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Meaning and Social Phenomena

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Philosophy

by

Matt Dean

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Aaron James, Chair
Professor Karl Schafer
Distinguished Professor Margaret Gilbert

2023

DEDICATION

For

my daughter

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.

John Stuart Mill
Utilitarianism

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Meaning and Social Phenomena

by

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Professor Aaron James, Chair

Chapter 1 investigates what we are asking when we ask about meaning in life. I begin via conceptual-linguistic analysis to arrive at a pretheoretical account informed by survey results and common intuitions. I precisify the account to avoid overlap with other concepts like happiness, pleasure, and moral praiseworthiness. The result is close to Susan Wolf's account. I give a detailed summary of her account that stresses our agreement concerning (1) methodology, (2) the importance of both a subjective and objective condition, and (3) the motivational force of meaning. I end the summary with an objection: Wolf is merely describing a hybrid good rather than giving a full account of meaning. I then make the case for my claim that meaning is not merely another good to add to the list of things that make a life go well, but instead a matter of *how the goods in a life are organized*. When we ask about meaning in life, we are asking about how the goods of a life are related to one another, and I defend what I call *robust narrative meaning in life*: a view that builds on Helena de Bres's influential narrative account. My account foregrounds narrative as a means of explaining the importance of significance, purpose, and intelligibility in our explanation concerning the content and import of meaning in life.

Chapter 2 asks how it is possible for a group to lead a meaningful life, *as a group*. I begin with a quick recounting of the meaning of "meaning" in more general terms than what was seen in Chapter 1. The

goal is to take a bigger picture view of meaning that remains neutral on some of the more controversial claims from Chapter 1. Instead, my focus is on the coherence of group meaning. I give accounts of “social group” and “group life” before proceeding to make the case for the viability of social groups bearing the property of meaning in life. I consider and reject *summativism* about group meaning before defending the *joint commitment account* of the meaning of a group’s life.

Chapter 3 investigates the possibility and implications of *group immortality*. I consider two widely-cited objections to individual immortality – namely, excessive boredom and very bad events – and argue that neither objection applies in the case of immortal (or very-long lasting) group lives. I end by unpacking an important upshot: individual participation in (good) immortal groups is an underexplored way to add meaning to an individual’s life.

Chapter 1: Robust Narrative Meaning in Life

It would be regrettable, at the end of a life, to think that one's time had been pleasant or unobjectionable, yet ultimately meaningless. Indeed, many have argued that the present historical moment is characterized by a *crisis of meaning*.¹ As the influence of religion and other traditional sources of meaning are on the decline, many are left wondering if meaning in life amounts to anything at all. Perhaps Macbeth was right to characterize life as “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.”² Before we can respond to such a worry, however, it is important to clarify what we are asking when we ask about meaning in the context of a human life. In short, what is the meaning of “meaning”?

Attempts at clarification face an immediate problem: it isn't clear that the various states, activities, relationships, and objects that purportedly add meaning to life describe either a single property or a single phenomenon. Perhaps various questions that appear to be about meaning in life are talking past one another. If my grandmother's wedding ring is meaningful to me and volunteering at a women's shelter is meaningful to you, are we talking about the same thing? Perhaps where we seem to see a single phenomenon there is in fact an amalgam of various interrelated but distinct concepts.

A further difficulty arises when we realize the scope of possible answers. Analytic philosophers have only recently confronted the question of meaning in life, with very little of this work going back more than a few decades.³ But if we expand our inquiry to include answers

¹ On the inverse relationship between intelligence and meaning, see Pollet and Schnell (2017). See Geuss (2016) on nihilism as the central question of the present age. For a popular treatment with large engagement, see John Vervaeke (2019).

² William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, eds. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington DC: Folger Shakespeare Library.

³ For early engagement with this topic, see Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716–27; Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life,” in *Life, Death and Meaning. Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, ed. David Benatar (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004 [1970]), 19–28; Richard Taylor, “Time

grounded in theology, art, or self-help books, our task begins to look quite daunting. As we examine these sources to sharpen the edges of the concept “meaning,” we quickly find ourselves ensnared by purple prose and metaphor, in the best cases, and hand-waving or incredulity in the worst.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a clear account of the applicable concept of “meaning.” What, in short, is the meaning of “meaning” in the context of a life? Assuming that life can indeed be in some sense meaningful, what contributes to meaning and how can it be distinguished from similar concepts like happiness and moral approbation?

I begin with a broad conception of meaning drawn from surveys that recount how the term is used in everyday speech. I then consider how we might refine this everyday discourse by looking at guiding examples of paradigmatically meaningful lives and activities. The goal of these examples is to refine the reportive definition (gleaned from survey data) and move toward an account that aims to remove contradictions and sharpen blurry boundaries. Toward this end, I investigate Susan Wolf’s influential “hybrid” account of meaning in life to draw out what I take to be most useful for my own account. I note agreements concerning method, the subjective and objective conditions, and the motivational force of meaning, and disagreements concerning the scope of the final account. I end with an attempt to show that the meaning of “meaning” is indeed univocal and that questions about meaning in life are best answered by a *narrative* conception of meaning in life.

1. The reportive definition

and Life’s Meaning,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 40, no. 4 (1987): 675–86; and Robert Nozick, “Philosophy and the Meaning of Life,” in *Philosophical Explanations* (Belknap Press, 1981), 571–647.

One way we might try to shed light on the meaning of “meaning” is with a reportive definition, i.e., a definition that straightforwardly reports how people tend to use the word. Recent research in psychology has attempted to do just this. In one survey, participants were asked to identify what leads to the feeling that one’s life is meaningful.⁴ As might be expected, the results were diverse, including, among other things: relationships, parenting, altruism, nature, spirituality, religion, knowledge, hobbies, creative pursuits, career success, travel, personal legacy, and self-improvement. According to the reportive definition, sources of meaning amount to whatever would be included in a comprehensive list of those activities, relationships, and states of being that anyone surveyed takes to add meaning to life.

If we take these survey results at face value, then it seems that we should be extremely pluralistic about sources of meaning: meaning results from nearly any activity, relationship, or object that confers value on a life. One consequence of such a view is that meaning is not a distinct concept but instead a synonym for “value in general” or for closely related concepts like happiness or morally praiseworthy action. We should be open to this possibility. Perhaps meaning is reducible to happiness or some combination of desirable traits that might be present within a life. To talk about a meaningful life, then, would be simply another way to talk of a good life more generally. Meaning talk, on this view, is confused and confusing. We ought to instead talk more specifically about the constituent elements of a good life and avoid the unhelpful language game hidden behind obscuring synonyms. I argue below that this would be a mistake. Meaning is a distinct concept worthy of attention.

A further difficulty for the reportive definition is the problem of incorporating the wide variety of conflicting views within the philosophical literature. For instance, Landau (2017) takes

⁴ Taylor Nelson, Andrew Abeyta, and Clay Routledge, “What Makes Life Meaningful for Atheists and Theists? *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Online first publication (2019): 3.

meaning to have a positive valence: meaning is a property of a life that ought to be desired. All else equal, a meaningful life is a good one. Ayer (1988), on the other hand, takes meaning to have a neutral valence because meaning is closely related to “significance.” Hitler led a meaningful life, according to Ayer, because he had a significant historical impact, even though his life was, of course, terrible in many other respects.⁵ There are also disagreements about whether meaning should be assessed subjectively,⁶ objectively,⁷ with a hybrid approach,⁸ or whether all talk of meaning is simply confused.⁹ There is also significant disagreement concerning the relationship between meaning in life and the existence of a supreme being.¹⁰ If there is one, does this increase, decrease, or have no bearing at all on meaning in life?

More could be said to catalogue the wide variety of disputes that call into question the legitimacy of trying to capture every possible sense of the word “meaning” within the context of a human life. Rather than pursue this line of inquiry further, I hope to have shown that the term “meaning” is not apt for a straightforward reportive definition. I will proceed, instead, by attempting a careful reconstruction of one central conception. I will do this with a series of examples, and a careful examination of Susan Wolf’s hybrid account. Her view picks out the phenomenon I am interested in, and it does so while getting much of the linguistic-conceptual analysis right. I will show why I think this is so, and then end with making the case for where I see gaps in the analysis.

⁵ A.J. Ayer, *The Meaning of Life* (London: South Place Ethical Society, 1988), 196. Along a similar line, see Paul Edwards, “Meaning and Value of Life,” in *Morality and the Good Life*, ed. Thomas Carson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and John Kekes, “The Meaning of Life,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 24 (2000): 17-34.

⁶ For defenses of subjectivism, see Frankfurt (1988), Richard Taylor (1999 [1970]), and Ayer (2000).

⁷ For defenses of objectivism, see Nozick (1981), Irving Singer (1992), Peter Singer (1993), Gewirth (1998), Audi (2005), Levy (2005), and Smuts (2013).

⁸ For an influential hybrid account, see Wolf (2010).

⁹ On nihilism about meaning, see Schopenhauer (1974 [1851]) and Tolstoy (1884). For a helpful articulation (but non-endorsement) of the worry, see Setiya (2017).

¹⁰ See Thaddeus Metz, *God, Soul, and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019b).

I proceed primarily with two argumentative strategies. First, via illustrative examples of sources of meaning. The cases are initially like some of those provided by the reportive definition's survey results, but, importantly, they include more detail. The goal is to avoid having to commit one way or another to, say, hobbies in general adding meaning to life, but to instead look in detail at when (or if) certain hobbies might play this role, and when they do not, why not.

The second strategy will involve distinguishing value in general from the value characterized by meaning. For instance, we are interested in meaning, so it would be a mistake to include activities that are exclusively valuable in terms of some other property. It isn't obvious, for example, that each activity included in the reportive definition avoids this type of mistake. For instance, if the reportive definition mistakenly includes activities that add pleasure or fulfillment to a life but not meaning, we want to eliminate these cases from the final account. This task too, can be accomplished by adding more detail to our examples. If it turns out that certain creative pursuits, for instance, when explained in more detail are pleasurable but useless or pleasurable but vicious, we will want to consider if they are legitimate cases of meaningful activity.

With these two strategies at hand – namely, adding more detail to purported instances of meaning and distinguishing instances of meaning from instances of some other value -- let us attempt to characterize meaning in general terms and in that sense define the meaning of “meaning” in the context of a life.

2. Wolf's hybrid account

The purpose of this section is to describe the main features of Susan Wolf's hybrid account of meaning in life. With these features in mind, it will then be possible to show points of agreement and disagreement with my own account in the following section. The features I will highlight

include: the subjective condition, the objective condition, the possibility of acting on “reasons of love,” and the difference between meaning, happiness, and morality.

To begin, Wolf acknowledges a similar problem with the reportive definition -- namely, that everyday uses of the word “meaning” involve multiple incompatible interpretations -- and so she begins narrowing the scope of her account by offering three paradigmatic examples that get to the heart of the phenomenon she wants to investigate:

The most obvious examples of what I have in mind occur when we act out of love for individuals about whom we deeply and especially care. When I visit my brother in the hospital, or help my friend move, or stay up all night sewing my daughter a Halloween costume, I act for neither egoistic reasons nor for moral ones.¹¹

The idea at the heart of these examples is one of motivation: we often act on *reasons of love*, and such reasons are conceptually distinct from moral reasons and reasons motivated by promoting one’s own happiness. We can largely set aside Wolf’s interesting discussion of love. For our purposes, acting on reasons of love amounts to acting not out of self-interest or out of moral obligation, but for the sake of the object of one’s love. When I visit my brother in the hospital, I do so for his sake, regardless of whether I am happier or less happy as a result or whether I think there is a moral obligation to visit. The same can be said of sewing the Halloween costume and helping a friend move. It is certainly possible that such actions could make someone happier or better off morally speaking, but the point is that there can be a third set of reasons, namely reasons of love that result in adding a subjective feeling that one’s life is now more meaningful. We might imagine that I do not think the visit to the hospital will be pleasurable, nor do I think there is a third-personal moral obligation to go, and yet it is still coherent to claim that my life (among other

¹¹ Wolf (2010): 4.

things) goes better for making the trip. These are the types of cases that motivate Wolf's inquiry into what she identifies as a valuable property of a life called "meaning."

The lessons of this section are clearer when we look not at meaningful actions, but instead meaningful lives. I take Martin Luther King Jr. to have lived a paradigmatically meaningful life. His contributions to social and moral progress are legion: he led the Montgomery Bus Boycott in support of Rosa Parks; he was a key organizer of one of the largest human rights demonstrations in history, the 250 000-strong March on Washington; he is one of America's greatest orators, best known perhaps for his "I Have a Dream" address; and, among many other accomplishments, he was the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. For these reasons, among others, MLK stands as a guiding example of a paradigmatically meaningful life.

Despite these accomplishments, it seems likely, or at least possible, that his life was not particularly happy. To demonstrate this, let me say something about what happiness amounts to in the present context. I use "happiness" in the contemporary, everyday sense, such that a happy life is a pleasurable life. I take this sense to match what Fletcher (2016) calls the "*Pleasure theory of happiness*: To be happy *just is* to have a high hedonic level. To be unhappy *just is* to have a low hedonic level."¹² There are, of course, many diverging philosophical accounts of happiness. Some, pace Aristotle, take happiness to be synonymous with well-being or flourishing in general. This is not the sense that I use here or in what follows. I contend that meaning always contributes to well-being, but not always to happiness. For stylistic variation, I sometimes use "pleasant," "pleasurable," and "happy" as synonyms. I avoid terms like "self-interested," "well-being promoting" and "egoistic" as these terms are murkier, perhaps implying "whatever is in a person's

¹² Guy Fletcher, *The Philosophy of Well-Being* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 93.

interests.” These terms are broader than “happiness” and more readily include contributions from meaning and morality.

There are, of course, statistical correlations between happiness and meaning. Many people desire to live a meaningful life, and so satisfying this desire may lead to a more pleasurable life. However, there is no necessary connection between meaning and happiness, and I do not mean to imply that meaning entails happiness, or vice versa. Indeed, there are many striking examples of those who take adversity and the absence of pleasure to be a source of meaning. Oscar Wilde is a well-known example.¹³ Wanting his life to resemble a work of art and thinking that tragedy is the highest form of art, Wilde famously sued his boyfriend’s father for libel, knowing full well that a well-documented case of sodomy would show the accusation to be false. The lawsuit led Wilde to be sentenced to two years of hard labor. Whatever mistakes we might think Wilde endorsed in this case, the point is to demonstrate a possible connection between meaning and adversity. For now, we have established a data point in favor of the view that, according to Wilde (along Nietzschean lines), happiness and meaning are distinct.¹⁴

To bring this disconnect into greater relief, let’s return to Martin Luther King. He faced great adversity at the hands of the U.S. government, of course, but also from significant portions of the public. He is rightly venerated now, long after his assassination, but his contemporary reception was far from warm. Whether or not MLK in fact lived an unhappy life is not important for the present inquiry, but it’s certainly possible to imagine a life like his that is meaningful but unhappy. There seems to be no contradiction in imagining a life that is both meaningful and

¹³ For further analysis of this example, see Elijah Millgram, *Life in the Projects: John Stuart Mill and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 8.

