuit of a Meaningful Life," 475.

<sup>39</sup>Kinsella, Igou, and Ritchie, "Heroism and the Pursuit of a Meaningful Life," 475.

who have lived heroically and are inspirational to them. Their influence inspires people to become more virtuous and to act toward their goals, or helps people grow in their moral awareness and commitment to their moral communities.

### *C. Temptation Overcome*

Genuine temptation where a person might engage in wrongdoing and hope to benefit from it is impossible in a world without evil. For neither the wrongdoing would be possible, nor would the moral orderliness of such a world allow any semblance of gain from wrongdoing. Therefore, the good of a meaningful life partially defined in resisting temptation seems impossible without evil. This good includes the meaningfulness from temptations against personal loyalty, sexual fidelity, promise keeping, religious piety, justice in general, and so forth.

Temptation is often framed in terms of the easier path, an escape from the more difficult and virtuous path, and promises quicker achievement of desires. The good of a meaningful life often comes from resisting such temptation over the long run, as the various virtues that develop in the process strengthen and allow the person to achieve a better and more meaningful result. For a recent example, one might consider the life of NBA star Giannis Antetokounmpo. Born to undocumented Nigerian parents in Greece, Antetokounmpo grew up poor. As a boy he would go out to the streets to sell sunglasses and cheap goods to tourists to help raise funds for his family. During this time there was a real temptation to avoid hard work and long days, to abandon family and join a gang, or turn to drugs or other forms of escapism. He was also tempted to grow resentful toward those Greeks who seemed prejudiced towards him. He describes some of the challenges of being an undocumented immigrant youth in Athens, "Because my parents were illegal, they couldn't trust anybody. They were always nervous. A neighbor could be like, 'These people are making too much noise, their children are making too much noise,' and the cops could knock at our door and ask for our papers, and that's it. It's that simple."<sup>40</sup>

Rather than give into these temptations, Antetokounmpo was faithful to his family, worked hard to raise money, and engaged in disciplined practice of basketball, even when food was scarce. Eventually, he went from such humble and challenging beginnings to become a multi-year MVP in the NBA. Generally, people are inspired by Antetokounmpo's story. Furthermore, there is general agreement, from his coaches to executives and teammates, that his incredible work ethic, his attractive humility, and his healthy perspective of basketball, all grows out of his own story, which is a story littered with temptations resisted and overcome. He explains, "Just growing up and going through life and how tough life was for me and my

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<sup>40</sup>Jenkins, "Freak Unleashed."

family, I'm always going to stay humble."<sup>41</sup> In the process, a meaningful life emerged, not because the evil or hardships were good in themselves, but because his commitment to his family and values was made more meaningful and valuable to him in the midst of these challenges.

#### *D. Trusting God and Other Humans Amidst Pain and Evil*

The good of trust in God in evil times, requiring faith, can only occur if evil exists. The meaningfulness of the experience of this kind of faith can only occur in a world where evil exists. In a paradisiacal world there would be little role for this kind of faith since there would be no evils to trust God in the midst of. The evils of doubt and uncertainty would not exist to be overcome. Faith and trust in God are made more meaningful, and perhaps even possible, by the challenging circumstances in which such trust is necessary.

Furthermore, certain kinds of meaningful bonds are only possible in human relationships where disappointment and betrayal are possible. There is value and meaning found in trusting imperfect, morally fallible humans that is only possible in a world with genuine evil and moral failure. While cooperation is possible in paradise, there is no need for a deeper kind of trust since it is impossible for anyone to disappoint us through betrayal. Yet, trust in the midst of actual vulnerability to harm from others adds a deeper quality to trust's value. Furthermore, many aspects of the need for human dependency upon others exist because of ills, pains, human limitations, and outright evils. The meaning found within these deeper, more significant relationships, made possible due to human interdependence, has great value.

Accordingly, when researchers have asked people what gives meaning to their lives, social relationships are most frequently mentioned.<sup>42</sup> Family relationships are most frequently brought up in this context. Even correlations from basic demographic information suggest the centrality of the connection between certain close relationships and more meaningful lives. Accordingly, married people report a higher sense of meaning than singles and cohabiting people. And while presence of children in a household lowers both life satisfaction and partner satisfaction, this cost is compensated for by a much higher level of sense of meaning than found in childless adults.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, even couples who are aware of the costs, inconveniences, and troubles that accompany having children still often choose to have them, suggesting the increase to life's meaningfulness might be more highly valued and valuable than the sacrifices necessitated by children.

