WHY SUBJECTIVISM ABOUT MEANING IN LIFE MIGHT NOT BE SO BAD AFTER ALL

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Abstract: Several philosophers have argued recently that *subjectivism* about meaning in life ought to be rejected because "it has seriously counterintuitive implications" (Metz 2013: 175). In this paper I try to show that once we take a closer look at the illustrations provided of these allegedly counterintuitive implications, we find that neither of them is especially convincing—at least not against the background of one particularly attractive form of subjectivism. For those of us on whom subjectivism about life's meaning exerts a significant pull, this should come as good news since it means that (in at least one of its forms) subjectivism remains a live option.

1. MEANING IN LIFE: PRELIMINARIES

1.1 In virtue of what, if anything, does a human person's life have meaning? Several attempts have been made in philosophy recently to offer a systematic answer to this question—i.e. to offer an answer in the form of a general account or criterion aiming to capture the feature(s) in virtue of which there is meaning in someone's life (if there is). It is important to stress that the question here concerns what makes *a* life—or, more specifically, *a human person's* life—meaningful, and not, for example, in virtue of what (if anything) human life itself has a meaning. While answers to the latter question have traditionally often invoked references either to some Divine purpose or to the existence of a certain function or final end inherent in human nature, philosophers addressing the former question seem—

quite sensibly, to my mind—generally convinced that it can be answered without relying on controversial religious or biological assumptions.[1]

Some further clarifications of our question are in order. To begin with, meaning should be conceived here as an example of a *final value*—i.e. of something that is valuable for its own sake, and not merely as a means to some further end—which is at least conceptually distinct from other examples of final values, such as morality and happiness.[2] Granted that there is a close connection between final values and different kinds of normative reasons for actions and affections, meaning thus also constitutes a source of a distinct kind of normative reasons.

Secondly, even though the distinction is sometimes overlooked or ignored in the literature, it seems both possible and important to distinguish between what we, following Metz (2013: 4), may call a *whole-life* sense and a *part-life* sense in which a person's life can be meaningful. The former "concerns the respects in which a person's life as an entirety can be meaningful", whereas the latter instead concerns "how a segment of a life can be meaningful" (ibid.). In this paper, I will just assume that it is primarily the part-life sense we are interested in—i.e. that we are interested primarily in the question of what makes a part or segment of a person's life meaningful. The whole-life sense, as well as the question of how the two senses might be related to each other, will thus be set aside for another occasion.[3]

[1] There are exceptions, though. For example, Craig (2000) and Cottingham (2003) both seem to think that without the existence of God, our lives are ultimately absurd or pointless.
[2] This of course leaves open the possibility that, on a *substantive* level, it might turn out that what makes a person's life meaningful in fact coincides with that which makes a person's life, say, prudentially valuable
[3] For a valuable discussion of some different ways in which the two senses might be related, see Metz (2013: ch. 3).

Thirdly, it is commonly assumed in the literature that the lives of e.g. Charles Darwin, Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, at least given "our stereotypical apprehension of them" (Metz 2013: 2), constitute *paradigmatic examples* of lives that were meaningful. The idea, it seems, is that we are so confident that the lives of these persons were meaningful that we can use them as test cases for different proposed accounts or criteria of the feature(s) in virtue of which a human person's life has meaning. If a particular account entails that the lives of some (maybe even just one) or all of the persons just mentioned were *not* meaningful, then that would tell strongly against—maybe even refute—the account in question. Now I certainly have no wish to deny that if we were to compile a list of examples of paradigmatically meaningful lives, then the lives of Mandela, Mother Teresa, Darwin, Einstein, and King would plausibly figure on it (given, again, "our stereotypical apprehension of them"). But at least two things should be noticed in relation to these examples. First of all, we must ask whether they are meant to constitute paradigmatic examples of lives that are meaningful in the whole-life sense—in which case they would not, in the light of what I said earlier, be very relevant for the purposes of this paper—or rather in the part-life sense? In my view, they should reasonably be thought of as paradigmatic examples of lives that are meaningful in *both* senses. Thus, whether our aim is to defend an account of meaning in life in the whole-life sense or in the part-life sense (or perhaps in both), the lives of Mandela, Mother Teresa, King, Darwin, and Einstein provide good test cases with respect to the plausibility of the relevant account. Furthermore, it should be important to notice that what Metz refers to as "our stereotypical apprehension of them" must be thought to include not only the great achievements that these persons are remembered for, but also that they all cared about and were deeply fulfilled by their projects. This is important in order to make sense of the fact that the examples are often