¹⁴ For more on Nietzsche’s “aesthetic” approach to the good life, see Nehamas (1985) as presented in Millgram (2016), 8.

unhappy or even meaningful and miserable. We can draw several lessons from this example of an imagined unhappy MLK.

First, we can safely say that there is a connection between moral praiseworthiness and meaning. MLK experienced more sources of meaning than those listed above: he was a parent and husband, he had close friends and warm acquaintances, and he taught social and political philosophy at Morehouse College as a visiting professor in the early 1960s.¹⁵ Most likely all of these activities added meaning to his life, but even if they didn't, his life is paradigmatically meaningful when considered solely from the perspective of morality. His contributions to the civil rights movement secure the fact that his life was meaningful. We can conclude from this example that a personal contribution to moral progress is one way to add meaning to a life.

A second lesson we can draw from this example is that meaning and happiness are distinct. Most people agree that a meaningful life is desirable, but the connection between happiness and meaning is underexplored.¹⁶ We might initially think that there is a positive correlation, that lives high in meaning tend also to be high in happiness. If meaning is desirable, the thought might go, then meaning must contribute to happiness. Perhaps the intuitive appeal of psychological egoism wrongly impresses on us the idea that if we desire a meaningful life, we must do so out of a narrow view of self-interest that equates self-interest with subjective attraction. But this connection isn't at all obvious. We often want our lives to go a certain way even at the expense of happiness. MLK is an example of this. It is unlikely that he believed his life would be happier because of his activism. More likely he acted on moral principles in spite of or at least irrespective of how these

¹⁵ Meghna Chakrabarti and Zoë Mitchell, "The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Radio Boston*, Jan. 15, 2018.

¹⁶ For a closer look at this connection, see Thaddeus Metz, "Happiness and Meaningfulness: Some Key Differences" in *Philosophy and Happiness*, ed. Lisa Bortolotti (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009), 3-20.

actions would impact his happiness. We can say much the same of the parent who consciously sacrifices happiness to act instead on reasons of love. We often pursue desires that we assess as valuable and worth pursuing, even when the desire leads to less happiness. None of this is to say that there is no connection at all between happiness and meaning. It may very well turn out that meaningful lives tend to be happier than meaningless lives. The primary lessons are, rather, that (1) meaningfulness and happiness are distinct concepts, and that (2) full-throated pursuit of meaning (like in MLK's case) often self-consciously rejects maximizing one's own happiness.

A third and final lesson can be drawn from the above if we amend the example and imagine a world in which MLK felt that his life was meaningless. We can imagine someone much like MLK who was in fact making large contributions to moral progress but was, for one reason or another, unaware that his contributions were making any difference. He might see that his actions make a moral difference, but still not feel the subjective sense of meaning, perhaps due to depression. It seems reasonable to imagine that such a life would *feel* meaningless but *be* meaningful. As we imagine such a life – full of meaning but devoid of the feeling of meaning -- it becomes clear that the subjective feeling of meaning is distinct from meaning simpliciter.

Wolf emphasizes a similar point by distinguishing meaning from fulfillment. If meaning and fulfillment were synonyms, then the presence of meaning in a life would be assessed purely from the first-person perspective. Call this the *fulfillment view* of meaning in life: a meaningful life *just is* a fulfilling life. On the fulfillment view, to know if a life is meaningful we simply ask the person in question. If she takes her life to be meaningful, then it is. The problem with this view, in Wolf's words, is that if "the only thing that matters is the subjective quality of one's life, then it shouldn't matter, in our assessment of possible lives, which activities give rise to that quality."¹⁷

¹⁷ Wolf (2010): 15-16.

Is meaning really activity independent? Wolf is skeptical and explains her skepticism by appealing to several examples where she thinks our assessments of meaning and our assessments of fulfillment are likely to come apart. Imagine a person who finds fulfillment in smoking pot all day, making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, or a woman whose life revolves around her love for her pet goldfish.¹⁸ We might take some of these examples to be more convincing than others, but the point is that if it is possible for a life to be maximally fulfilling while at the same time not maximally meaningful, then meaning and fulfillment are distinct. Furthermore, if meaning and fulfillment are distinct, then meaning is not purely subjective. In a word, if a worthless activity can lead to fulfillment but not meaning, then subjectivism about meaning in life is mistaken.

We must be careful, however, not to abandon the fulfillment view too quickly. Problems with this view demonstrated the need for a condition beyond subjective assessment, but we need to be careful not to discard subjectivity altogether because the conception of meaning Wolf is analyzing is understood to be a desirable property, something that both makes a life go better from the third-personal perspective and *feel like* it is going better from the first-person perspective. I began this chapter with a similar worry, that our present moment is characterized by a crisis of meaning: we increasingly feel that the subjective sense that life is meaningful is on the decline, and this leads to lives not going as well as they might. To reinforce this point, Wolf appeals to examples of those who feel alienated from activities that we would typically assess, from the outside, as meaningful activity. Consider people “who do valuable work but who cannot identify or take pride in what they are doing – the alienated housewife, the conscripted soldier, the assembly line worker, for example – may know that what they are doing is valuable, yet reasonably feel that their lives lack something that might be referred to as meaning”¹⁹ What these examples show is

¹⁸ Ibid, 16.

¹⁹ Ibid, 21.

that no matter how valuable a life is assessed to be from the outside, from the third-personal or objective standpoint, the life is missing something of what we desire when we desire a meaningful life. MLK's life is more meaningful if he does meaningful work and takes that work to be meaningful. If he takes his life to be worthless or unfulfilling, then no matter the level of meaning *we* attribute to his life, there is an important condition left unfulfilled for a maximally meaningful life. In summary, Wolf contends that meaning arises when "subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."²⁰

In presenting Wolf's account of meaning in life, I have emphasized the points of agreement between her view and the one that I will ultimately defend. In summary, we agree on: methodology (linguistic-conceptual analysis); the importance of distinguishing meaning from similar concepts like happiness and moral praiseworthiness; and the need for both a subjective condition (a sense of fulfillment) and an objective condition (a third-personal endorsement of the activities that lead to fulfillment).

Before moving on to points of disagreement between Wolf's account and my own, I will respond to objections that apply to each of us equally.

An implication of what has been said so far is that meaning is a property that comes in degrees. As such, some lives are more meaningful than others. I'm comfortable saying that MLK's life was more meaningful than my own. This is no great disaster for how I think about and assess the quality of my life. A life can be filled with great meaning without being maximally meaningful.²¹

²⁰ Ibid, 26.

²¹ For more on anti-perfectionism and meaning, see Iddo Landau, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 31-48.

We might worry, however, that if meaning comes in degrees, we will inevitably fall into a pernicious form of elitism, that to allow that some lives are more meaningful than others is to allow that some lives are more valuable than others. This would be a mistake. We can allow that meaning comes in degrees while at the same time avoiding the charge of elitism by making it clear that the level of meaning within a life says nothing about whether a life is worthwhile or, more broadly, whether a life is worthy of respect. Moral status is not contingent on the meaningfulness of a life, and so the claim that meaning comes in degrees is no more dangerous than the claim that some lives are happier than others. A life goes better when it is happy rather than unhappy, but this isn't to say that those living unhappy lives are less worthy of respect or moral consideration. The important claim, and it is meant to be fairly benign, is that a life that is more meaningful goes better for the person living it, all else equal. Of course, things often are not all else equal, so the relationship between meaning and well-being needs further investigation. It may turn out that many meaningful activities reduce other important sources of well-being. Engaging in meaningful activities may tend to reduce a life's total pleasurable experiences, for instance, especially if overcoming adversity is a primary source of meaning. Similarly, the pursuit of non-moral sources of meaning may reduce one's engagement with moral activities. Let's set these issues aside for the moment and return to the claim that meaning comes in degrees.

We can allow that meaning comes in degrees, while still being wary of getting carried away with precise calculations. It seems unlikely, for instance, that we will be able to perform a kind of Bentham-adjacent felicific calculus by simply replacing measurements of pleasure with measurements of meaning.²² I have argued that meaning is not a purely subjective property, so there is an immediate dissimilarity between our epistemic access to levels of happiness and levels

²²Compare Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, 40.

of meaning, at least according to the present account of happiness. Because the agent lacks fully-transparent access to her level of meaning, we cannot simply ask for a self-report on the felt sense of meaning and expect to have an accurate report of meaning simpliciter. We should therefore be fairly modest when we compare levels of meaning between lives. Extreme cases may be the only ones where our comparative assessments are reliable. The claim that MLK's life is more meaningful than a life devoted to counting blades of grass, for instance, seems like a safe assessment, but it is unclear that we will be able to say much more than this, or, really, that more than this is necessary. If an individual is concerned with pursuing the good life, it is perhaps enough to know that meaning is a property that comes in degrees, that certain activities confer more meaning than others, and that it is therefore possible to increase the meaning within a life by increasing moments of meaning within that life.

To summarize, the lessons of this section have been the following: meaning is a property that comes in degrees, and there is no straightforward additive calculation of meaning from either the first-person or the third-person perspective.

We might also worry that nothing has yet been said about a commonly cited source of meaning: cultural and familial traditions. Along these lines, the account so far presented might be criticized for being overly individualistic. Consider an example. It's not uncommon, especially while young, to complain about family traditions while at the same time making an effort to participate. A teenager might wonder why it matters that his family, according to tradition, opens one present on Christmas Eve, starts the next morning with a particular breakfast, and then insists that the youngest member of the family opens the first gift. And yet, as many of us who were once surly teenagers can attest, if these step-by-step traditions are performed out of order or discontinued altogether, there is often a surprising sense of loss. In some cases, these traditions are

fun, so an explanation of how they add value to a life is straightforward. But, as I intended to make clear, traditions that have no particular purpose outside of upholding a tradition because it is a tradition, are often valuable for mysterious reasons. In many cases the mystery can be resolved with an appeal to meaning. Under the right circumstances, family traditions are meaningful. A tradition that is not otherwise pleasurable or moral or even predictably valuable often is in fact valuable in virtue of meaning. One explanation for this phenomenon is that a connection to one's past is a source of meaning. This connection will be analyzed in further detail in Chapter 3.²³

Having noted points of agreement between Wolf and myself, and having responded to objections that apply equally to our competing accounts, I will now show where I think Wolf has left a gap in need of explanation. The goal is to demonstrate the need for new *narrative account* of meaning in life. I aim to do this by showing that Wolf's account is insightful in that it has identified a hybrid good that makes a life go better, but that this hybrid good is too narrow to capture the full breadth of what most people are asking for from an account of meaning in life. To do this, I begin with Joshua Seachris's useful taxonomy of the phenomena in need of explanation.

3. Significance, purpose, and intelligibility

Seachris (2019) argues that when we examine the reportive definition in detail, there are three senses of meaning in life that need to be distinguished: meaning as *significance*, meaning as *purpose*, and meaning as *intelligibility*.²⁴ I will briefly unpack each of these senses in greater detail. One thought to keep in mind as we investigate each sense, is whether each investigates a separate

²³ For a fascinating discussion of the normativity of cultural traditions, see Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 33.

²⁴ Joshua Seachris, "From the Meaning Triad to Meaning Holism: Unifying Life's Meaning," *Human Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2019).

phenomenon, or whether significance, purpose, and intelligibility can be reconciled under a single concept.

One way to understand the desire for a life to be meaningful is to interpret this desire as being about the *significance* of one's life. In Seachris's words, "Meaning often conveys the idea of significance, and significance tracks a related cluster of notions like mattering, importance, impact, salience, being the object of care and concern, and value, depending on context."²⁵ Meaning as significance evokes the idea that a life goes better when it makes an impact, and worse when it does not. A similar idea often arises in discussions of the cosmic meaning of human life, or what is sometimes called the meaning of human life in general. Nagel (1971) famously opens with a worry that "nothing we do now will matter in a million years," so a significant life is impossible because whatever impact a person has during her lifetime will fade away with time.²⁶ The cosmic worry touches on a similar worry for meaning within a life. If I enjoy my life but have no lasting impact, there's a concern that things have not gone as well as they might have. Many people want to live a pleasant, morally praiseworthy (or at least morally acceptable) life that also has some level of significance, whether that significance amounts to something as grand as a lasting legacy, or, more modestly, at least to be remembered fondly by the people one cares about.

Understanding meaning as significance leads to a disagreement in the literature concerning whether meaning has a positive valence. The dispute arises because a meaningful life is typically understood to be something desirable, but "significance" does not necessarily have the same connotation. Having a significant impact on the world, after all, isn't necessarily a good thing. A.J. Ayer, for example, argues that the significance of a life is what determines its meaning, regardless of the valence of the significance. He claims that it is "one's standing in one's society and the

²⁵ Ibid, 368.

²⁶ Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd." in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 60, no. 20 (1971): 716.

historical influence” of one’s life that determines that life’s level of meaning.²⁷ As such, for Ayer, Hitler’s life was extremely meaningful. To be responsible for millions of deaths, so the thought goes, is to live one of the most significant, and so most meaningful, lives of all time.

One worry with Ayer’s view is that if we take “meaning” to be nothing more (or less) than a straightforward synonym for “significance,” we do damage to the reportive definition. Recall the examples of meaningful activity that we began with: relationships, parenting, altruism, nature, spirituality, religion, knowledge, hobbies, creative pursuits, career success, travel, personal legacy, and self-improvement. The list provides sources of meaning that are taken to make a life go better. Everyday discourse, then, appears to be after *good* examples of relationships, parenting, and so on, and not merely examples of these activities that lead to a lasting impact on the world, regardless of valence. Parental neglect, for example, is certainly a significant event, but is it really the case that such neglect would make a parent’s life more meaningful in the sense of meaning under analysis? If we privilege the reportive definition, then meaning necessarily has a positive valence. If we privilege Ayer’s sense of meaning as significance, then meaning has a neutral valence.

To settle the dispute, we might simply choose a side, arguing that each gets at a different conception of meaning. Better yet would be to arrive at an account that can capture both intuitions, even though they appear to lead to a contradiction. The final narrative account of meaning offered at the end of this section will do just this by arguing that all lives are meaningful, but some kinds of meaning are more desirable than others. In this way we can make sense of Ayer’s intuition that a significant life is a meaningful one, but that positively valenced significance leads to higher

²⁷ A.J. Ayer, *The Meaning of Life* (London: South Place Ethical Society, 1988), 196. Along a similar line, see also Paul Edwards, “Meaning and Value of Life,” in *Morality and the Good Life*, ed. Thomas Carson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and John Kekes, “The Meaning of Life,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 24 (2000): 17-34.

levels of meaning, a consequence that in turn makes sense of the reportive definition's positive valence.