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<sup>41</sup>Polacek, "Giannis Antetokounmpo Recalls Selling Goods on the Street, Will 'Stay Humble.'"

<sup>42</sup>Schnell, *The Psychology of Meaning in Life*, 88–101.

<sup>43</sup>Nelson, Kushlev, and Lyubomirsky, "The Pains and Pleasures of Parenting," 846–895.



We also see the phenomenon of deeper friendships forming in deeply troubling circumstances. For example, in war countless examples of uniquely deep friendships, comradeship, and a sense of belonging emerge under such intense experiences. War correspondent Sebastian Junger has written about the phenomenon of those who go through traumatic wartime experiences and discover deeper, more meaningful relationships than they had experienced before, and with that came a profound sense of belonging.<sup>44</sup> This phenomenon partly explains the counterintuitive experience of many veterans who, against all rational sense, sometimes wish they could return to the war zone. They feel isolated and lonely in their normal world, but when forced into a tight community under intense pressure with clear, unambiguous purpose they find that real and deep human relationships are formed. Furthermore, such settings bring a sense of personal significance, wherein each person has important talents to offer and must fulfill their role. As Junger memorably observed, "Humans don't mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what they mind is not feeling necessary. Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary."<sup>45</sup> Here again, Junger's insight is well describe as placing the value and importance of meaningfulness over the importance of ease and pleasure.

#### *E. Compassion for Others Who are Suffering*

If the existence of evil is needed for suffering, then empathetic compassion with those who suffer similarly requires the existence of evil. The meaningfulness of a compassionate life is a good for both the compassionate person, as well as those with whom the compassionate person empathizes. All of this requires the existence of evil.

People who are high in compassionate and altruistic traits tend to perceive others as fellow human beings rather than as members of a particular sub-group. This perspective forms part of their view of the world and gives meaning to self-sacrificing behavior. In a book entitled *The Hand of Compassion*, Kristen Renwick Monroe reports on her study of people who risked their lives during WWII to rescue Jews from Nazi persecution.<sup>46</sup> She found that the "sense of one's self in relation to other people" in which connection and common humanity were emphasized was the key factor distinguishing heroic altruists who were moved by compassion for the suffering Jews—from ordinary self-interested people.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, there are good reasons to think that the altruistic other-orientation of compassionate people results in a stronger sense of personal purpose and meaning. A recent study using a large national representative sample demonstrated that altruistic people who expressed their altruism

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<sup>44</sup>See Junger, *Tribe*.

<sup>45</sup>See Junger, *Tribe*, xvii.

<sup>46</sup>Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*.

<sup>47</sup>Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion*, 260.

through attitudes and behaviors tend to have a higher sense of purpose or meaning in life than those who did not.<sup>48</sup>

### F. Redemption

A redeemed life is one where the individual's personal success and blessedness only occur due to the great goodness of God, despite the evils of this corrupted world. This standard religious narrative is well-depicted in the hymn "Amazing Grace," which says, "I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see."<sup>49</sup> Yet, obviously, such redemptive experiences and meanings require the previous experience of lostness and corruption. One cannot be 'found' unless one has previously been 'lost.' And being lost is an undesirable, evil state of affairs. Yet, the meaningfulness found in a redeemed existence is a great good and such narratives can shape one's ongoing life for the better.

Dan McAdams, a leading personality psychologist, has done extensive work on narrative identities focusing upon the life narratives of individuals who are characterized by redemptive themes. His research demonstrates that several patterns of redemptive storytelling correspond to aspects of meaningfulness with his conceptualization of flourishing *eudaimonia* as including both life meaning as well as pleasure.<sup>50</sup> First, people at high levels of *eudaimonia* tend to emphasize personal growth. Second, people at high levels of *eudaimonia* tend to frame difficult life experiences as transformative experiences in which they suffered but gained new insights about themselves. Third, their stories often follow a particular script of redemption which moves from suffering to a state of upward social mobility, liberation, recovery, atonement, or the full actualization of the inner self. McAdams himself notes the connection between the kind of growth narratives at the heart of meaningful lives and personal hardship. "The narrative pathway towards eudaimonic well-being in adulthood may actually require difficult life experiences and the capacity to process them as creating positive self-transformation."<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, in a qualitative study of Christian cancer survivors, Hall et al. found that participants' cancer narratives were often characterized by redemptive themes.<sup>52</sup> They drew on their own experiences in confronting their potential deaths, and the subsequent experiences of personal growth, to develop unique senses of meaning and purpose which often involved passing on to other sufferers the benefits they had received. Their experiences of adversity and transformation resulted in a stronger sense of life as meaningful and purposeful.