used by adherents to both of the two dominant kinds or types of accounts of life's meaning that figure in the modern philosophical debate. According to so called *hybrid* accounts, meaning in a person's life (or, more importantly for my purposes, in a part or segment of a person's life) arises in virtue of the fulfilment of two different components, one *subjective* and one *objective*. It is required *(a)* that the person is actively engaged with some project (understood broadly) that she is herself attracted to—one that she loves or cares about—and *(b)* that the project with which she is actively engaged has objective worth.[4] *Objectivist* accounts, on the other hand, reject *(a)*: a person's life (or, again, a part or segment of a person's life) is meaningful (if it is) in virtue only of the objective value of that which the person devotes herself to, and/or of the outcomes that she is causally responsible for.[5]

1.2 The question we started out from could no doubt be clarified in still further respects. However, I hope we have achieved an at least sufficiently clear grasp of what the question is about for us to be able to move on.

One thing that we can ask at this point is why we should not say, in contrast to both hybridism and objectivism, that what determines whether someone's life has meaning is rather the fulfilment of only the subjective component mentioned earlier—i.e. by the extent

[4] The most prominent exponent of a hybrid account is Susan Wolf. According to Wolf (2010: 8), "meaning [in a person's life] arises form loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way". (Wolf in fact offers various formulations of her favored account. In addition to the formulation I just quoted, she also writes e.g. that "meaning in life consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth. On this conception, meaning in life arises when subject attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it" (2010: 26); and "a life is meaningful insofar as its subjective attractions are to things or goals that are objective worthwhile. That is, one's life is meaningful insofar as one finds oneself loving things worthy of love and able to something positive about it" (2010: 34f).)

[5] Recent examples of objectivist accounts include e.g. Aaron Smuts's *Good Cause Account*, according to which a human person's "life is meaningful to the extent that it is causally responsible for good" (Smuts 2013: 559; similar accounts are defended also in Audi (2005), and in Bramble (*forthcoming*)); as well as the much more complex accounts developed in Kauppinen (2012), and in Metz (2013: ch. 12).

to which a person is actively engaged with projects that she loves, cares about, or lives for, without concern or regard for whether the relevant projects (or the outcomes brought about through the person's engagement with them) also are objectively valuable.[6] It is indeed a striking feature of the modern philosophical discussion about life's meaning that a *subjectivism* of this kind—or of any kind, for that matter—is so rarely defended. The main, and maybe even the only, reason for this state of affairs is that subjectivism, allegedly, "has seriously counterintuitive implications about which lives count as meaningful" (Metz 2013: 175).[7] How convincing, though, are really the alleged counterexamples that have been presented against subjectivism? Maybe (I am not sure) there are *some* forms or versions of subjectivism against which they work. But as I hope to show below, there is at least one form of subjectivism—one that I find quite attractive—in relation to which the putative counterexamples are not at all as convincing as they are usually made out to be in the literature. And at least for those of us on whom subjectivism about meaning in life exerts a significant pull, this should come as good news since it means that subjectivism—in at least one of its forms (and perhaps in many others as well)—remains a live option.