Setting significance aside, we should also consider the sense that a meaningful life is a life with *purpose*.²⁸ The primary intuition at play on this interpretation is that a meaningful life is one with a telic structure. MLK has a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and so the thought might go that his life is meaningful because it has a purpose. Those who are skeptical that life has meaning or that a particular life has meaning might ask about the point of it all. What is the purpose of life? Answering this question by pointing to one of the activities from the reportive definition is to appeal to meaning as purpose.

Finally, we should also consider the view that meaning is about the intelligibility of a life, or about the narrative structure of a life. In describing this constellation of views, Seachris draws an analogy between asking about the meaning of a life and the meaning of a sentence.²⁹ Consider that a string of words can be meaningful or meaningless, and when meaningful, the string of words can represent a univocal meaning, several different meanings, or no meaning at all. "John reads philosophy on Thursdays" is a meaningful sentence. "Philosophy Thursdays John reads on" is meaningless. The second string of words contains fragments of meaning – an English speaker will typically understand each word taken in isolation – but taken as a whole, the sentence is meaningless. It's nonsense. The point of view that takes meaning to be primarily about intelligibility draws an analogy from this example to that of the meaning of a life by arguing that a life is more meaningful when it is intelligible and less meaningful when it is not. Seachris offers an illustrative example: ". . . if I ask my children, 'What is the meaning of this?' in response to walking in on their fight, they could render the fight intelligible by telling me a coherent story

²⁸ Seachris, 367ff.

²⁹ Ibid, 365.

about it and how it unfolded.”³⁰ The children express the meaning of their fight by recounting it as an intelligible narrative. The fight is made intelligible through its recounting. If the fight is recounted first in terms of an instigating incident, then a middle period involving insults and a physical altercation, and finally in terms of a conclusion marked by a parent entering the room and intervening, then this is an event that makes sense. It’s a meaningful narrative. If the fight was instead recounted as an instigating incident, then four years of college, then an insult, then the birth of a child, and then a conclusion in which each child makes a sandwich, this is a narrative that makes no sense. It is unintelligible. Importantly, who is doing the recounting, which features are highlighted or omitted, how much or how little the audience trusts the narrator, among other things, affects the meaning of the story. More will be said about each of these features in due course.

Much of what has been said about the interpretation of an event or a sentence can be said of a life considered as a whole. Certain moments are intelligible. I get dressed, brush my teeth, and walk to the office. This is an intelligible sequence of events that, when taken in the context of other intelligible events, constitute one sense of the meaning of my life. Meaning as intelligibility speaks to one reason why it is tragic to see a loved one suffer from Alzheimer’s. Among other concerns, the Alzheimer’s patient experiences a greater frequency of unintelligible moments when compared to a non-Alzheimer’s patient. The life in question, sadly, loses some degree of meaning when memories that tie events together are lost or confused. None of this is to say that such a life is meaningless, all things considered, but instead that the intelligibility of a life is one way of assessing how well a life is going, and when a person’s life is unintelligible or difficult to interpret for the person living it, things are not going as well as they otherwise might.

³⁰ Ibid, 366.

We can assist our understanding of the narrative meaning of a life by drawing on an argument from the philosophy of well-being. The argument goes like this: it is a mistake to assess an individual's lifetime well-being by merely adding up the individual moments of well-being that make up that life. Instead, we must account for individual moments of well-being, on the one hand, while also taking account of the *shape* of the life in question.³¹ We accounted for one way in which the shape or trajectory of a life matters in the previous discussion of cultural and familial traditions. Here is another way. Imagine two lives, X and Y, with equal total well-being, as assessed by adding up individual moments of well-being. X's life starts off very poorly, with a childhood spent in extreme poverty, a middle period of moderate career and personal successes, and then a final few decades of high levels of life-satisfaction. Y's life has the opposite trajectory. He begins life in the lap of luxury, experiences a moderate middle period with some successes and some heartbreaks, but, due to an end-of-life addiction to opiates, he experiences a dramatic drop off in life satisfaction, resulting in a miserable final decade of life. Importantly, the individual moments of well-being across each of these lives are equal, yet most people have the intuition that a life that starts out poorly but then gradually gets better is a better life than one that starts off well but ends poorly.

The lesson from this example is that just as the shape of a life affects the well-being of a life, so too does the shape of a life affect that life's meaning. Alongside individual moments of

³¹ See David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (March 1991): 48–77 and Guy Fletcher, *The Philosophy of Well-Being* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 132–144. Velleman offers a robust account of how and why telling a story about one's life is intimately connected to what it is to be an agent. Further research might examine how Velleman's view relates to the present inquiry. See also the discussion in this chapter of Rosati (2013).

meaning, the trajectory and intelligibility of a life affect the degree of meaning present in that life.³²

4. Narrative meaning

A recent trend in work on meaning in life has focused on reconciling the three senses of meaning just discussed – significance, purpose, and intelligibility – into a single conception that takes intelligibility or narrativity as primary.³³ Narrative approaches are advocated for two primary reasons. First, such accounts can explain an important cluster of empirical facts concerning meaning and subjectivity. We tend to interpret the world and our place in it via the stories we tell about our surroundings and ourselves.³⁴ Recall the discussion earlier about meaning and the shape of a life. One common way to make sense of a life’s “shape” is as a narrative with rising action, protagonists, antagonists, and other such common narrative features. I have argued that our final account of meaning must be responsive to the subjective condition (i.e., meaning arises, in part, via a particular kind of subjective attraction) and so we ought to take seriously the claim that everyday discourse about the shape of a life is a story about the narrative of a life.

A second reason to take narrativity as primary is that it is a single-answer approach, and single-answer approaches avoid the *amalgam problem*, a problem that claims we are confused when we take ourselves to be asking a single question when we ask about meaning in life. Instead, the *amalgam thesis* claims, questions about meaning in life are better understood as three different questions that concern significance, purpose, and intelligibility as separate locations of inquiry. If

³² See Wai-Hung Wong, “Meaningfulness and Identities,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 11, no. 2 (2008): 123-148.

³³ I follow the literature and use “intelligibility” and “narrative” as stylistic variations that refer to the same property.

³⁴ See Benedict Carey, “This is Your Life (and How You Tell It),” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2007, as quoted in Rosati (2013): 22.

the amalgam problem is correct, then everyday discourse about meaning is confused. In other words, according to the amalgam thesis, questions about meaning that claim to be about a single problem are in fact an amalgamation of three different questions. An advantage of taking intelligibility as primary is that we can respond to the amalgam problem, cover the entire conceptual space with one account rather than many, and consequently keep everyday discourse intact. Something that such an approach needs to explain is why intelligibility is primary, and what explanatory power is afforded to significance and purpose.

To accomplish these explanatory tasks, I will begin by examining de Bres (2018)'s influential and deeply rich narrative account of meaning. I then contrast her account with Kauppinen's objectivism and Rosati's subjectivism in order to show where I think each has strengths to draw on and weaknesses in need of improvement. In the end, I argue for what I call *robust narrative meaning in life*. My account is a single-answer approach that takes intelligibility to be primary, while also allowing for the subjective condition, objective condition, and the motivational force discussed as necessary limitations during the examination of Wolf's hybrid account. The primary difference between my account and Wolf's is that robust narrative meaning can answer the amalgam problem by understanding meaning as a relation among the goods of a life rather than as a single hybrid good. Let's begin with a close look at de Bres's *fitting story* account.

de Bres offers a narrative account of meaning in life, so something needs to be said about what "narrative" amounts to in this context. de Bres identifies five core features that are common to both the narrative structure of a story and the narrative structure of a life understood as a story.³⁵ First, a narrative has a *diachronic structure*: as we saw in the discussion of the importance of the shape of a life, narratives involve the unfolding of events over time. The diachronic structure is

³⁵ Helena de Bres, "Narrative and Meaning in Life," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 15 (2018): 547.

both an empirical fact about the order of events within a life and a subjective quality of the recounting of these same events. Of course, there will be frequent inconsistencies between the empirical facts of a life and an individual's recounting of the same, but the diachronic structure is common to both perspectives. Second, a narrative stresses *connections* between events and, third, these connections stress the *continuity* or *coherence* of "micro-narratives" within a life. de Bres doesn't use this language, but we can understand the connections between events that lead to the continuity and coherence between events of a life to relate to the earlier point about the telic structure of a life. The diachronic, progressive structure of a life speaks to the sense of meaning as purpose. We see, then, a tentative reason for thinking that narrative is fundamental because the purpose of a life is explained, at least in part, by the narrative features of a life. Fourth, narrative involves *agency*: we are the protagonist of our own story, and the recounting of this story tends to focus on agential decisions and the consequences that result. Fifth, narratives communicate *significance*: the selective recounting of events stresses what is important (and what isn't) from the agent's perspective. The explicit reference to significance gives us further reason to think that narrativity is primary.

With these five narrative features in mind, we start to see how the meaning of a narrative can be appealed to as a useful analogy when trying to make sense of the meaning of a life. For example, narrative approaches to meaning in life appeal to a life's diachronic structure, agential focus, the connections between events, which result in continuity and coherence. Taken together, these features speak to the significance of a life, where, importantly, significance has a neutral valence, an important feature that allows us to adjudicate an earlier dispute. For narrativists, every life with a narrative structure is a life that is meaningful, so MLK and Hitler both led meaningful lives. Importantly, this is not a point about value, but about intelligibility. We are able, then, to say

that all lives are meaningful because all lives have an intelligible narrative structure – even when the narrative structure is less than maximally intelligible due to brain damage, a split personality, or Alzheimer’s disease, for example -- but this does not imply that all lives are equally desirable because some narratives are more desirable than others. To spell the distinction out more fully, all lives have *a* meaning, but not all lives are *meaningful*. Any intelligible life, then, expresses a meaning, but when this meaning is paired with the agent’s subjective endorsement (i.e., the agent has satisfied the subjective condition), then the life is also *meaningful*. The objection considered earlier was that if meaning is about significance (either wholly or partially), then significance must have a positive valence because meaning is something desirable. The objection loses its force for narrative accounts of meaning because on the narrative account all lives are at least minimally meaningful when they are intelligible, while still maintaining that MLK’s life is going better than Hitler’s because positive significance is more valuable than negative significance.

With these preliminaries out of the way, let’s take a close look at the formal statement of de Bres’s account:

Fitting Story: Telling a story about one’s life that is (i) true and (ii) adheres to a set of (salient) narrative conventions, contributes to the meaningfulness of one’s life. It does so by making the life more intelligible to oneself and others, thereby enabling the goods of understanding and community.³⁶

The (salient) narrative features de Bres has in mind are *selectivity*, *unity*, and *isomorphism*. When taken together, she argues, these three features make possible the move from thinking of one’s life as a story to making one’s life more intelligible. Selectivity transforms an otherwise unwieldy mass of people, places, activities, and so on into a focus on particularly important people, places,

³⁶ Ibid, 562.

and activities that highlight what the agent takes to be the key features of her life. In other words, without selectivity, a life (or a story) would be an unedited stream of consciousness. A life story does not include every miniscule detail of one's life. Selectivity makes the mass of events intelligible. *Unity* is a consequence of selectivity. Disparate events are woven into a "cohesive whole, drawing causal, or analogical connections between them and situating them within a larger context."³⁷ The third salient narrative feature is *isomorphism*: narratives tend to share "deep structural" features with other narratives, like rising action, character tropes, common themes, and allusions to canonical motifs. de Bres is careful here to appeal to a very general isomorphism. The narrative structures she is interested in are intended to be largely neutral in terms of cultural, geographic, and temporal influence. It would be a mistake to think she has an aesthetic criterion that applies narrowly to a certain time and place. A life might resemble the 19th century bildungsroman, for example, but this isn't to say that to be a narratable life is to follow a narrative structure that is this narrow.

In essence, understanding one's life as a narrative is valuable because it makes one's life more intelligible. But this raises the question concerning why we should care about intelligibility. de Bres argues that intelligibility is valuable because it leads to two further values: understanding and community. Perhaps not much needs to be said about the value of understanding. The basic claim is that it is better to understand the connections between events, relationships, and accomplishments that constitute one's life than to not understand these things. Much of what can be said about the value of understanding in general applies to the value of understanding one's life. There is a *practical value* that improves our ability to navigate the world, predict future outcomes, and make sense of the past, and there is a *subjective value* that arises from the satisfaction that

³⁷ Ibid, 557.

arises from the practical value just mentioned. This is to say that the success of navigating the world by understanding the world is a value in itself.

The value of *community* that arises from making one's life intelligible is less obvious. de Bres argues that through selectivity, unity, and especially isomorphism we see connections between our own lives and the lives of others. In the same way that narratives share deep structural features in common with one another, so too do the meaning of human lives. When my life is intelligible to me, it allows me to see a commonality between my desires, projects, values, and so on, and those desires, projects, and values of other members of the human community. Put simply, thinking of one's life as a story that shares features with the stories of others helps answer (or quell) the problem of existential dread. My story is similar to the stories of those that came before and after me, and so in that way there is a valuable sense of fellow feeling. I also contribute to the ongoing story of humanity, a point that will be unpacked in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

One worry for de Bres's account is that if meaning is primarily a matter of narrative intelligibility, and intelligibility is valuable for instrumental reasons – namely, as a means of achieving understanding and community – then meaning, in turn, is merely instrumentally valuable.³⁸ On my view, this account is too humble. Certainly, there are instrumental reasons for hoping that one's life is meaningful, but these instrumental reasons do not tell the full picture. If we are to take the reportive definition seriously, a full account must also allow that meaning is valuable for its own sake. If meaning in life did nothing to assist understanding or a sense of community, this would not exhaust our reasons for desiring a meaningful life. Indeed, if we are to

³⁸ See de Bres, pg. 570: "According to Fitting Story, the value of narrative meaning is purely instrumental."

remain neutral concerning meaning's valence, and as a result reap the benefits that such an approach permits, then we must reject a purely instrumental account of meaning.

A second problem arises from Fitting Story's excess humility: de Bres is careful to remain neutral on subjectivity and objectivity. The reason for this is that she sees insurmountable problems with the leading subjectivist and objectivist accounts of narrative meaning. For example, Antti Kauppinen's *progressive-relationism* is an objectivist view that argues that a life "increases in meaning to the extent that it involves the challenging and successful pursuit of objectively valuable projects, in ways that draw constructively on the past."³⁹ Importantly, for Kauppinen, subjective attraction plays no role in the meaning of a life, and this is where things go wrong, according to de Bres, for mere "bloodless relations" cannot confer meaning on a life. Perhaps lurking in the background here is the instrumental worry: objective relations alone cannot lead to a subjective sense of understanding and community. However, if we reject the instrumentalization of meaning, then de Bres's rejection of the objective condition loses its force.