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<sup>48</sup>Xi et al., "Altruism and Existential Well-Being," 67–88.

<sup>49</sup>Newton, "Amazing Grace," Celebration Records, 1970.

<sup>50</sup>Bauer, McAdams, and Pals, "Narrative Identity and Eudaimonic Well-Being," 81–104.

<sup>51</sup>Bauer, McAdams, and Pals, "Narrative Identity and Eudaimonic Well-Being," 95.

<sup>52</sup>Hall et al., "The Varieties of Redemptive Experiences," 13–25.

Of course, we need not limit valuable life meanings to ‘successful narratives’ and stories with ‘happy endings.’ Some meanings from far less happy and successful lives—at least in the earthly sense—might nonetheless be especially valuable and provide reason for God to allow evil.

### G. *Sacrificial Love*

A life where one’s own good is voluntarily sacrificed for the sake of others would be impossible without evil. In Auschwitz, the priest Maximilian Kolbe voluntarily died in the place of another prisoner who had a family. The meaningfulness of his sacrifice was such that he led the other condemned prisoners in song and prayer during their two weeks of starvation leading up to his execution by lethal injection. Similarly, David McPherson construes the courageous sacrifices of many anti-Nazi resisters as ‘happy lives’ in that they were full of meaningful courage and sacrifice in the face of evil despite their suffering.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, research in psychology has demonstrated a deep link between such sacrificial altruism and life’s meaningfulness.

Of course, death is hardly the only way to sacrifice for others. The mundane long-term, daily sacrifices many make for children, spouses, aging parents, and friends are also genuinely sacrificial. The day-to-day sacrifices that many parents make for their children have been examined closely. Psychology conceptualizes the sacrifices parents make for their children and the next generation in terms of the concept of generativity. Sometimes these sacrifices are successful in aiding the next generation, but other times they may not be. Yet, such sacrifices need not be successful in order to be worthwhile in terms of providing meaningfulness to those who sacrifice.

Erik Erikson describes generativity as the psychosocial challenge of those in middle adulthood and argues that those who fail to be generative tend to experience lives lacking in psychosocial adjustment.<sup>54</sup> Research since his proposal has verified this claim in various ways. Dan McAdams has demonstrated that highly generative adults are more likely to narrate their lives in ways that report incidents of suffering that eventually lead to meaningful, positive, growth-inducing outcomes.<sup>55</sup> He concludes that “highly generative American adults tend to understand their own lives as heroic tales of mission and transformation, wherein a gifted and morally steadfast protagonist journeys forth into a dangerous world, turning bad into good and giving back to society for early blessings received.”<sup>56</sup> He noted that these individuals are often characterized by sensitivity to the suffering of other people or to oppression, inequality, or some other social ill, and are motivated by religious, ethical, or political values, beliefs, and

<sup>53</sup>McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning*, 60.

<sup>54</sup>Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed.).

<sup>55</sup>McAdams and Guo, “Narrating the Generative Life,” 475–483.

<sup>56</sup>McAdams and Guo, “Narrating the Generative Life,” 476.

principles to attempt to address these evils. Finally, and in relationship to the claim that these generative lives are meaningful, McAdams notes that these life stories provide a sense of temporal meaning and purpose to life. Such sacrificial efforts resulting in deeply valuable, more meaningful lives is the essence of the type of theodical trade off we have in mind.

### *H. Defeated Valor*

Evil also allows the possibility that virtuous lives may end tragically. Yet a life lived bravely in the face of danger is valuable, even if evil or danger ultimately wins out. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the fictional character Boromir ends his life bravely facing massive numbers of enemy soldiers in a heroic, but hopeless effort to defend the innocent.<sup>57</sup> While his efforts are unsuccessful and cost him his life, the meaning to himself and to those who hear of his sacrifice is hardly trivial. This sort of willingness to face death with valor and courage has been valued at least since the time of ancient Spartans, who marked the deaths of their soldiers who died in battle with tombstones denied to most in their society.<sup>58</sup>

We do not need to focus on fictional or ancient examples to see the value and meaningfulness of courageous sacrifice. During the tragedy of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center courageous fire fighters ignored the unmistakable dangers to themselves to rush into the doomed buildings to fulfill their duty by rescuing as many victims as possible while the burning towers still stood. They were undoubtedly aware of the mortal danger to themselves, but risked their lives anyway and 343 firefighters courageously sacrificed their lives in the efforts to save the lives of tens of thousands of people who were believed to be in the Twin Towers.