In the next section (2), I provide a brief sketch or outline of the form of subjectivism that I find most attractive and which I will rely on throughout the rest of the paper. In section 3, I introduce and offer my responses to certain examples put forward by objectivists that are meant to show that being subjectively attracted to what one does is not even necessary in order for one to obtain meaning from doing it. In section 4, I then turn my attention to some of the many examples in the literature purporting to show that even if

[6] It may be worth noting that the question here does not concern the very existence of objective values. For the purposes of this paper, at least, I will grant that there are such values. The question in the main text concerns rather why it would be a requirement on meaning in life that the projects with which one is actively engaged (or the outcomes one is causally responsible for through being so engaged) are objectively valuable; why would it not be enough that they are such that one loves or cares about them?

[7] Metz (2013: 175) refers to this as the "only ... standard argument" against subjectivism.

being actively engaged with projects that one loves or cares about is perhaps necessary, it is not sufficient for obtaining meaning in one's life. The paper ends with a few concluding remarks.

2. FIRST STEPS TOWARDS A PLAUSIBLE SUBJECTIVISM ABOUT MEANING IN LIFE

2.1 Here as elsewhere in philosophy, it is possible to distinguish between different forms of subjectivism. However, it is well beyond the scope of the present paper to offer anything like an inventory of even the most common and/or influential ones.[8] Instead I will restrict myself here to try and provide a general outline of the form of subjectivism that I find most plausible.

The form I have in mind constitutes a clear example of subjectivism, I think, in at least the following sense: It does not contain any requirement to the effect that in order for there to be meaning in a (part or segment of a) person's life, the projects with which one is actively engaged—or, for that matter, the outcomes or results that one is causally responsible for—must be objectively valuable. What matters is instead only that the projects that one is actively engaged with are ones that one loves, cares about, or lives for.

However, the form I favour is admittedly different from e.g. *desire-satisfactionism* (as that view is commonly conceived), in the sense that meaning in life, on my view, is not determined (merely) by the extent to which one's desires are actually satisfied or fulfilled—something which one can be gravely mistaken about (on the one hand, some of my desires might be satisfied without me know anything about it; and, on the other hand, I may be

[8] Metz (2013: 165-169) helpfully distinguishes between at least some different forms of subjectivism.

firmly convinced that some of my desires are satisfied while they are in fact not so). What I want to say is instead that meaning in a person's life arises when the relevant person is *actively engaged* with projects that he or she loves, cares about or lives for.[9] But what, then, does that—being *actively engaged*—involve? It might reasonably involve many different things. But on a very general level, I believe we can say that it involves at least the following: that one is knowingly and deliberately involved in both the planning and the execution of the project; that one is affected, both positively and negatively, by what happens in and with the project; that one has a general pro-attitude towards one's engagement with the project—that one wants or desires to be engaged with it; that it matters to one that one is so.

2.2 I should like to add at least four things to what has been said above. Firstly, on the view I will be relying on, what matters for whether a person's life has meaning is the extent to which the person is actively engaged with projects that she *herself* loves or cares about, and thus not what e.g. a virtuous person would love or care about, or what the majority of people in one's community happen to love or care about.

Secondly, in order for one's active engagement with a project to confer meaning to one's life, it must be an engagement with something that one cares *deeply* about; with something that one *identifies*.[10] This means that the form of subjectivism that I am attracted to does not entail that engaging with the object of just any old (or new) desire or inclination that one has will make a positive difference to the amount of meaning that can be found in

[9] The view thus comes rather close to Wolf's view. The crucial difference, though, is that I want to reject the objective component that she endorses.

[10] Using Bernard Williams's famous expression, we could perhaps say that it should constitute a *ground project* in one's life (see Williams (1981)). As is perhaps evident, my main influence here is however the work of Harry Frankfurt; see, for example, his (1988) and (2004). I have also found Luper (2014) helpful.

one's life; only the active engagement with a project that one endorses wholeheartedly will do that. Mine is thus a much more demanding form of subjectivism than many others that we can easily think of. But that is, I think, as it should be: whether one's life has meaning is no light matter, but rather something that is determined by the extent to which one is able to connect or engage with one's most deeply held concerns.