What about subjective narrative accounts? Connie Rosati offers an account of personal welfare that takes a subjectivist approach to the value of recounting one's life as a narrative. de Bres restates the account in slightly different terms to make it about meaning in life rather than individual welfare:

Agency-recountism: Telling a story about one's life that emphasizes one's status as an autonomous agent contributes to the meaningfulness of that life, by virtue of increasing one's sense of agency.⁴⁰

³⁹ Antti Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84 (2012): 345-377 as quoted in de Bres, 550.

⁴⁰ Connie Rosati, "The Story of a Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 30 (2013): 21-50 as quoted in de Bres, pg. 551.

de Bres objects to this account for two reasons. First, for reasons similar to those articulated by Wolf (2010), it doesn't seem right to say that a felt sense of meaning alone can confer meaning on a life. The counterexamples appealed to earlier were collections of paradigmatically meaningless activities: smoking pot all day, counting blades of grass, copying out *War and Peace* by hand, and so on. We stray too far from the reportive definition if we allow that meaning is a purely subjective sense of fulfillment. Even if a life devoted to counting blades of grass *feels* meaningful, there is a compelling third-personal perspective from which we have the strong intuition that it is not.

A second problem with Rosati's account, according to de Bres, is the lack of a truth condition. If I think I am a civil rights activist, but in reality my actions detract from civil rights causes, something seems to have gone wrong no matter how meaningful I take my actions to be. Similarly, if I remember being a loving parent, or writing a great novel, but in fact I am delusional or simply mistaken, it seems, again, that the meaning of my life is different than what I take it to be. A truth condition is justified.

For these reasons, de Bres's account remains neutral about subjectivity and objectivity. When taken in isolation, her objections to the subjectivist and objectivist accounts hold a great deal of weight. But we don't have to commit to one view or the other, nor do we have to remain neutral. Instead, we can take what is valuable from each to propose a hybrid narrative account of meaning in life. By doing so, we arrive at a new narrative account of meaning:

Robust narrative meaning in life: Telling a story about one's life that is (1) true and (2) adheres to a set of (salient) subjective and objective narrative conventions, explains the meaningfulness of one's life.

The account I propose incorporates the strengths of de Bres's account while avoiding its weaknesses. I have maintained the truth condition, as well as the list of narrative features outlined

at the beginning of this section. I have added the subjective and objective conditions for the reasons outlined in the discussion of Wolf.⁴¹ I have removed the claim that narrative conventions merely contribute to the meaning of a life, choosing instead to offer a full-throated endorsement of narrativity as primary and significance and purpose as derivative. What this means is that the account breaks from de Bres in taking narrativity to explain meaning simpliciter rather than merely one aspect of meaning. She takes her account to explain just one aspect of meaning, which requires an endorsement of the amalgam thesis, while mine account gives a univocal answer. On my account, every life is meaningful to some minimal extent, because every life can be recounted as a narrative. Even a life that is dull or repetitive – a life perhaps that is nothing more than “one blasted thing after another” – contains narrative features, and thus a meaning. The account still leaves room for some lives to be more meaningful than others because significance and purpose play a role in one’s life story and increasing these derivative properties increases the degree of meaning within a life.

⁴¹ An important difference from Wolf, however, is that my account is in the context of a narrative interpretation of meaning in life, so, critically, what is required is not merely that one’s life satisfy the need for subjective attraction, but also the subjective endorsement of one’s life as an attractive narrative. Thus, a fully meaningful life contains certain objective narrative features that are recognized and subjectively endorsed.

Chapter 2: Social Groups and Meaning in Life

Recent work on meaning in life has primarily focused on two related questions: what, if anything, makes an individual's life meaningful (meaning *in* life) and what, if anything, makes life in general meaningful (*the* meaning *of* life)?⁴² These questions are occasionally considered in tandem. For instance, if nothing makes an individual's life meaningful, we might be skeptical that anything can make life in general meaningful. More commonly, however, meaning *in* life and *the* meaning *of* life are taken to be distinct investigations. In this chapter, I argue that this distinction misses an important third set of questions, namely those questions concerning the nature and import of the meaning of *group* lives. Neither meaning *in* life nor *the* meaning *of* life, as they are typically understood, can provide an adequate account of, for example, meaningful crowd-sourced projects or group efforts to maintain meaningful cultural traditions. Of course, such group actions can add meaning to the lives of the individuals that make up these groups, but if the analysis ends there, we fail to notice that *the group itself* can lead a meaningful life, over and above anything experienced by any one group member, or even the sum of those individual experiences.

Consider an example. A *potlatch* is a gift-giving ceremony practiced by First Nations tribes along the North American Pacific Coast. To mark an important occasion, like a wedding or a birth, the host of the potlatch offers gifts to those in attendance. The greater the gifts, the greater the honor bestowed on the host. Beyond gift giving, there is typically also food, drink, and dancing, as well as planning, trading, and negotiations. As such, a potlatch is often both pleasurable and

⁴² For recent work on meaning *in* life, see, e.g., Wolf (2010); Metz (2001) and (2019); Landau (2017). For recent work on *the* meaning *of* life, see e.g., Nagel (1971): 716-27; Taylor (1987): 675-86 and (2004 [1970]): 19-28; Nozick (1981): 571-647.

useful. But even if the ceremony were unpleasant and useless, a potlatch might still be valuable when it is a source of meaning.⁴³

At first glance, this example might seem to fit nicely into an individualistic approach to the meaning of life. After all, when the tribe undertakes a potlatch, the individual members of the tribe engage in meaningful activity. And, as a result, each of their lives becomes more meaningful. So, if this was the claim we wanted to investigate, we would be safely within the bounds of questions concerning the meaning of an individual's life. Similarly, we might be able to tease out some connection between these instances of meaningful activity and facts about meaningful life in general. Either approach would be interesting, but even taken together they fail to exhaust all that we might ask.

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that recent work on meaning in life that focuses on individuals can indeed be scaled up to cover the life of a group. Just as certain activities can add to (or hinder) the meaning of an individual's life, so too can certain activities add to (or hinder) the meaning of group lives.

I begin by making the case for the plausibility of meaningful group life. I then consider what a successful account of meaningful group life might look like, beginning with *summativism* about the meaning of group life, the view that the meaning of a group's life just is the sum of the meaning of the individual lives that make up the group. I argue that summativism cannot do justice to the all the ways in which group lives can be meaningful, and that such views should be rejected in favor of what I call the *joint commitment account* of the meaning of group life.

⁴³ I provide an account of meaning below. For now, a pretheoretical understanding that takes meaning to be an aspect of well-being that is separate from happiness or morality should suffice.

1. The meaning of “meaning”

Before we can say anything useful about the meaning of group lives, something first needs to be said about the meaning of “meaning.” The present account will be brief, since the purpose is simply to introduce the discussion that follows. The account that opens this chapter is intended to remain neutral on many of the controversial steps that I argued for in Chapter 1. The goal is to have a broad, agreeable conception of meaning so that the focus can be on the meaning of group lives without getting bogged down by the points of disagreement discussed in the individual case. I end this chapter by returning to the robust narrative account of meaning in life to show how the more detailed account plays out in the group context.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no consensus as to what we are asking when we ask about the meaning of “meaning” in the context of meaning in life. It is unclear, for instance, whether meaning is assessed from the first- or third-person perspective. What should we say, for instance, when these two perspectives diverge? For example, many people take Martin Luther King to have lived a paradigmatically meaningful life. Should this assessment change if we imagine a world in which he assessed his own life as meaningless? In a word, are there objective facts about meaning? These questions are at the heart of the debate between *subjectivism*, *objectivism*, and *hybrid* accounts concerning meaning in life. For the present inquiry, we may set this debate aside. We may allow that the meaning of “meaning” is indeterminate and remain open-minded about an expansive pluralism in the context of determining which cases of purported meaning are legitimate.

With that said, it isn’t the case that *all* pre-theoretical references to meaning should be included in our analysis. To see why, consider some of the recent psychological research that has attempted to catalogue which activities add meaning to life. Nelson, Abeya, and Routledge (2021) asked research subjects to respond to the following prompt: “We are interested in identifying the

different ways people find a sense of personal meaning in life [. . .] please describe what makes your life feel meaningful.”⁴⁴ As might be expected, the responses were diverse. Among other things, respondents cited: positive relationships, parenting, altruism, nature, spirituality, religion, knowledge, hobbies, creative pursuits, career success, travel, personal legacy, and self-improvement. One worry, if we were to take this data at face value, is that this list is too broad: “meaning,” pre-theoretically, seems to include nearly anything that might reasonably count as valuable rather than a specific type of value called “meaning.” Said another way, meaning is sometimes taken to be synonymous with “valuable.” For present purposes, however, meaning should not be confused or conflated with other concepts like “happiness,” “pleasure,” or “good in general.”⁴⁵

Seachris (2019) has helpfully narrowed the scope of philosophical analyses of meaning. On his account, there are three primary senses. The first asks about the *purpose* of a life, the second about the *significance* of a life, and the third asks about the *intelligibility* of or *narrative relations* that constitute a life.⁴⁶ In short, for Seachris, the *purpose* of a life refers to the primary goals or projects that the life in question aims at. From this perspective, we might ask about the *point* or *goal* of a life. The *significance* of a life refers to the lasting impact or relevance of a life. A statistic can be meaningful or meaningless, impactful or irrelevant, and so too a life. Finally, the *intelligibility* of a life refers to the coherence or narratability of a life. Do the moments of a life *make sense* when taken as a whole? A life is more meaningful, on this account, when the various parts tell a coherent narrative rather than many different unrelated stories.

⁴⁴ Nelson, Abeyta, and Routledge (2021): 112.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Metz (2009): 3-20.

⁴⁶ Seachris (2019): 363-70.

Much could be said about each of these points, and indeed, the analysis in Chapter 1 develops each point in more detail. My goal is not to settle anything at this stage, but to instead narrow our inquiry down so that we have a broad, workable understanding of what *meaning in life* refers to. Seachris's taxonomy moves us one step closer to assessing the question of meaning in the context of group lives.

2. The meaning of "social group"

I will now give a brief account of what I mean by "social group." To show that recent work on individuals and meaning in life can be scaled up to the life of a group, the account analyzed here must satisfy three conditions: the group must be able to (a) perform actions and (b) live a group life that can be assessed in terms of well-being.⁴⁷ The group must also (c) satisfy these conditions not as an arbitrary set of individuals, but as a group "unified" in the manner articulated below. The purpose of these conditions is to ensure that we capture the same sense of meaning analyzed earlier in the individual case. I will unpack each condition in detail as we proceed. Along the way I briefly describe Gilbert's account of "social group" and compare it to Ritchie's to draw out what I take to be important for the present inquiry. I end up with one possible account of social group that satisfies the required conditions, but I leave open the possibility that there are others. It would be unsurprising to find that conditions (a) – (c) are consistent with a wide variety of competing accounts of "social group."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Objection: the concept *group well-being* is nonsensical because well-being requires a unified conscious subject, but groups are not unified conscious subjects, so groups cannot be assessed in terms of well-being. Response: well-being, in the sense used in this chapter, does not require a unified conscious subject but instead that a subject constitute a *life* and that this life be assessable in terms of going better or worse. I make the case in section 3 that there is coherent and useful sense in which the temporal duration of a social group constitutes the *life of the group* and that this life can go better or worse. Grounding the distinction in terms of *life* rather than *unified consciousness* allows us to talk informatively about the success of groups and individuals without being forced to accept the conclusion that that rocks or pieces of furniture are assessable in terms of well-being.

⁴⁸ For example, Thomasson (forthcoming) and Ritchie (2015)'s "Type 1 social groups" are distinct from one another yet consistent with the conditions I propose here.

Gilbert (1989; 2006) offers a “rough and partial characterization” of “social group” such that the members of a social group are “*unified* in such a way that they constitute *more than a mere aggregate* of persons.”⁴⁹ A group like *men born on Tuesday* may be useful for a statistician interested in aggregates, but such a group is not a social group in Gilbert’s (or my) sense. More precisely, for Gilbert, to qualify as a social group, the group in question must meet certain conditions:⁵⁰

1. Unity: as discussed above, group members are unified in such a way as to be more than a mere aggregate of persons. The type of unity is the unity that arises from conditions (2) and (3), below. One consequence of this condition is that members feel justified in referring to one another as “associates,” using the full-blooded “we”, and similar such phrases.⁵¹ As such, members will typically feel justified in saying things like “we believe *x*,” “we accomplished *x*,” and so on.
2. Consciousness of unity: In paradigmatic cases, each member is consciously aware of being a member of the group unified in the sense described in (1). Members of a labor union, for example, may have intentionally signed a membership card, are aware of paying dues, and so on.
3. Intentionality of membership: members have intentionally joined the group. There are no accidental members in paradigmatic cases.

Beyond these limiting conditions, it is important to note a lack of a limit on the size of the group. Social groups can be small, even just two people, or very large, like a union with millions of

⁴⁹ Gilbert (2006): 152, echoing Rousseau.

⁵⁰ See Gilbert (2006): 15-16 and especially 93-101.

⁵¹ Gilbert (2018): 224-25.

members.⁵² Paradigm social groups include book clubs, sports teams, hiring committees, parent-teacher associations, and unions.

So much for the positive account. Let's also consider some examples of groups that do not qualify as social groups, in Gilbert's sense. Some groups -- like *men*, *women*, and *people who have freckles* -- are not unified in the sense in question. A census or a statistician will pick out demographic groups (as well as some social groups), but the account of social groups proposed here will not. It would be unusual for a man to speak on behalf of all men or for someone with freckles to refer sincerely to others with freckles as her associates. A man might say something like "Men don't believe in showing emotion," but he would be strained to find large scale agreement from his purported associates. Indeed, even in speaking this way it seems likely that he would intend to communicate a generalization about how men typically act rather than making the more specific claim that men constitute a social group.

On my view, women and other historically disenfranchised groups are trickier cases. For Gilbert, these groups are not social groups on account of failing the "associates test." As I understand her view, it would be unusual for a woman to speak legitimately on behalf of all women, for example, in the sense presupposed by membership in a social group. What may give us pause, however, is the fact that groups like *women of color* have faced persistent systemic racism and misogyny that may indeed unify these groups in the sense of unity described in condition (1), above. appropriate sense.⁵³ It does seem natural for a woman of color to make a statement like, "We refuse to put up with this anymore!" while a similar statement from someone with freckles would be unusual, in typical cases. Ritchie (2020), for instance, agrees that not any arbitrary

⁵² For a full treatment of how joint commitments are possible in very large groups, see Gilbert (2006): 98-99. Gilbert makes the case that joint commitments are possible even in large groups despite concerns about hierarchy, impersonality, and anonymity.