### *I. Unrequited Love*

A life of unrequited love is one of deep love for another which is not returned. This love can be parental love, love for all humanity, romantic love, or any other important form of love. Stories of such love are legion and have been widely celebrated since our culture recognizes the value of love and the meaningfulness love creates, whether or not such love is returned. Cyrano De Bergerac is a famous literary example of unrequited romantic love. The story of Jesus of Nazareth is an example of largely unrequited love for all humanity.<sup>59</sup> Even Hans Christian Andersen's—but not Disney's—tale of *The Little Mermaid* is a story of unrequited love. Helga Schneider's autobiographical *Let Me Go* recounts a daughter's care for a mother who abandoned her in order to become a Nazi guard at a prison

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<sup>57</sup>Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 4–9.

<sup>58</sup>Cartledge, *Thermopylae*, 81.

<sup>59</sup>John 1:11 describes the rejection of Christ as, "He came unto his own, but his own received Him not." (KJV)

camp. Similarly, the fictional story of *King Lear's* rejection of his daughter Cordelia's love and her steadfast care for him is no less moving.

Do we really have reason to accept such love as valuable? Alfred Lord Tennyson thought so, as his poetry attests, "It is better to have loved, and lost, than to never have loved at all."<sup>60</sup> The meaning unrequited love gives to life is quite valuable, most of all to the lover. To be the sort of person who loves is valuable, even if such love is never returned and ends in disappointment. In contrast, while never loving others is indeed safer, it entails a certain pessimism about the world that is plausibly worse than the heart break it prevents.

Tragic, but meaningful, lives do not need to be better off, on the whole, in order for our thesis that the good of meaningfulness in such lives has some contributory theodical value to be correct. The meaningfulness of one's life, even in tragic circumstances, is a good that could contribute to justifying the existence of evil in this world, even if it turns out to be an insufficient reason in itself. The value of meaningfulness in such lives is a good distinct from others, but we need not argue that meaningfulness, apart from other such theodical goods like free will, moral development, a genuine uncoerced relationship with God, etc. fully justifies the existence of evil.

#### 4. Two Objections Considered

It might seem that our account is vulnerable to two potential objections: First, it might seem that there is nothing valuable in the meaningfulness of these scenarios that is distinct from either the virtuous character development or close, positive relationships involved. Thus, someone favoring the soul-making theodicy might think that what is valuable in scenarios like sacrificial love, defeated valor, and unrequited love is *limited to* the virtues or relationships built within them. The value of these relationships and virtues might appear to exhaust the increased value made possible by the existence of evil.

Yet, this objection is incorrect. While we agree that there is objective value in developing a virtue like courage or developing a positive relationship in the midst of the challenges of the real world, there is an additional and distinct good in subjectively experiencing a more qualitatively deeper, more meaningful life within the process of virtue development or relationships, whether or not that process is fully successful.

One piece of the evidence for our view is seen in the case of inconsistent or unsuccessful relationship or virtue development: if only the virtue or relationship is valuable, then failed pursuit of these valuable goods should completely lack value. If the only value relevant to our discussion is the achievement of a superior type of relationship, then the case of unrequited love should have no value since the good of a relationship

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<sup>60</sup>Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A. H. H.*

was not obtained. Yet, it appears that unrequited love does indeed have value, as it has been immortalized in various stories within our culture. There must be some additional good to account for the phenomenon that even pursuing goods unsuccessfully possesses value, and we locate that good in the meaningfulness of the relational pursuit. The purposefulness of the experience and the efforts exerted in seeking the relationship are experienced as valuable in and of themselves. Similarly, the pursuit of virtue is valuable even during periods when virtue development is unsuccessful. Attempting to develop virtue is meaningful, even if the more important good of virtue is not obtained or only obtained incompletely or inconsistently.

A second piece of evidence for our view is that there are mental health problems that can hinder one's experience of the good of meaningfulness, even when important goods like virtue or relationships have been obtained. Such mental health problems have a very detrimental effect upon well-being. According to the DSM-V, depression includes a "Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day."<sup>61</sup> While the description does not use the language of meaningfulness, a reasonable interpretation of this symptom implies that activities that were once meaningful to the person no longer possess meaning. Depression undermines well-being, in part, because it prevents one from subjectively experiencing the distinct good of meaningfulness, even when one engages in activities that connect them to good things like relationships and virtuous traits. This phenomenon is well explained by conceptualizing meaningfulness as a distinct good that exists as a separate entity apart from the virtue, relationships, and other goods to which it is often connected.