Thirdly, it is perhaps worth making clear explicitly that the subjectivism I favour is not a purely experientialist view. It is not enough for meaning that one has the *experience* of being actively engaged with one's most cherished projects—an experience one could have, I suppose, even while lying in Nozick's dreaded experience machine.[11] Instead it is required that one *is* indeed actively engaged with the relevant projects.

Fourthly, someone could ask if it matters at all, on the view I favour, whether one succeeds in ever actually achieving the ultimate goal or end of the projects that one is actively engaged with. Here it seems different answers are possible. But for my own part, I find it plausible to think that being actively engaged with projects that one cares deeply about is enough for meaning, even if one would in the end fail to realize the ultimate end or goal of the project. For example, if one of the main projects in a certain person's life is to become a distinguished professor in Classics, then it seems to me plausible that his being actively engaged with that pursuit contributes meaning to his life, whether or not he will ever actually become a distinguished professor in the relevant subject. Still, it might be that in at least some—and maybe even in quite a few—cases, success in achieving the ultimate goal or end of one's projects will make one's life even *more* meaningful than it otherwise would have been.

[11] See Nozick (1974: 42-44).

3. RESPONSE TO COUNTEREXAMPLES I: AGAINST OBJECTIVISM

3.1 According to objectivists, it is possible to come up with examples of cases showing that being attracted to (loving, caring about) what one does is not even necessary in order for one to obtain meaning from doing it. One can engage in some activity and obtain meaning from it despite not liking the activity very much at all. Thaddeus Metz writes thus:

> [T]here are counterexamples suggesting that meaning is possible despite not having any of the purportedly relevant attitudes … for instance, [consider] the case of someone who volunteers to be bored so that others do not suffer boredom. Imagine that he exhibits no positive attitude whatsoever to his condition, and rather hates being bored. Even so, *some* meaning would plausibly accrue to him for having made the decision he did … [Or] imagine that [Mother Theresa] lacked any potentially relevant attitude. Suppose that she loved neither the people she helped nor the activity of helping them, that she was not inspired by her work, but instead did out of fear that she would face eternal damnation for not doing it, that for large periods she wondered whether human beings were really worth all the trouble, etc. Even so, my intuition is that she would have acquired some meaning in her life simply by virtue of having substantially helped so many needy people" (Metz 2013: 183f). [12]

I am unconvinced by these examples, however. There are two possibilities here. *(i)* To begin with, it could be responded that volunteering to do something one dislikes so that others do not have to do it, may be a part of a more general project that one is deeply devoted to. In that case, it seems plausible to think that the person in Metz's first example *does* in fact have a pro-attitude towards what he is doing: he desires or wants to do something he dislikes for a while so that others are saved from doing it.[13] And perhaps

[12] I should say that Metz is open to the idea that subjective attraction might be required for living a life that is *on balance* meaningful. His examples are meant to show merely that subjective attraction is not necessary for an activity or a project to make at least *some* positive contribution to the meaningfulness of one's life (cf. Metz 2013: 184).

[13] For example, perhaps he cares about his children so much that he very willingly accepts being bored (which he dislikes) for a while in order for the children not to be bored but instead be able to engage in something they love doing. In this case, it seems it would not be correct to say that "he exhibits no positive attitude whatsoever to his condition, but rather hates being bored". Rather, he exhibits a positive attitude towards the

Mother Teresa, as we are to imagine her in Metz's second example, was indeed helping sick people out of fear for eternal damnation, but also desired to do just that as an expression of her obedience to God. Understood in these ways, the two examples are compatible with at least the form of subjectivism that I am relying on in this paper. Because while being actively engaged with a project that one loves or cares about entails having a pro-attitude towards one's engagement with the relevant project, it can surely be the case that the engagement sometimes involves having to do things that one dislikes or does not particularly enjoy.