⁵³ My thanks to Karl Schafer for this example.

collection of people counts as a social group, but, according to her account, gender and racial groups are genuine social groups.⁵⁴ As such, she makes a distinction between what she calls “feature social groups” and “organized social groups.” The former includes racial and gender groups -- i.e., groups that are unified according to a shared feature -- while the latter contains the more traditional cases like unions, book clubs, and the like.⁵⁵

Keeping in mind that in my sense social groups must be able to perform actions and be assessable in terms of well-being, how should we adjudicate this dispute? A useful piece of evidence is the fact that we often speak loosely in a way that implies that a feature group has performed an action when in reality the action was performed by a small subset of the group in question. For instance, on June 20, 2020 President Trump held his first campaign rally since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The rally was expected to easily fill Tulsa, Oklahoma’s 19,000-seat auditorium. On the day of the rally, however, a meagre 6,200 people were in attendance.⁵⁶ Several news outlets attributed the poor turnout to a prank purportedly performed by “zoomers,” the name for people born in the late 90s and early 2000s. An organized campaign across several social media platforms requested tickets for the event, despite having no intention of attending, with the idea being that tens of thousands of fake ticket requests would make it difficult for those who genuinely wanted to attend to do so. A representative headline summarized the prank: “Zoomers Boast They Sabotaged Trump Rally Turnout with Fake Reservations.”⁵⁷ If we take the headline at face value, we might be fooled into thinking that a feature social group in Ritchie’s

⁵⁴ Ritchie (2020): 402.

⁵⁵ Ritchie’s careful analysis aims to satisfy the “Goldilock’s condition,” where the goal is to capture all genuine cases while avoiding overgeneration. Missing racial and gender groups would be overly narrow, while including groups like “people with freckles” would be too broad on her account. See Ritchie (2020): 413ff.

⁵⁶ Giovanni Russonello, “Trump’s Tulsa Rally Attendance: 6,200, Fire Dept. Says,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2020.

⁵⁷ Mary Papenfuss, “Zoomers Boast They Sabotaged Trump Rally Turnout with Fake Reservations,” *HuffPost*, June 21, 2020.

sense performed a collective action. In reality, of course, the protest action was performed by a small subset of a demographic. What appears at first to be a novel case of a feature group performing an action turns out to be a straightforward case of an action performed by an organized social group.

Of course, a single example cannot show that it is impossible for a feature social group to perform an action or, for that matter, lead a meaningful group life. And, importantly, if a feature social group could perform an action, it would become a social group in the Gilbertian sense. With that said, we may remain agnostic for the time being. The purpose of the example is to demonstrate that we should be wary of our off-the-cuff judgements about these types of cases.

The lesson from these two accounts is not that one is correct and one mistaken, but instead that each pick out a different set. Taken together, Ritchie's feature groups and organized social groups pick out a broader phenomenon than that picked out by Gilbert's three conditions. My own account is narrower yet by adding to Gilbert's account the requirement that the group be assessable from the perspective of well-being.

3. The meaning of "group life"

As a final point of terminological clarification, something needs to be said about what constitutes a "group life." The clarification heads off the following objection: it is commonly agreed that groups can *appear* as though they are "alive" – by having intentions and beliefs, performing actions, and being subject to a variety of success conditions, among other things -- but to say that a group is "alive" or that a group constitutes a "group life" is a category mistake.

The objection fails because the sense of "life" under analysis does not depend on the kind of psychological unity or group mind presumed by the objection. Any social group that exists over

time and meets the conditions described in the previous section will in some sense have a life as a group – a “group life” that can go better or worse. As such, there is no category mistake, nothing “spooky,” about the sense of life under analysis. A group life, then, is not *equivalent* to an individual life, but there are enough similarities to make “group life” a useful term of art.

This sense of “group life” is consistent with a wide variety of accounts of “social group,” but since I will be operating with Gilbert’s framework here, I can be more specific: I understand a group life to be the life of a *plural subject* that has been created via *joint commitment*. Let’s unpack these terms. A joint commitment is the technical phrase Gilbert uses to describe a ubiquitous social phenomenon.⁵⁸ Imagine that Desmond asks Onóra to go for a walk and Onóra accepts.⁵⁹ This is an example of a joint commitment. Here is the general form: “Persons xi, xii, . . . xn are jointly committed to [phi] as a body,”⁶⁰ where “phi” is taken to be a psychological state like “believe,” “commit to act,” and so on. Returning to the example, a joint commitment has occurred because Desmond and Onóra have jointly committed to act in concert as a single subject – hereafter, a *plural subject* – committed to *phi*, i.e., espouse as a body the goal of their going for a walk.⁶¹ The individuals have committed themselves to act, as much as a possible, as a single body with a certain psychological property. In short, they have formed a plural subject with a particular goal.

A great deal could be said about the constitution and consequences of joint commitments. I will focus on just the three features that are essential for the joint commitment account of the meaning of a group’s life.

⁵⁸ In what follows, I provide a brief account of the core features of joint commitment. For more detail, see e.g., Gilbert (2018): 161-168.

⁵⁹ I borrow this example from Gilbert (1990): 2ff.

⁶⁰ Gilbert (2002): 43.

⁶¹ “Going for a walk” is cashed out in behavioral terms: keeping a comfortable yet friendly distance from one another, aiming at a shared destination, returning to a starting point, and whatever else ought to be included in a detailed behavioral explanation of this joint task.

First, a joint commitment is not a set of individual commitments, but a single commitment with two or more committed parties. Desmond and Onóra are going for a walk *together*, as a plural subject. As such, it would be a mistake to think of the commitment as the sum of its parts. It isn't the case that Desmond is committed to Onóra, and Onóra is committed to Desmond. In fact, it isn't a case of anyone being "committed to" anyone at all. Instead, the walk is a single commitment of the two pursued as much as possible as a plural subject.

Second, joint commitments are formed by each party's expression of readiness, in conditions of common knowledge, to be jointly committed with the relevant group members.⁶² Desmond expresses his readiness to be jointly committed by asking Onóra if she would like to go for a walk. Onóra can signal her readiness to join the commitment in a variety of ways: by saying "Yes" or nodding her head or by smiling and beginning to walk alongside him. These expressions of readiness occur under conditions of common knowledge when the communication of readiness is clear and understood by each party. One cannot initiate a joint commitment while asleep or while not paying attention. If Desmond moves into the apartment next to Onóra, and he claims to now be living, as a plural subject, *with* Onóra, we can rightfully explain to him that a joint commitment has not been formed. The purported plural subject was not formed under conditions of common knowledge. In addition, Onóra had no say in the matter, a further problem for the claim that a joint commitment has been formed.

Finally, joint commitments entail a variety of consequences. One worth mentioning: joint commitments require joint rescission. No single party to the commitment may dissolve the commitment, absent any special background understanding. As such, joint commitments entail

⁶² "Common knowledge" is a technical term for Gilbert. For a full treatment, see Gilbert (1989: 194-5). Informally, an expression has been made under conditions of common knowledge when none of the parties can be in doubt that the expression has made, and this is clear to all. See also, Lewis (1969).

normative constraints. Further, to act contrary to a joint commitment is to open oneself up to rebuke. To see what this means, let's extend the example. Imagine that Desmond and Onóra, under conditions of common knowledge, have each expressed readiness to go for a walk together towards a coffee shop. They begin walking and engage in conversation. At the halfway point, Desmond stops in his tracks and begins walking in the opposite direction. Onóra might call after him, saying something like, "Desmond! Where are you going? We agreed to walk to the coffee shop!" She has noticed that something has gone wrong. Desmond has broken the joint commitment. There might, of course, be other normative commitments that could impact what Desmond should do, all things considered, but we can still say that Desmond has violated a normative commitment when he breaks off and begins walking on his own. All else equal, Onóra has the standing or authority to rebuke Desmond for breaking the joint commitment. Precisely how this come about is discussed in Gilbert's book *Rights and Demands*.⁶³

The lesson to be taken from this brief discussion is that when I speak of a "group life," I refer to a plural subject formed via joint commitment. Importantly, plural subjects are capable of holding and expressing a point of view ("We, the hiring committee, have shortlisted your application"), performing actions ("The football team won the game"), and being subject to assessments akin to common assessments of individual well-being ("The book club flourished under the guidance of new leadership").

4. Guiding examples

With these terminological distinctions out of the way, let's turn to two guiding examples. The first demonstrates meaningful group activity. The second demonstrates group activity aimed at

⁶³ Gilbert (2018).

maintaining a meaningful group life across time. I aim to capture both senses of meaning described as conditions in section 2, namely, a moment of meaning that arises from a discrete activity and a meaningful state of being together that results from a history of meaningful activity across time. Taken together, we see that meaning can be synchronic or diachronic.

The cases are intentionally mundane: they describe everyday phenomena. And yet, despite being common, our ways of talking about these examples obscures their ubiquity. We do not typically say, for instance, “The union lives a meaningful life.” What I intend to demonstrate is that, yes, it is unusual to describe, out loud, a meaningful group life, and yet it is commonplace for groups to in fact constitute meaningful group lives and for us to think of them as doing so.

Unlike so much work in social ontology -- where our ways of speaking are in need of an explanation -- the direction of explanation works in the opposite direction when it comes to the meaning of group lives. I begin with a common phenomenon that is not often talked about and only then make the case for a new way of speaking that is consistent with the phenomenon in question.

4a. Meaningful group activity

In 2010, University College London launched the Transcribe Bentham project.⁶⁴ Still active today, the initiative uses crowd-sourced volunteer labor to transcribe Jeremy Bentham’s unpublished manuscripts. The project incorporates several features common to many social media platforms: “friending,” user profiles, and a digital rewards system. Volunteers take on as much or as little work as they feel equipped to handle, with the aim of eventually transcribing 11,000 handwritten

⁶⁴ University College, London, “Transcribe Bentham: A Scholarly Crowdsourcing Initiative,” Research Impact, December 7, 2020, 2014, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/impact/case-studies/2014/dec/transcribe-bentham-scholarly-crowdsourcing-initiative>.

pages. Volunteers report a sense of community and shared purpose. To date, more than 500 members of the public have made one or more transcriptions.

I take this to be an example of a plural subject engaged in meaningful activity. Several features of the activity support this contention. First, the goal of the project is to *preserve* something (Bentham's work) that many people take to be valuable, and, further, to *promote the continued accessibility* of this valuable thing. Said another way, collecting, preserving, and promoting something of value is often taken to be a paradigmatic meaningful activity, and so it seems reasonable to take the product of this work to be meaningful. Museums, history departments, and many cultural practices aim at similarly meaningful practices.

Note that nothing has been said about pleasure or morality. This is consistent with the earlier observation that meaning is distinct from these other values. Indeed, it seems likely that the transcription work would be rather unpleasant, even if meaningful, and this is also consistent with other paradigmatic cases of meaningful activity, like visiting a friend in the hospital, or persevering under duress in the face of injustice.

What about morality? Perhaps a case could be made that some part of the transcription project will make a moral contribution at some point. It's possible that a new way of understanding Bentham's work will come to light, and this will make downstream, real-world contributions to morality. Perhaps. But there is certainly no guarantee that this is the case, and in the end it is irrelevant to assessing the possibility of meaning assessed from the perspective of the meaning instantiated by the life of the plural subject. If the transcription work makes the world a better place, this could increase the meaning of the work, but if it doesn't this does not preclude meaning. Meaning and morality remain distinct.

We must also distinguish the motivation of the individuals and the motivation of the plural subject because these motivations can come apart. The plural subject aims to transcribe 11,000 pages of historically and philosophically important work to preserve the accessibility and value of this work for future generations. On the other hand, the plural subject is made up of individuals and each individual will have slightly different motivations, goals, and so on. As such, we cannot make a general assessment of the meaning of each individual's contribution in the same way that we can when it comes to the plural subject. I say more about this in due course.⁶⁵

The larger point is this: the work performed by an individual may or may not be meaningful for the individual, but this is a separate level of analysis. Any single transcriber might not perform especially meaningful work, and, indeed, transcribing a few dozen pages here there might feel uncomfortably Sisyphean. Regardless of what a full analysis of meaning from the perspective of the individual might look like, I hope to have shown that meaning at the level of the individual and meaning at the level of the plural subject are distinct.

4b. Meaningful group life

We have seen that social groups can perform meaningful activities that contribute to group well-being. In this way, meaningful moments result from meaningful activity. I now aim to show that meaning is not always the result of discrete, countable actions, but also results from a social group being together across time. Just as an individual can perform a single virtuous action or live a virtuous life taken as a whole, a person might perform a meaningful action, but she might also live a meaningful life, considered as a whole. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that the same is true of group lives.

⁶⁵ See section 5.

Consider again the example of the potlatch and its difficult history. In Canada, the tradition was outlawed near the end of the 19th century as a means of so-called “integrating” Indigenous peoples into European civilization. Although it did not disappear entirely, the potlatch was significantly suppressed and did not come back to full force until more than fifty years later. As a result of this history, many Indigenous tribes consider the potlatch to be both a source of happiness and joy, but also a reminder of the brutal history of colonization. As such, many tribes celebrate as they mourn, and each has a role to play in well-being. Food, drink, and dancing contribute to well-being via happiness (and perhaps in other ways), while remembering and persevering through a difficult past contributes to well-being via meaning.

Speaking more generally, mourning can be performed as a distinct action -- through a conversation or a funeral, perhaps -- but it need not be so discrete. Mourning can also ebb and flow in intensity and awareness across time. Recall that persevering through adversity is commonly taken to be a source of meaning, and so, in this way, a tribe instantiates a meaningful state of being together across time that is distinct from any particular meaningful action. We can't point to any single moment of overcoming adversity, but instead perseverance is something that happens across time.

It might be objected that cultural traditions are meaningful, but only insofar as they contribute to the well-being of individuals. Is there a coherent plural subject that finds cultural traditions meaningful for the plural subject's sake? It seems that there can be, as we see in the present case where an Indigenous tribe works to preserve the potlatch across generations. An individual can contribute to the group goal, but there is no potlatch that exists for one person at one moment. Any individual contributions only count as contributions when they aim at the collective goal. Of course, there will be secondary effects that contribute (positively or negatively)

to the well-being of the individuals that constitute the group, but this is a separate level of analysis. All that needs to be shown for the present inquiry is that the group has a goal and success conditions of its own. A plural subject can instantiate meaning that is separate from the meaning of its members.

5. What summativism is and why it fails

An implicit claim of the previous section is that each guiding example is an activity or state of being together performed or instantiated by a group and not an activity or state of being together that simply *appears as though* it is performed by or instantiated by a group. If we knew nothing at all about human behavior, we might mistake some cases of the latter for the former. For example, an alien species witnessing a patron yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater might mistake the ensuing chaos for an organized, although dangerous, retreat. But we are not aliens. We know that not all appearances of coordination are cases of group action. Some apparent cases fail to constitute a group *acting together*; they merely constitute accidental coordination. With this in mind, how might we account for genuine cases of group action in the context of meaning in life?