A second possible objection to our argument is that someone might claim that God could have created the good of meaningful human lives without allowing evil or suffering and, therefore, there is no benefit of meaningfulness requiring a world where evil comes to exist. While it is plausible that God could create a world without evil and with at least some degree of meaningful personal lives, we have already demonstrated that there are especially valuable themes of personal meaningfulness that could not occur without the existence of evil. There is at least some value in the increased quantity and range of types of meaningful human lives.

More importantly, the meaningfulness requiring the existence of evil does not merely increase the quantity of types of meaningful lives, but also includes meanings possessing a greater qualitative value than those available in a world with no evil. The themes we have discussed are not merely noted in human culture, but outrightly celebrated. Stories of unrequited love like *Cyrano De Bergerac*, or love fulfilled against the backdrop of the very real possibility of rejection as in the stories of Jane Austen,

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<sup>61</sup>American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.), 160.

are celebrated. Stories of great courage are not merely popular but have been culturally defining, such as Greco-Roman epics like the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. Even instances of defeated courage such as Hector's in the *Iliad* or Boromir's in *The Fellowship of the Ring* are celebrated. In some religious circles, the theme of redemption is thought to have especially high value. Some theologians claim that the Christian story of having sacrificial love performed for our benefit is a superior narrative than existing in uninterrupted paradise.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son suggest that there is a type of meaningful joy and rejoicing over a single repentant sinner that does not occur over a much larger number of morally upright people who never need to repent.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, we should not dismiss the superior qualitative value of these meaningful lives.

The value of meaningfulness found in a world where evil exists and is experienced through struggle has a qualitative value that would not have been possessed without such struggle and uncertainty. The meaningfulness of good events that occur has an even higher value in such a world because of their contingency and because they are accomplished in the midst of threat, uncertainty, risk, and temptation. Conversely, even the evil attributed to some negative events within these narratives is somewhat mitigated by the value of meaningfulness one might find in the hope that evil events occur within a larger good context where they will ultimately be transformed, redeemed, and overcome by God in eternity. Therefore, the full meaning of evil events does not end with their immediate negative results. For example, the martyrdom of moral saints and the sacrifices of courageous heroes can have meaning that resounds for the ages despite—and because of—the very real sacrifices involved.

While there might be some narrower range of meaningfulness in a world without evil, such meaningfulness would be of a limited and of lesser value. In contrast, even the kinds of meaningful lives possible in the real world that don't explicitly and directly involve evil seem contingent on two factors. First, the value of times of meaningful and pleasant happiness in this world is increased by the reality that many situations are unhappy and that there was no guarantee that we would enjoy even such limited happy times. Similarly, an accomplishment is made more meaningful by the fact that it was accomplished with great ongoing effort and sacrifice and might not have been successful at all. Second, there is meaningful value to the process of accomplishments requiring ongoing effort, setbacks, ambiguities, obstacles, and so forth. Accomplishing such goals in a world with difficulties, evils, setbacks, and the possibility of failure is more valuable and meaningful. For example, finishing a Ph.D. and

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<sup>62</sup>For example, see C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 165–7. The idea that a redemption story including evil is superior to a story without such evil and redemption is also supported by the biblical story of the Prodigal Son. The returned prodigal's narrative is cause for celebration in a way that the faithful older brother's story is not. See *Luke* 15:11–32.

<sup>63</sup>See *Luke* 15.

attaining the related skills and expertise, while facing the limitations of finite time, physical energy, and personal giftedness is made all the more meaningful since our success in such endeavors is hardly guaranteed. Therefore, there is good reason to think that God could not have created a world without evil but with the same range, degrees, and qualities of meaningful lives.<sup>64</sup>

### 5. Conclusion

A meaningful life is a great good. The degree to which life's meaningfulness is a good that can give a partial justification for the existence of evil within a larger theistic worldview has been underexplored to this point. Certain kinds of particularly valuable meaningful lives require the existence of evil at least temporarily. Such meaningful lives appear to have a greater qualitative value than the kinds of meaningful lives that might have been possible without the existence of evil. Therefore, the good experienced by those who live these meaningful lives is a partial contributor to the overall greater good allowed by the existence of evil, which may jointly constitute a successful theodicy.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>The principle that positive states of affairs are made more meaningful by the fact that they might not have occurred might even apply to the afterlife. The existence of evil in the current world could make heavenly existence more meaningful to someone who has experienced this more difficult world, since she can compare the heavenly experience to the current inferior world.

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