(ii) Another possibility, though, is that we should rather think of the persons in Metz's examples as doing things they dislike and that are *not* part of any projects that they care about. Maybe the person in the first example volunteers to do be bored only because he believes he is morally obliged to, as far as possible, save others from being bored. Furthermore, maybe he does not really care about morality, but rather feels compelled or forced to comply with its demands. In *this* case, however, it seems to me as if the most plausible analysis of the example is that the relevant person finds himself forced to *sacrifice* some amount of meaning in his life for the sake of morality (analogous to how people, without really wanting to, sometimes seem to sacrifice some amount of happiness for themselves for morality's sake). But what about the imagined Mother Teresa, doing her work entirely "out of fear that she would face eternal damnation for not doing it"? Well, fear is no doubt an important and in many situations very helpful emotion. But if we do not learn to control it properly, fear has the power to take over our lives completely. And while living a life dominated by fear—a life where one does whatever one can to avoid the thing or things that one fears (whether it be eternal damnation, the end of the world, that harm will come

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fact that he is making it possible for his children to do something they love. And to make that possible might be something that does confer meaning to his life.

to oneself and/or one's friends and family, or what have you)—may be debilitating, sad, and thereby such that one should try and seek out help to change it, it hardly seems to be a way of obtaining *meaning* in one's life. What the imagined Mother Theresa did may still have been *morally* important (she did, after all, help many people in great need), but I fail to see how it could plausibly be said to have made her life (or, rather, any part(s) or segment(s) of it) meaningful.[14]

3.2 Another adherent to objectivism, Aaron Smuts, has argued that one particularly clear counterexample to the claim that being subjectively attracted towards what one does is necessary in order for a person to obtain meaning from doing it, is provided by the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*.[15] Writes Smuts:

> The movie tells what is now a familiar story of suicidal man, George Baily (James Stewart), who is finally able [to] see the meaning of his life with a little help from a friend—an alcoholic angel who wants to make good. The angel takes George on a trip to Pottersville—the alternate world where George had never been born. A few hours in Pottersville is enough for George to see how meaningful his existence has been (Smuts 2013: 544).

What the example should help us see, according to Smuts, is "that one can live a meaningful life, but mistakenly think otherwise" (547). Indeed, even if Baily "had not been shaken out of his mistaken evaluation ... [his] life would still have been meaningful. He would not have

[14] I believe a similar line of response is available also in relation to another example proposed by Metz. There are cases, Metz suggests, in which "*negative* attitude towards undesirable conditions such as injustice, sickness, and poverty might be factors relevant to the subjective aspect of meaning … For instance, even if one did not love or otherwise exhibit a pro-attitude towards fighting injustice, meaning might plausibly accrue so long as one hated the injustice one is fighting" (Metz 2013: 183). Now just as fear is an emotion with the potential to take over a person's life, so is hatred. And it seems Metz is asking us here to imagine a person who is driven, if not in all in areas of life then at least with respect to injustice, entirely by hatred. But to be driven entirely by hatred towards something seems (once again) to be debilitating, sad, and worth seeking help for, but not, I submit, a way of obtaining meaning in one's life.

[15] See Smuts (2013). The example is used also by Bramble (*forthcoming*).

realized it. In fact, he probably would have killed himself ... But this would not make his life meaningless" (546f).