One strategy would be to say that the meaningfulness of a group’s life is nothing more or less than the sum of the meaning of the individual actions that make up the group life. Call this the *summative* account of the meaning of a group’s life. According to summativism, to determine the meaningfulness of the group life that works on the Bentham Project, we add up the meaning of the individual actions that make up that life. The total is the sum of the parts.

Summativism is attractive for at least two reasons. First, it is simple. If we can assess the meaning of a plural subject’s constitutive parts, then it is simply a matter of arithmetic to arrive at

the meaning of the whole. If two accounts arrive at the same conclusion, then the simpler approach should be favored, a point in favor of summativism.

Second, it is intuitive. We often appeal to summative-like accounts in other well-being-adjacent assessments. If I want to know how well a company's finances are doing, a "summative" account that sums the company's income and expenses is a good approach. If a physical therapist wants to know how well a patient's injured shoulder is recovering, a "summative" account that asks the patient to track good days and bad may also do well in this case. If the daily running average includes an increasing number of good days, this is a point in favor of the treatment plan. Summativism about meaning is attractive, then, in part because it is a common approach when assessing success in other areas of life.

Despite these points in its favor, summativism fails for two reasons. First, it is possible for a group life to contain more meaning than the amount expressed by the sum of its parts. This is because meaning is not merely a matter of what one does, but also a matter of *how* and *why* one does what one does. In other words, in paradigmatic cases, meaningful actions (1) do not result from luck (the *how* of an action matters) and the (2) one's intentions matter (the *why* of an action matters).

Consider an example. Imagine that in a dystopian world minor crimes are cleared from one's criminal record through volunteer work at the Transcribe Bentham Project. A doctor is convicted of misdemeanor graffiti while attending a civil rights protest. He runs a successful practice and decides to plead to community service rather than face the potential embarrassment of appearing in court to pay his fine. When it comes time to complete his transcriptions, he finds the work miserable, repetitive, and pointless. He doesn't actively sabotage the project, but he makes no effort to do a good job and barely pays attention to his transcriptions. As a matter of

luck, his transcriptions are above average quality and contain very few errors. In the end, the Transcribe Bentham Project produces meaningful work, and that work is slightly better on account of the doctor's contributions. We might imagine further that *all* of the contributors to the project feel and act just as the doctor does. If this is possible, then summativism fails, for the group has done something meaningful even though every individual action that makes up the group action is meaningless. The sum is zero, yet the total is greater than zero, a result that is impossible according to summativism.

It might be objected that the individual actions are less meaningful than they might be, but that they represent some non-zero amount of meaning, so summativism can explain the case because each individual adds some miniscule amount of meaning that when added up in large enough numbers can lead to a significant total. To reject this response, the individual contributions must not just be very small, but zero. Why should we think this is the case? Notice three facts about this case:

- (1) the doctor finds the work boring, repetitive, and pointless. As a result, the activity lacks subjective meaning.
- (2) the doctor makes no effort to do a good job, but on account of luck does a good job anyway. As a result, the activity lacks an appropriate *how*.
- (3) the doctor is compelled to complete the transcriptions under threat of legal and social punishment. As a result, the action lacks an appropriate *why*.

Depending on the account of meaning one endorses, these three factors will be weighted differently. I include all three to stay consistent with the earlier requirement that we remain open-minded about which competing account of meaning is correct. In any case, if any one of these make the action meaningless, then, given the presence of all three, we have strong evidence that

the doctor's action is meaningless, even though the group he briefly is a part of produces meaningful work. The total amount of meaning is greater than the sum of the parts.

A further reason to reject summativism is that it can also fail in the opposite direction: the whole can be less than the sum of the parts. Imagine a second dystopia, this one composed of a single world-government. Consumer culture has run rampant, most people work at jobs that are pointless or harmful, cultural traditions are outlawed, and pleasure is the only government-recognized value. The members of this group life have unfortunately been coerced, under threat of imprisonment, to spend their workday pursuing these ideals. Using the language of joint commitment, we might say that the members of this plural subject are jointly committed to pursue pleasure, and only pleasure, as a body. Despite this meaningless group life, we should expect a great many of the individuals in this dystopian society to still be leading meaningful individual lives. Many would spend their non-work life with family, pursuing creative hobbies, writing great novels and all the rest of it. The result is a meaningless total comprised of meaningful parts. Summativism fails to explain how this type of world could be possible.

6. The joint commitment account of the meaning of a group's life

Given the problems with the summative account, we need to look elsewhere to explain how a plural subject can perform meaningful actions and constitute a meaningful group life. My suggestion is that just as joint commitment can make sense of group actions like walking together, so too can they make sense of the meaning of a group's life. Stated formally:

The joint commitment account of the meaning of a group's life (JCA): a social group leads a meaningful group life if and only if (1) its members are jointly committed as a body

to pursue activities that are meaningful and (2) the pursuits in (1) result in a meaningful state of being together across time.

The first condition captures meaningful group action, like the plural subject committed to the goals of the Transcribe Bentham project in section 4a. The second condition captures the need for assessing meaning in life across time, like the tribe that celebrates and mourns the potlatch across many generations in section 4b. In a word, a group performs a meaningful action if it succeeds in one of the pursuits in the first condition, but to constitute a meaningful group life requires consistent engagement with meaningful actions across time, as required by the second condition.

Note the lack of an explicit success condition built into (2). Successful projects are more likely to add meaning to life, but success is not a necessary condition. Attempting to write a great novel can be meaningful even if the attempt is not successful.⁶⁶

Taken together, JCA's two conditions provide an account of what it is for a plural subject to constitute meaning in life in a way that is roughly analogous to meaning in life considered from the individual's perspective. The goal was to "scale up" recent work on meaning in life to the case of group life, and the joint commitment account makes this possible.

Compared to the summative account, JCA has some advantages. First, the account presents no conflict with the conditions described in section 2. Recall that to be a social group, in my sense, the group must be able to (a) perform actions and (b) be assessable in terms of well-being. Gilbert (2022) provides a joint commitment account of acting together that is in harmony with the present understanding of social groups. As to (b), I take the present chapter to be an account of what it is for a social group to be assessable in terms of meaning, a dimension of well-being.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Along similar lines, see Metz (2009): section 4.2 on meaning and luck.

⁶⁷ See also Wiland (2022).

Second, JCA can explain the cases that were problems for the summative account. For example, it is common to feel at times that we are participating in a meaningless society. At the same time, this does not preclude the feeling that some individuals within the same society are living meaningful lives. Any adequate account of social groups and meaning in life must allow these separate levels of analysis. Unlike the summative account, JCA can explain this phenomenon because there is no necessary connection between the meaning of the group life and the meaning of the lives of its members. The total may be greater or less than the sum of the parts.

With that said, there is certainly a probabilistic relationship between being a member of a meaningful social group and leading a meaningful life. The former increases the likelihood of the latter in the same way that a social group that is jointly committed to believe x is more likely to contain members that believe x . However, there is no necessary connection between group meaning (or belief) and individual meaning (or belief) under the joint commitment model.⁶⁸ As a result, JCA can make sense of the cases that were problems for the summative account.

Third, JCA brings the problems that arise from “summing up” meaning into greater relief. Several such problems were discussed in the analysis of summativism, as well as in the attempt at a Benthamian felicific calculus in the context of meaning in Chapter 1. Meaning, according to the robust narrative account defended earlier, cannot be summed because meaning has no distinct “parts” or moments that can be added or subtracted. Meaning is analyzed holistically, according to the narrative account, and so there is no calculation to be performed. It is futile to sum up meaning in the same way that it is futile to sum up the parts of a story. Any such attempt is a category mistake.

⁶⁸ See Gilbert (2002) on distinguishing group belief from the beliefs of the group’s members.

JCA cashes out “meaning” in the minimal sense introduced at the beginning of this chapter. The goal of the minimal account is to show that the third set of questions – namely, those concerning the meaning of *group lives* – are applicable regardless of the specifics of the particular account of meaning we endorse.

But we don’t need to be so tentative. The robust account of meaning in life examined in Chapter 1 is consistent with everything that has been said about social groups and meaning in life. To see why, we need only to take “meaning” in JCA to amount to the same sense of “meaning” in the account of robust narrative meaning in life. On such an interpretation, the conditions on meaning in Chapter 1 apply. Meaning takes: narrativity to be primary, significance and purpose to affect the level of meaning in a life, the subjective and objective conditions to be necessary, and so on. Where we end up is with a robust account of meaning in life that applies both to the individual case and the case of group lives.

Further research ought to investigate how the subjective condition plays out in the group case, as the phenomenal experience appealed to in the individual case is not obviously applicable without a group mind. Some might think that the subjective requirement is too demanding, so more would be needed to be said to show that (1) groups can self-narrate in a manner that is analogous to the individual case, and that (2) this type of self-narration is a necessary condition for meaning in life in the group context. More could be said, also, to show that (or whether) Gilbert’s work on group belief can motivate self-narration in this context.

7. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that recent work on meaning in life can be scaled up to assess meaning in life from the perspective of group lives and group well-being. While the traditional bipartite distinction that examines questions concerning (1) meaning *in* life and (2) *the* meaning *of* life

has been fruitful, a third set of questions concerning the meaning of *group life* in general deserves attention.

Chapter 3: Group Immortality and Transgenerational Meaning

Most people would not choose to live forever. A variety of reasons have been cited to explain this preference. In what follows, I examine two such reasons as they relate to individual immortality: first, that an immortal life would be excessively boring and second, that an immortal life would be guaranteed to experience an event so bad that it would make most people choose mortality over immortality. Many have argued that if either of these objections succeed, then an immortal life is undesirable. This may be so. The purpose of this essay, however, is to argue that *group lives* are different. It isn't clear that paradigmatic group lives -- like the lives of unions, reading groups, and philosophy departments -- are susceptible to the preceding objections. It isn't clear, for instance, that a union lasting forever is undesirable from either the point of view of the union, *qua* group, or for the union's members, *qua* individuals. I argue that this intuition is correct: neither of the objections to an immortal individual life apply to the life of an immortal group. In the end, we may not be able to wish immortality for ourselves, but we can and often should desire that good group lives go on forever.

An important goal of this chapter is to introduce a new concept, that of group immortality, into the literature and to make the case that this is a concept worthy of further analysis. The present investigation inevitably covers a lot of ground – sometimes rather quickly. I hope that the occasional lack of fine-grain analysis will be taken as an invitation for further research.

In what follows, I sometimes speak of “lives worth continuing,” “lives not worth continuing,” and similar phrases that may be misinterpreted as objective assessments of the value of a life. In all cases, the analysis of the value of a life is to be assessed from the subjective point of view, meaning that in the individual case the assessment is made from the first-person

perspective, and in the group case the assessment is made from the point of view of the group. I set aside the question of whether a life can or should be assessed objectively, intersubjectively, or otherwise.

1.1 Boredom and individual immortality

Williams (1973) famously argues that an immortal life would be undesirable because it would be excessively boring.⁶⁹ To motivate this claim, he recounts the story of Elina Makropulos, the protagonist of Karel Čapek's *The Makropulos Case*. We are told that Elina has taken an elixir that permits her to live forever, or for as long as she likes. Every so often she must retake the elixir if she desires to continue living. Her body is "frozen" at age 42. Call this type of immortality *immortality-if-you-want-it*. Elina will live as long as her desire to live persists.

With these two conditions in mind – that one's life will only go on as long as one likes, and that one's body will be relatively young and healthy – two possible concerns are headed off: when considering the desirability of immortality, we need not worry about the pains of a deteriorating body, or the fact of being "locked into" one's decision to live forever. If it's true that one's life will inevitably become so boring that one no longer wishes it to continue, then, to put it simply, one's life needs not continue. The type of immortality in question is elective.

But is this enough to make immortality attractive? Čapek's Elina doesn't think so. Three centuries after her initial sip of the elixir, at the age of 342, Elina chooses to end her life. In Williams words: "Her trouble was it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that

⁶⁹ Cf. Nietzsche's discussion of "eternal return" in *The Gay Science*, p. 194, fragment 341. The Cambridge edition (2001) was edited by Williams.

everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened.”⁷⁰

There are two claims here worth noting. First, the type of boredom at issue is the type that results from *a lack of novel experiences*. Second, if the type of boredom that results from a lack of novel experiences is pervasive enough, it is necessarily the case, according to Williams, that such boredom would spoil whatever benefits immortality has to offer. Let’s take each point in turn.

First, it is important to clarify what “boredom” in Williams’ sense refers to because some everyday references to boredom appear to overlap, and others appear to refer to psychological states that are different not only in quantity but also in kind.⁷¹ For example, if John says to Stacy, “That movie was boring,” it seems unlikely that he refers to the same feeling if he later states, “My life is boring.” There are large philosophical and psychological literatures that attempt to disambiguate a wide variety of boredoms. It is not my task to settle any of these debates. Instead, I stipulate that the type of boredom I am interested in is the type of boredom that might result from the feeling that that one had done everything that one wanted to do, seen everything that one wanted to see, and experienced everything that one wanted to experience. To be bored of a task, in this sense, Williams’s sense, is to be unmotivated to continue a task out of a lack of interest.

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014) clarify further: Williams’ boredom is primarily characterized by a *lack of novelty*. They name this state “content-boredom,” the state of being

⁷⁰ Bernard Williams, “The Makropolis Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 90.

⁷¹ For a similar point, see Parfit on the varieties of “pleasure”: Derek Parfit, “What Makes Someone’s Life Go Best,” from *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 493–502.

without any desires that stem from projects that make life worth continuing.⁷² In short, content boredom results from a lack of *categorical desires*, i.e., those desires that motivate one to continue living, things like being a good parent, creating art, or being deeply invested in a sports team or other hobby. Categorical desires are contrasted with *conditional desires*, those desires that are conditional on one's desire to continue living, desires like eating for nourishment (as opposed to eating for pleasure) and sleeping. If an individual desires to continue living, she will normally also want to eat and sleep. But, for most of us, eating and sleeping are not categorical desires because eating and sleeping *result from* a desire to live but do not themselves *cause* or *motivate* one's desire to continue living.

With these clarifications in mind, we are equipped to understand Williams' claim that an immortal life would be boring. One way to voice the concern is to say that whatever makes life worth living – reading, amusement park rides, watching one's child graduate college, perhaps – these things lose some of their luster with repetition. The first ten thousand novels are more interesting and enriching than the second; watching your first child graduate college is more interesting than watching your hundredth child accomplish the same. Williams contends that an immortal life would be boring because it would be excessively repetitive. On this view, an immortal life would eventually become dominated by boredom because an immortal life would eventually contain no novel experiences.