While I quite like the example, I disagree with Smuts's diagnosis of it. What the angel helps Baily to realize, it seems to me, it not that his life both is and has been meaningful all along. Rather, the visit to Pottersville functions as a way of reminding Baily—or of making him see more clearly—how important his existence has been to other people, including his family and friends. And since being important to others is something that Baily, as most of us perhaps, deep down really cares about, the reminder helps to put him on a path *towards* leading a meaningful life (and insofar as there was meaning in Baily's life before the bad things happened that led to his suicidal state, we might say that the reminder helps to put him on a path towards leading a meaningful life *once again*). As I think many people who have at some point suffered from mild forms of clinical depression, but whose lives now seem to have at least some amount of meaning, can attest, it is not characteristically the case that once one gets out of a depressive episode one realizes that one's life was in fact meaningful all along, even though it might be the case that while depressed one was actually able to fulfil most of one's duties at work, to help friends and family members with various tasks, to take part in social gatherings, or whatever activities that, when (as it were) one is oneself, one cares genuinely about and which one would normally be both attracted to and fulfilled by.[16] To the contrary, one of the (many) great reliefs about getting out of a depressive episode seems to be precisely that one regains one's ability to take part in life in a meaningful way.

[16] I refer to *mild* forms of clinical depression quite deliberately. When suffering from more severe forms of depression, it is unlikely that one would have been able to really fulfil all the duties of work, friendships, family life, etc.

But suppose someone at this point raised the following question: If Baily, as I suggested above, deep down *does* care about being important to others, and he, as a matter of fact, also has been important to others all along, then why should not adherents to subjectivism say that Baily's life really had meaning already before the visit to Pottersville? Why would they want to add that Bailey must also be actively engaged with that which he cares about?

Now some forms of subjectivism (such as a simple form of desire-satisfactionism, e.g.) will presumably imply that it is indeed enough for Baily's life to have had some amount of meaning even before the visit to Pottersville that he was important to others. However, I believe it is a virtue of the form of subjectivism that I am relying on that it does *not* have that implication. But why, then, is that a virtue of it? The answer, I think, is roughly this. What we are interested in here is what it takes in order for a (part or segment of a) *human* person's life to have meaning.[17] We should therefore, it seems to me, reasonably have to take into account what is characteristically involved in living a specifically human life. And what that involves is crucially a matter of exercising *agency*—i.e. of planning and/or deliberating, making decisions, acting, responding emotionally to one's circumstances, forming beliefs, and so on. In the light of this, the question we started out from could be couched in terms of what is required in order for there to be meaning in a (part or segment of a) life of that kind. And it seems extremely attractive to think that it must be at least necessary in order for someone to obtain meaning in such a life that her agency is guided by projects that she loves or cares deeply about.

[17] I should say that I do not wish to rule out that there might be meaning also in the lives of individuals belonging to other species of living things. However, an account or criterion of what (if anything) makes the life of a member of some other species meaningful would, I think, plausibly have to take into account what is characteristically involved in living a life *as* a member of the relevant species.

3.3 It may be worth adding that while Smuts's example fails to convince me of the possibility that a person may obtain meaning from engaging with some project that the person is not himself attracted to, it does seem to me plausible that people can be wrong or mistaken in thinking that their lives have meaning. Hybridists can of course easily make sense of this latter possibility. Since hybridist accounts of what makes a person's life meaningful consist of not just one but two components, one subjective and one objective, adherents to such accounts can point out that while someone's life might be dominated by active engagement with projects that the relevant person cares deeply about, the person may still be mistaken about the objective worth of the projects his life is dominated by. And insofar as he is so mistaken, his life does not fulfil the objective component and, consequently, is not (contrary to what the person himself might think) meaningful.

There is room, though, also in subjectivism, for the possibility of thinking wrongly that one's life has meaning. For example, and as hinted in section 1 already, if placed in Nozick's experience machine, one could indeed enjoy the *experience* of being actively engaged with one's most important concerns or projects. But in fact one would *not* be so engaged, and therefore there would not be anything conferring meaning to one's life. Furthermore, people can for various reasons be mistaken about what they deep down really love or care about. And when or if that happens, their lives could be dominated by the active engagements with projects that they wrongly take themselves to care about, in which case subjectivism would imply that their lives do not (contrary to what they themselves might think) exhibit much meaning.