1.2 Boredom and group immortality

With this account of boredom in mind, what can we say about group boredom? Does the objection from boredom in the individual case hold any sway in the group case? To answer these

⁷² John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, "Immortality and Boredom, *The Journal of Ethics*, 18, (2014): 355.

questions, it is important to first establish the types of cases that count as cases of group boredom. The groups I have in mind must satisfy three conditions: the group must be able to express a point of view, perform actions, and live a group life that can be assessed in terms of well-being.⁷³ The group must also satisfy these conditions not as an arbitrary set of individuals, but as a group unified in the manner articulated below. The purpose of these conditions is to ensure that when we analyze immortality in the group case, we are comparing this sense to a relevantly similar sense analyzed in the individual case. I unpack each condition in detail as we proceed.

In what follows, I focus on Gilbert's account of "social group" because it satisfies the above conditions while also providing a robust framework for further analysis. With that said, the final account of group immortality is consistent with a wide variety of extant social ontologies;⁷⁴ I focus on Gilbert, here, to show that at least one such influential account provides a framework for comparisons between group and individual immortality.

At this point, I refer the reader back to the discussion of Gilbert on *social groups* and *joint commitment* from Chapter 2. The core features of these Gilbertian technical terms play a role in the account of group immortality that I propose in the present chapter.

We may now return to the discussion of group boredom. Though it is less common than in the individual case, we do often speak about a group losing interest in an activity, project, or goal. Sports commentators occasionally mention a team's lack of "WIM," short for "want it more." A team that has not won a championship in many years will often display more WIM when in championship contention than a team that more frequently makes championship

⁷³ On the viability of group well-being, see footnote 48.

⁷⁴ For example, Thomasson (forthcoming) and Ritchie (2015) are distinct from one another yet consistent with the conditions I propose here.

appearances. It's a toy example, but the idea is that we often speak as though groups, and not merely the individuals who compose the groups, are capable of varying degrees of enthusiasm. Along similar lines, a very successful team will sometimes be accused of caring about something other than winning, perhaps the team members' movie careers or sponsorship deals. As a result, coaching manuals frequently address the need to keep one's team motivated. Teacher training faces a similar problem: how can an instructor keep the class interested in a "dry" topic? How can one prevent a sense of boredom in the classroom?

Consider a more detailed example. Imagine that C.J. mentions to his friend Jane that he always meant to read the great Russian novels. "What do you think of reading them together?" he says. She agrees and invites several friends. The group is formed with the intention of reading and discussing classic Russian literature once a month. The first month is a success and so is the second. In the third month, C.J. is scheduled to host, but he falls ill and needs to postpone. "No problem," says Jane, "we'll pick it up again next month." Six weeks pass before the next meeting, and then eight weeks until the next. Summer comes along, and C.J. is once again tasked with hosting. On this occasion, C.J. finds the beach more alluring than Russian literature. He suggests to the group that they go swimming instead. The members look at one another -- some sheepishly, some less so -- until Jane blurts out, "Tolstoy is a bit...dry for the summer? I feel like we've probably read enough of these dead old guys to get the point anyway. They're a bit boring after a while... Let's go swimming!" Most of the group members laugh. They decide to go to the beach.

This is a case of group boredom. The reading group was formed with an explicit intention: to read and discuss classic literature. With the passing of time this interesting activity became less interesting, and, when compared to swimming, the activity seemed boring. Much

more could be said about what constitutes a group emotion rather than a mere coincidence of individual emotions, but I set this task aside for present purposes.⁷⁵ What's important for now is the demonstration of the possibility of content boredom in the group case.

1.3 Group content-boredom is not inevitable

Although the reading group demonstrates group boredom in some sense or other, it seems implausible that a group would *necessarily* experience *content-boredom* in the sense at issue for the immortal individual in section 1.1. Several reasons explain this difference. I will discuss two of them: first, monomania, i.e., a singular all-consuming desire, reduces individual well-being but not group well-being, and second, it is easier for a group to reinvigorate enthusiasm through new members than it is for an individual to reinvigorate enthusiasm through a change of desires.

First, consider monomania and well-being. I understand monomania as the state of obsessive devotion to a single activity. The state goes beyond enthusiastic devotion: world chess champion Magnus Carlson, for instance, has been said to “eat, sleep, and bleed” chess, but he still makes time to play soccer, basketball, and spend time with his family. He is not a monomaniac. Monomania, as it is to be understood in the present context, goes beyond so-called healthy obsession. If Carlson were a monomaniac, he would have no other hobbies or interests. The figure of speech would be literal: he would eat, he would sleep, and he would play chess. To draw the distinction between healthy devotion and monomania into greater relief, consider the protagonist of Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*:

⁷⁵ C.f., e.g., Margaret Gilbert, “Collective Guilt and Collective Guilt Feelings,” *The Journal of Ethics* 6 (2002b): 115-143.

‘Robert Audley is mad,’ she said, decisively. ‘What is one of the strangest diagnostics of madness—what is the first appalling sign of mental aberration? The mind becomes stationary; the brain stagnates; the even current of reflection is interrupted; the thinking power of the brain resolves itself into a monotone. As the waters of a tideless pool putrefy by reason of their stagnation, the mind becomes turbid and corrupt through lack of action; and the perpetual reflection upon one subject resolves itself into monomania. Robert Audley is a monomaniac.’⁷⁶

Audley’s life is described as “monotone,” as a “perpetual reflection upon a single subject.” We are told that his mind has become stagnant, “turbid and corrupt,” “through a lack of action.” He is viewed with contempt, as though a singular devotion has ruined his life.

However, in response to the claim that monomania is always a bad thing it might be objected that it isn’t *the fact of monomania* that is the problem, but instead *what* Audley is maniacally devoted to. Perhaps it’s the *what* (a matter of content) and not the *how* (a matter of one’s orientation to a set of content). I don’t think this is correct. Even an individual monomaniacally devoted to something praiseworthy and fulfilling, like improving the working conditions of one’s coworkers, for example, seems to go wrong when the worthwhile project occupies one’s entire life. Life would be better if one did not devote every waking hour to union activities, no matter how praiseworthy these activities might be.⁷⁷ If nothing else, a single praiseworthy project would eventually become boring. Perhaps not for some time, but certainly eventually, given an unbounded immortality.

⁷⁶ Mary Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (Oxford, 1862; Project Gutenberg, 2003), Ch. 30, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8954/8954-h/8954-h.htm>

⁷⁷ For a similar point, see Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1984): 419-439.

When it comes to the well-being of a group, however, the objection loses its bite. When we shift from an individual working monomaniacally on behalf of a union to the union working monomaniacally to improve workplace conditions, things look quite different. If a union's goal is to improve the members' working conditions, and the group remains monomaniacally committed to this goal, we might think that this is praiseworthy rather than regrettable. A group does not need hobbies or family for things to go well from the perspective of group well-being. If this is right, then monomania impedes well-being in the case of the individual but not in the case of the group. As a result, an immortal group is less likely to suffer from content-boredom because the threat of a lack of novelty is diminished or eliminated.

That monomania can be a good thing from the perspective of group well-being is further reinforced by the second reason that group immortality is unlikely to lead to content-boredom: a group can add or remove members to reinvigorate enthusiasm and combat boredom. If the union were composed of, say, a half-dozen permanent immortal committee members, these members would no doubt grow bored with their task, both as individuals and as a group. However, an immortal group comprised of mortal individuals avoids Williams' charge of necessary boredom because, unlike in the individual case, the group can, in a sense, *dictate its own desires*. By adding and subtracting members, only those interested in the group's goal need carry on. Those with the desire to participate in union activities remain part of the union. If a member becomes bored, she may leave. The group, as a result, remains interested. Much more could be said to give a full analytic treatment of group membership conditions, how members join and leave, and how a social group is able to persist through time. Such an account is beyond the scope of the present inquiry. The informal account in this section will suffice.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ One brief point is worth bearing in mind. As we saw in Chapter 1, certain narrative features give an individual's life unity and meaning. Much the same has been said about group lives. One reason for new members

An individual, on the other hand, cannot control her desires to the same extent. If I grow bored of union activities, I can try to reinvigorate my interest – perhaps by reading about labor history or asking a friend to join the union – but these interventions are less powerful than the options available to the group. The individual’s desires may change, or they may not. When they do not, boredom is likely to follow, and the problems with individual immortality crop up once again.

2.1 Chronic pain, very bad events, and individual immortality

In this section I consider the claim that some events reliably lead to the subjective judgment that mortality is preferable to immortality. Moreover, because some of these regrettable events occur as a matter of bad luck, the longer a life goes on, the more likely it becomes that one experiences such an event. In the case of an immortal life, one is guaranteed to experience at least one such event. These are general claims. I examine two specific examples of these general claims: chronic pain and very bad events. The primary concern of this section involves events that are external to an individual’s intentional actions. In a word, the concern is that if one lives long enough, something will happen *to* the individual in question that will lead to the subjective judgment that one is better off not living forever.

Let’s begin by distinguishing a life worth starting, a life worth living, and a life worth continuing. I will proceed under the following assumptions. *A life is worth living* when the ex post holistic assessment of the life is (or would be) positive. *A life is not worth living* when the ex post holistic assessment is (or would be) negative. The assessments are results-oriented in the

to join a group, and keep the group going across time, then, is the desire to participate in the *story of the group life*. Perhaps an individual finds value in Buddhist spiritual practice, for example, and so becomes a member of a long-running Buddhist reading group. Her desire to participate in the story of this group’s life extends the life of the group, and this extension has the possibility of extending the group life across generations.

sense that all and only results matter: if, at the end of a life, the assessing agent, i.e., the person who has lived the life in question, judges or would judge the life to have been worth living, then the life is worth living in the sense in question. *A life is worth starting* when it is a life that is expected to be a life worth living, where “expected” is used in the technical sense of expected value.⁷⁹ In other words, to say that a life is worth starting is to make the ex-ante assessment that the life in question has positive expected value. A life is not worth starting when the ex-ante assessment of expected value is negative. If the ex-ante assessment is neutral, then the value of starting the life is also neutral. Finally, and most importantly for present purposes, *a life is worth continuing* when the ex-ante expected value of the life is positive *at the moment of assessment*. The assessment might be made at the start of a life so that the assessment that a life is worth starting is nearly identical to the assessment that it is worth continuing. But this doesn’t have to be the case. The assessment that a life is worth continuing (or not) can be made at any point during a life, and, indeed, is most often made near the end of a life. Each of these three assessments – those of the value of living, starting, and continuing a life -- can be *subjective*, i.e., from the point of view of the person who has lived or would live the life, or *objective*, i.e., from “the point of view of the universe”⁸⁰ or a third party. For reasons explicated in the Introduction, I focus on subjective assessments in what follows.

Benatar (2006) argues that a life not worth continuing is necessarily a life not worth starting. He grounds this argument in the claim that there is a higher threshold for ending a life than for not starting one.⁸¹ Losing a limb is not a reason to end a life, but it may be a reason to

⁷⁹ Expected value calculates the result of an event over the long run. For example, if an event, E, has precisely two possible outcomes, x and y, we state the expected value of E as: $A = P(x) - P(y)$, where P(x) is the probability of outcome x and P(y) is the probability of outcome y.

⁸⁰ Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884).

⁸¹ David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22ff.

not begin a life, according to Benatar. Whether or not this is so, it does not lead to the conclusion that any life not worth continuing is a life not worth starting. The most common reasons for requesting and receiving euthanasia, for instance, occur near what would have otherwise been the natural end of a life. An individual may assess that the chronic pain resulting from throat cancer is an acceptable reason to end life early, but the knowledge that one will develop painful throat cancer later in life is not, contra Benatar, a reason to not begin the life altogether. The relationship between a life not worth starting and a life not worth continuing is more complicated than Benatar contends. For now, all that needs to be said is that if it is shown that an immortal life will necessarily lead to a life not worth continuing, this does not mean that an immortal life would not be worth starting.

Evenblij et al. (2019) cite “psychiatric disorders, dementia, and the accumulation of health problems” as the most common reasons for requesting and receiving euthanasia.⁸² Let’s set aside psychiatric disorders and dementia and focus on the more general “accumulation of health problems.” If anything renders a life unlivable, severe chronic pain is a prime candidate.

Consider the life of Tracy Latimer, age 13, who died by euthanasia administered (illegally) by her father. Tracy had a rare form of epilepsy that resulted in severe physical and cognitive disabilities. According to the doctor consulting on her father’s criminal trial, Tracy had little or no control of her muscles, she suffered from violent seizures, had no control over her bowels, and could not walk or talk. Because of her seizure medication, Tracy could not take pain killers other than over-the-counter Tylenol. She lived in constant pain.⁸³

⁸² Evenblij, et al., “Factors Associated with Requesting and Receiving Euthanasia,” *BMC Medicine* 17, no. 39 (2019): 1–12.

⁸³ Leslie Perreux, “Tracy faced lifetime of surgery, doctor says,” *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, October 31, 1997.

Setting aside assessments of Tracy's case in particular, which are controversial, not the least of which due to her inability to consent, we can imagine a life like hers, though more difficult still, that most would not think worth continuing:

CHRONIC PAIN: Stacy suffers from a severe form of epilepsy. She endures frequent violent seizures that are disorienting and painful. She is unable to move her limbs, control her bowels, or speak. Because of her seizure medication, she is unable to take pain medication. She lives in constant pain. As a child, she could speak and communicate the desire to continue living. She is now 30 years old, and her condition has significantly worsened. Her family has the financial and emotional means to care of her. She is not and does not feel she is a burden. After consultation with a psychiatrist and a team of epilepsy specialists, it is determined that Stacy's condition will continue to worsen. She requests euthanasia and her doctor endorses the request after determining that she has provided informed consent.

Absent Stacy's informed consent, it would be wrong to think her life ought to end or that she ought to judge that her life ought to end. However, *ex hypothesi*, we have her consent and more: we have her express desire to end her life. I will proceed from the assumption that most readers would agree that when a life is dominated by constant pain, a lack of autonomy, and an informed expressed desire to stop living, we have grounds to take seriously the claim that such a life may rightly come to an end. In short, CHRONIC PAIN is evidence for the claim made earlier: some external events (in this case, some medical conditions), ground the subjective assessment that one would not choose to live forever.

Before extending the analysis to immortal lives, we should note that medical conditions are not the only reason to think a life may not be worth continuing. Large-scale moral crimes are

also commonly cited,⁸⁴ as well as, more controversially, certain cases of gross neglect.⁸⁵ To see why these examples may count as events that would lead one to choose mortality, we must first examine Williams' understanding of an agent's *ground projects*.