4. RESPONSE TO COUNTEREXAMPLES II: AGAINST HYBRIDISM

4.1 So far my concern has been with examples purporting to show that subjective attraction towards what one does or is engaged with is not a necessary condition in order for the latter to make a positive difference with respect to the amount of meaning in one's life. I will now turn instead to examples that are meant to show that while being actively engaged with projects that one loves or cares about may be necessary, it is not sufficient. In particular, it has been argued that if it *were* sufficient, then someone's life could obtain meaning even in virtue of the person being actively engaged with seemingly pointless activities or projects, such as:

* Watching reruns of old TV-shows (Wolf 1997: 218).

* Smoking pot all day (Wolf 2010: 9).

* Making handwritten copies of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Wolf 1997: 211; and 2010: 16).

* Counting blades of grass on a lawn (Smuts 2013: 536).

* Memorizing the contents of a dictionary (Wolf 1997: 211).

* Collecting bottle tops (Singer 1996: 113).

* Eating one's own excrement (Wielenberg 2005: 22).

But engaging—actively or not—with activities or projects such as these, we are invited to agree, surely cannot make a positive difference with respect to the meaningfulness of *any* person's life. And consequently subjectivism has to go.

4.2 What, if anything, could be said in response to examples of this kind? Well, we might begin with considering what would have to be true of a person for whom active engagement with one or more of the projects listed above would, given the form of subjectivism that I am relying on, contribute positively to the meaningfulness of his or her life.

Recall that according to my favoured form of subjectivism, meaning in life depends exclusively on one's being actively engaged with projects that one identifies with, loves, or cares deeply about. Once we have this clearly in view, it should be evident how remarkably different, from the general run of people, someone would have to be constituted in order for it to really be the case that such things as counting blades of grass on a lawn, collecting bottle tops, making hand-written copies of *War and Peace*, and so on, would make (a part or segment of) his or her life meaningful. While small children perhaps might, at least for a while, find some excitement in, say, collecting bottle tops or making a hand-written copy of some book (though it would have to be a very persistent kid indeed who makes such a copy of *War and Peace*), these are not activities that seem to be included among those we expect any normally developed adult—by which I here mean only someone who has developed the capacities necessary for caring deeply about different things—to devote her life to. Just as with counting blades of grass on a lawn, they seem too shallow to provide the content of a ground project in the life of such a being; there is simply not enough complexity involved to prevent them from being tremendously boring. With respect to the case of eating one's own excrement, on the other hand, it seems there should be various sociobiological reasons, having to do with health, cleanliness, etc., for why we are characteristically so disgusted even at the very thought of it.

Perhaps it will be objected here that what I have said above is simply beside the point. It does not really matter, a critic might argue, whether we can find any real life examples of people who genuinely care about one or more of the activities or projects listed earlier; what matters is merely that we can *imagine* a person who does. According to subjectivism, it would indeed be true of such a person that if s/he were to engage actively with the relevant activity or activities, then s/he would obtain meaning from it. And that should be enough to show "that [subjectivism] has seriously counterintuitive implications" and therefore ought to be rejected.

This does not seem to me convincing, however. First of all, I must admit that I find it far from easy to actually imagine a human being who has developed the capacities necessary for caring deeply about different things, and who cares genuinely about, say, counting blades of grass on a lawn—i.e. someone who loves and (at least in part) lives for that project; who in his actions and affections manifest a devotion to counting blades of grass that is analogous to the devotion shown by other (one is tempted to say *real*) people in relation to such things as close friendships, literature (movies, theatre, music), research, travel, haute cuisine, and so on. But in those moments when I (at least take myself to) succeed in imagining such a person, I just do not have any intuition to the effect that counting blades of grass would not plausibly contribute to making that person's life meaningful (assuming that he was to engage actively in it). Rather, I find myself thinking "why wouldn't it make his life meaningful?"