In "Persons, Character and Morality," Williams introduces ground projects by stating the following: "A man may have, for a lot of his life or even just for some part of it, a ground project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give a meaning to his life."⁸⁶ I will focus on two features of Williams' larger discussion: in the basic case, an individual *is the person she is and desires to continue to be the person she is* (rather than someone else or no one at all) because of one or more ground projects at the center of her life. These projects might be general, like the desire to advance justice or equality, or they might be specific, as is the case for the Romantic painter, the dedicated schoolteacher, or the devoted parent. The projects might be grand and intersubjectively meaningful, like the work of the suffragette or abolitionist, or they might be small-scale and subjectively meaningful, like the projects of a devoted Red Sox fan or avid stamp collector. The point is that most of us feel attached to some foundational project or other, and these projects play an important role in *expressing one's character and giving one motivation to carry on living*.⁸⁷ To return a point made earlier, one's ground projects are a source of one's categorical desires.⁸⁸ Williams is careful to note that the loss of a ground project is not a reason to think that an individual is now someone else or that she ought to desire to end her life, but to have no ground projects at all is to

⁸⁴ Smuts: "Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot lived worthless lives," in "Five Tests for What Makes a Life Worth Living," 440.

⁸⁵ See Nagel's affecting example of a beloved child drowning in the bath: Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 30-31.

⁸⁶ Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," 12.

⁸⁷ ". . . my present projects are the condition of my existence, in the sense that unless I am propelled forward by the conatus of desire, project and interest, it is unclear why I should go on at all" (Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality, 12).

⁸⁸ See section 1.1 of the present chapter.

lack an important aspect of what makes life worth continuing. To be the person that one is and to desire to continue to be a person at all is to take one or more ground projects seriously. To lack a ground project is to lack a categorical desire.

This might all sound overly serious. Could ground projects really determine one's character and motivate one's continued existence? I contend that yes, they do this and more. In fact, Williams' account is overly conservative. While it is true that some ground projects are interchangeable, others are not. We can imagine a Romantic painter who grows tired of his usual style and moves on to abstract pencils (or music, or acting, or whatever else) without losing the desire to live or losing the feeling that his sense of self remains intact. But, as I will now argue, not all ground projects are equally grounding. It is often the case that some central subset are irreplaceable.

Jeremy Richman died by suicide in March 2019. His 6-year-old daughter was one of the 26 students and teachers killed in the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in 2012. Following her death, Richman and his wife co-founded the Avielle Foundation "to support neuroscience research to shed light on 'what leads someone to engage in harmful behavior.'" ⁸⁹ Alongside funding this research, Richman frequently spoke publicly about the immensity of his grief and about how each subsequent school shooting was like a fresh wound that disoriented and bewildered him.

Let's set aside the specifics of Richman's case. It would be inappropriate to speculate about the details of his circumstances. We can, however, take his circumstances as a *type* of case that shows that certain ground projects, like the project of being a devoted father, play a role -- for some people in some circumstances -- that no other project can replace. It is at least plausible

⁸⁹ Tovia Smith, "Father of Sandy Hook Shooting Dies By Apparent Suicide," *NPR*, March 25, 2019.

that a father who loses a child to violence (or accident, or neglect) would, in some cases, choose mortality over immortality. What this demonstrates is that not all ground projects are equally grounding. Most people need some hobby or other to be motivated to carry on living a flourishing life, but for most people in most contexts, “pushpin is as good as poetry” when it comes to what occupies one’s free time. But parenting is neither pushpin nor poetry. To lose a ground project of this sort is to risk losing the perspective from which one judges one’s life to be worth continuing.

We may draw a further lesson from cases like Richman’s: some very bad events occur as a matter of bad luck. If it were only intentional acts that could deliver the subjective assessment that one’s life is not worth continuing, then we might think that an immortal life would be in no danger of falling to the objection of this section. We briefly considered the dangers of moral crimes, like those perpetrated by Hitler and Pol Pot. It seems likely that most individuals would not orchestrate a genocide no matter how long they lived, assuming we allow, as is the case in the *Makropolis Case*, that an individual’s personality is fixed across millennia to the same extent that it is fixed across a finite life. However, if some of the events that render a life unlivable -- like chronic agonizing pain or a drowned child -- arise as a matter of bad luck, then a life that goes on forever will necessarily experience one of these events. More formally:

1. Some set of events, D, reliably lead to the subjective assessment that mortality is preferable to immortality.
2. Some subset of D, Q, are events that occur as a matter of bad luck.
3. Given enough time, some subset of Q, S, are unavoidable.
4. Because an immortal life goes on forever, an immortal life will, eventually, experience every event in subset S.

C: An immortal life will eventually experience an event that leads to the subjective assessment that mortality is preferable to immortality.

Less formally, some events reliably lead to the subjective assessment that mortality is preferable to immortality. Call these events *very bad events*. Some very bad events, like orchestrating genocide, are avoidable. On the other hand, some very bad events, like severe chronic pain, are a matter of luck. Some subset of these unlucky events, given enough time, are unavoidable: chronic pain may be such a case. It is because some very bad events occur not because of intentional choices (like lung disease from smoking) but instead because of pure “bad luck,”⁹⁰ we can expect that every immortal life will, eventually, experience a very bad event.

So much for the individual case. Let’s turn now to very bad events in the context of group immortality.

2.2 Negative group emotions, very bad events, and group immortality

In this section, I argue that the problems for individual immortality presented by external events do not apply to group lives. In short, this is for two reasons: when facing a very bad event, groups are more likely than individuals to choose immortality because (1) groups have greater “inertia” and (2) a group’s ground projects tend to be less specific and more malleable than individuals’ ground projects. Let’s take each point in turn.

First, a point about inertia.⁹¹ My primary claim is that a group has a greater likelihood to carry on with its ground projects in the face of adversity (compared to an individual) because (1)

⁹⁰ I.e., as part of a chain of causation present in *every* recognizably human life.

⁹¹ My thanks to David Kovacs for pressing me on this point at the International Social Ontology Society’s conference, 2021.

group emotions are comparatively mild⁹² and (2) groups, due to being made up of more than one person, are more difficult to “set off course.” If a single group member loses the desire to carry on, it is of course possible, and in many cases very likely, that the group carries on anyway.⁹³ This is of course not true of the individual. In short, very bad events must be more severe to unsettle a group and because they must be more severe, they will occur less often.

Consider an example. Groups cannot experience physical pain, *qua* group, but a close analog is a strong negative group emotion, like group guilt or group shame. Gilbert (2002b) provides a detailed analysis of what it could mean for a group to experience group guilt in a sense that is not simply the acknowledgement that each member of the group feels guilt individually.⁹⁴ For present purposes, however, an informal analysis of group guilt will suffice. Take, for example, the formal process of reconciliation between the Canadian federal government and the aboriginal people of Canada harmed by the impacts of colonization. One way to interpret this formal process is as an attempt to alleviate the tangible effects of a specific group wrongdoing. A secondary effect of this process may be some amount of alleviation of the associated feelings of guilt and regret felt by Canadians as a group. Note, however, that even though the harms of colonization are much greater than the harms experienced by the grieving

⁹² It’s possible, of course, for group emotions to be extremely vivid. A riot, for example, might rival anything that could be felt by any one person. But the point in this section aims at a more general point about typical cases. As such, it’s important to note that many apparent cases of groups feeling stronger emotions than individuals are illusory. For example, the collective emotional response in Britain to Princess Diana’s untimely death was indeed vivid and widespread. Nothing I have said is meant to deny this. I aim to show, rather, that the individual analog is often felt more vividly. The individuals with a personal relationship to the Princess or with an individual causal relationship to her death will, in most cases, feel a stronger emotional response when compared to the national mourning in the group context.

⁹³ I have in mind large groups, in this example. Small groups, like couples, may turn out to have more in common with individuals when it comes to inertia.

⁹⁴ Margaret Gilbert, “Collective Guilt and Collective Guilt Feelings,” *The Journal of Ethics* 6 (2002b): 115-143.

parent, it is the parent who would, in almost every case, feel a stronger emotion.⁹⁵ I take this to be evidence for the claim that group feelings are less intense than individual feelings. Less intense emotions lead to greater group inertia.

Second, a point about the specificity and malleability of group ground projects. A further reason that a group life is not guaranteed to experience a very bad event is because most group ground projects are less specific and more malleable than their counterparts in the individual case. In the individual case, we considered ground projects like “being a good father” and “being an accomplished teacher.” These goals are specific and difficult or -- in rare cases -- impossible to replace. Group ground projects, however, are quite often more general and interchangeable. Consider, for example, the Enron Corporation’s rebranding as Andersen Tax. In 2001, Enron declared bankruptcy because of a willful accounting fraud scheme that led to thousands of employees losing their jobs and a loss of more than 21 billion dollars for its investors. We might think this would be a very bad event that would lead to the end of Enron, but it was only a few short years later that the company rebranded as Andersen Tax, a now respected and profitable corporation. Of course, many factors will lead to the success or failure of this type of rebranding, but one factor that helped its success was a general, rather than a specific, ground project. “Maximize share-holder profit” is the type of ground project that can overcome a great deal of adversity. The project is unconcerned with specifics – there is no analog to raising a specific child or performing a specific job well like we saw with the parent and teacher in the individual case. As such, the life of the group is not guaranteed to experience a very bad event as a reason to end the life of the group.

⁹⁵ On the Gilbertian view, the phenomenal nature of group emotions does not presuppose a group mind that *feels* anything at all. A group feeling is, at its core, a matter being jointly committed to act as if one were the representative of a single being that feels guilt, loss, or whatever its emotion is appropriate in a particular case. Group members might or might not personally feel the same emotion. See *Ibid*.

3.1 The viability of group immortality and transgenerational meaning

What I aim to have shown so far is that no individual ought to desire immortality, but that some groups should. In this final section I give a fuller account of which group lives are well-suited to immortality and how participation in certain immortal (or very long-lasting) groups can increase individual well-being via what I call *intergenerational meaning*.

As we've seen, some groups are more well-suited than others to go on forever. Some groups, for instance, are highly susceptible to content-boredom, while others more easily resist it. Some groups, due to the nature of their ground projects, are more likely to experience a very bad event that cannot be overcome by the group's inertia. Compare the book club that disbanded in favor of swimming and the Canadians concerned about the effects of colonization. The book club disbanded almost on a whim, while the Canadians persist in the face of great adversity.

We can take a few lessons from this comparison. First, a group with a highly specific ground project is less likely to carry on for a long time: a group devoted to reading classic Russian literature is more likely to disband than a group devoted to promoting the joys of literature in general, for instance. Many examples stand as evidence for this claim. The General Union of Trades, for example, is often recognized as the first labor union to bring divergent professions under one roof. Now more than two centuries old, the Union is thought to have been such a success in large part due to this expansion of membership and the subsequent broadening of its goals. Rather than working to promote the working conditions of a single profession, as was the case for earlier unions, the General Union broadened its scope and increased its membership size. One consequence of this effort, I contend, is that the group is less likely to experience content-boredom. A reduction in the likelihood of content-boredom leads to more stable categorical desires. As a group's ground project becomes more general, it becomes easier

to attract more members, and, as discussed earlier, groups with more members tend to have greater inertia.

A second lesson from this example is that very bad or destabilizing events affect groups differently than individuals. Groups do not always have greater inertia than individuals, for instance, and the group's inertia impacts how it will react to a destabilizing event. As we saw with the book club, all it took was a few very minor negative events (illness, postponement, and the thought of going to the beach) to cause the group to come to an end. We also saw that very bad events (colonial harms in Canada; Enron's collapse) can, depending on the group, *not* bring an end to the group. It seems, then, that there is no straightforward comparison between individuals and groups when making predictions about inertia. Instead, a group's likelihood of desiring to continue existing has to do with both the size of the group and the nature of the group's ground projects. The book club was small, and its ground project was highly specific: a few friends aimed to read the Russian classics. Canada and Enron, on the other hand, are very large groups committed to very general ground projects: in Enron's case, tens of thousands of people were committed to the goal of increasing value for shareholders (or however else we might summarize the goal of such a corporation).

I end with a gesture toward what I call *intergenerational meaning*. Wolf (2016) offers an influential argument in favor of a conception of personal well-being that takes meaning in life to be as important as happiness and morality when we assess what it means for a life to go well.⁹⁶ To illustrate what she means by "meaning" she asks us to imagine helping a friend move a heavy piece of furniture to her new apartment or staying up late to sew one's child a Halloween

⁹⁶ Susan Wolf, "Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of the Good Life," *Foundations of Science* 21, no. 2 (2016): 253-269.

costume for the next day's school parade.⁹⁷ Wolf contends, and I agree, that these types of tasks make one's life go better, but not because they contribute to happiness (at least not in every case) or because they are morally required. Instead, these types of activities add meaning to life. The parent may not enjoy sewing the costume or even be happy at all about helping her friend move, nor does it seem likely that either activity could be morally required, but Wolf contends that these activities nevertheless have a subjective attraction to them, and in many cases, this is because they contribute a sense of meaning to one's life.

Wolf offers a *hybrid* account of meaning in life: meaning occurs when "subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."⁹⁸ It is a "hybrid" because it collapses a previous, well-worn debate concerning whether meaning ought to be assessed subjectively or objectively. According to Wolf, both conditions are necessary: meaning occurs when an agent experiences an objectively meaningful activity as subjectively meaningful.

The account intentionally leaves open what types of activities are objectively meaningful, in part because, she contends, the list would be quite long. She also aims to avoid charges of elitism or personal bias. Nonetheless, Wolf suggests that one reliable way to add meaning to life is to participate in activities that make a contribution "outside of oneself" or to something "larger than oneself," like helping a friend move, as we saw, or participating in a skillful activity with a long lineage, like gardening or writing philosophy.

Wolf's conception of meaning in life is much richer than I can do justice in this paper. I end with the claim that if we accept that meaning matters, from the perspective of well-being, and that one plausible way to add meaning to life is to contribute to worthwhile projects (assessed subjectively) that are "larger" than oneself, and, further, that a long lineage of skillful

⁹⁷ Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010): 4.

⁹⁸ Wolf, "Meaningfulness," 9.

practice is a further amplifier of meaning, then a connection to immortal groups suggests itself: immortal groups, of course, have a very long lineage, and so participation in a project outside of oneself that lasts forever would, it seems, be very meaningful indeed. In fact, a feedback loop suggests itself: the group becomes more meaningful as the members that comprise it across generations live more meaningful lives, and the members' lives become more meaningful (both subjectively and objectively) as the group does the same. I call the product of this feedback loop transgenerational meaning, a type of meaning that increases the well-being of both the mortal individual group members that comprise the immortal group as well as the well-being of the immortal group itself. In the end, the group need not be truly immortal, perhaps such a thing is impossible, but the longer the group life, the more meaningful the members find participating in the group and the more meaningful the participation thereby becomes, both from the perspective of the individual and the perspective of the group,

I have argued that two commonly cited objections to individual immortality – the inevitability of excessive boredom and very bad events – fail to show that group immortality is undesirable. Indeed, the asymmetry of group and individual immortality gives us reason to think that we ought to desire that good group lives go on forever.

There is room yet for further research investigating the connection between individual and group well-being, in particular the interactions between these two domains and the potential positive effects of participation in immortal – or very long lasting – groups on individual well-being. I hope to have shown that group immortality is a concept worthy of further investigation.

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