Secondly, it seems highly doubtful that intuitions should be given much weight once we turn our attention to outlandish thought experiments. Our intuitions have, I suppose, been formed or shaped largely in response to various cultural, social and biological pressures

encountered (over a substantial amount of time, presumably) in everyday life. And because of this, they may (or, I would say, are) not be very reliable when applied to far-fetched or out-of-the-ordinary kinds of cases.

4.3 It seems possible to distinguish at least two further kinds of examples that are sometimes brought forward in the literature with the aim of showing that being actively engaged with what one loves or cares about is not sufficient for meaning in life: *(A)* on the one hand, examples in which subjectivism (including the form I am relying on) implies that even morally bad people can exhibit meaning in their lives[18]; and *(B)* on the other hand, examples where, given subjectivism, someone devoted to what many of us would regard as a rather pointless activity—solving crosswords, say—obtains as much meaning from that activity as e.g. Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela did from the projects for which they are remembered.[19] Let us consider *(A)* and *(B)* in turn.

Regarding *(A)*, I believe many of us share the sense that it would be fitting if morally good people, in virtue of their moral behaviour, were guaranteed both meaning and happiness in their lives, while morally bad people instead were prevented from ever obtaining those things as a result of their wicked activities or projects. But fitting or not, neither of these conjuncts seems true in our world. Restricting ourselves here to meaning (though I think one could argue in a very similar way with respect to happiness), it seems clear from experience that morally good people can live in miserable circumstances, without much opportunity to pursue the projects they love or care about the most. They might care about morality itself, of course. But their concern for morality need not be enough on its

[18] See e.g. Cottingham (2003: 23).
[19] See e.g. Smuts (2013: 536).

own to secure a fulfilling life for them. As for morally bad people, it may very well be the case that they are in fact rather unlikely to, as it were, profit from their immoral projects (they might e.g. break the law, get caught and spend most of their lives in prison; they might suffer from serious drug abuse; they might be betrayed by people in their own inner circle; they might end up lonely and paranoid; etc.). But it seems to me there is little plausibility to the idea that they *cannot* do so.[20] In contrast to the case of counting blades of grass, considered in the previous section, it strikes me as fairly easy to imagine a morally bad person who is (from his own perspective) lucky enough to be able to devote himself wholeheartedly to one or another immoral project that he cares deeply about and who would thereby, on my view, obtain some amount of meaning in his life.[21]

Turning to *(B)*, I believe the subjectivist can plausibly respond along the following lines. S/he might point out that there are, after all, many different respects in which we both can and do assess people's lives. And it would indeed be very odd if subjectivism entailed e.g. that the life of someone devoted wholeheartedly only to solving crosswords would be as rich in great achievements and morally admirable behaviour as the lives of Mother Theresa and Mandela were. But subjectivism about meaning in life does not, of course, entail that. What it does entail is just that it is at least conceivable (though, I think, extremely unlikely) that the first person obtains as much *meaning* in his life from solving crosswords as Mandela and Mother Teresa did from their respective projects. And to me at least, there is nothing particularly counterintuitive about *that*.

[20] I am, of course, not the first philosopher to accept that morally bad people might lead meaningful lives. For two important examples in the literature, see Frankfurt (1988) and Kekes (2000).

[21] Even if we were to bring in the possibility of an afterlife, where morally good people are suitably rewarded and morally bad people suitably punished, I do not see how that would change anything with respect to the conditions in *this* life.

Concluding Remarks

Several philosophers have argued recently that subjectivism about meaning in life ought to be rejected because "it has seriously counterintuitive implications" (Metz 2013: 175). What I have tried to show in this paper is that once we take a closer look at the illustrations provided of these allegedly counterintuitive implications, we find that neither of them is especially convincing—at least not against the background of one particularly attractive form of subjectivism. It is true that this does not exclude the possibility that someone will eventually come up with a successful counterexample even against the form of subjectivism that I have been relying on here. But until that happens—if, indeed, it ever does—at least this form of subjectivism (and maybe various other forms as well) continues to deserve our serious attention.[22]

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