

Meaningfulness and kinds of normative reasons

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Introduction

Meaningfulness is thought to be something to which we ought to aspire and meaninglessness is dreaded. Many of us believe that having a meaningful life is important and some of us have the nagging sense that some kinds of lives would be more meaningful for us than our current life. Perhaps such sentiments are simply confused.¹ Given the complex ways that it interacts with moral, prudential, and other sorts of reasons, the concept of meaningfulness can seem hopelessly obscure. Nevertheless, the aspiration to live a meaningful life seems compelling and in this paper I will explore and defend it.

I will argue that there is a distinct kind of importance associated with meaningfulness and it is tightly connected to autonomy, deliberation, and decision-making in ways that I hope to explain. I argue that meaningfulness is not reducible to moral, prudential, or other values, nor is it a hybrid blend of such values. Furthermore, it cannot be dismissed without dismissing other important goods.

In response to the temptation to reduce meaningfulness to something else, this paper argues that meaningfulness must be understood apart from other kinds of goods. We will see, for example, how one could live a morally good, but meaningless life. Likewise, one could imagine a prudentially or aesthetically valuable, but meaningless life.

¹ Tim Oakley (2010) argues that while there might be some content to the notion of meaninglessness, the diverse range of emotions or psychological dispositions that are associated with “meaningfulness” makes it an unsuitable object of philosophical analysis. There is certainly a lack of agreement concerning the subjective states associated with meaningfulness. According to Susan Wolf, some practice or activity counts as meaningful if it results in “fitting fulfillment”, the moment when “subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (1997, 221). On her conception “meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way” (2010, 8). Others, like Antti Kauppinen emphasize achievement (2011, 346). From a cross-cultural perspective, we find considerable variability also. For example, the Japanese concept of *ikigai*, (roughly translated as “reason for being” or “source of value in life”) for example does not place the concept of love or achievement at the foreground, but instead indicates calmness, skill, and a sense of freedom from compulsion (See Matthews 2008). This paper does not focus on the wide range of subjective experiences associated with the idea of meaningfulness.

We sometimes notice when other people live *exceptionally* meaningful lives and such people are generally thought to be admirable. And yet, this admiration is of an unusual kind. Not all highly meaningful lives are desirable and not all those who live meaningful lives are people one normally would or even *should* aspire to be. Our judgments of what counts as meaningful are orthogonal to and sometimes even in conflict with our understanding of what counts as the morally right thing to do. As we shall see, living a meaningful life or engaging in a meaningful practice can sometimes involve violating moral norms and diminishing one's well-being.

For moral rationalists, the claim that there are conflicts of this kind indicates error or misunderstanding and thus the approach to meaningfulness that I will defend here can simply never be persuasive. A moral rationalist is someone who believes that moral questions and practical questions more generally never come apart in the ways I am assuming. For the moral rationalist, it is simply a conceptual truth that the thing we ought to do simply is the morally right thing to do (See for example Smith 1994 64, discussed in detail in Dorsey 2012, 15). According to Michael Smith and other moral rationalists if some other normative reason *seems* to run counter to morality that seeming is misleading and we simply *must* obey the moral reasons.² However, in this paper I will assume that a strong version of moral rationalism is wrong. On my view, one can be in the position where it is permissible to reject moral reasons for other kinds of reasons. Philosophers who emphasize the role of prudence in normative reasoning have been the central critics of moral rationalism, arguing that reasons involving one's well-being can sometimes legitimately override moral reasons (See especially Dorsey 2016).

While I agree with advocates of prudential reasons that moral reasons are not always sovereign, my argument entails that reasons of meaningfulness can also run counter to prudential reasons just as both can run counter to moral reasons. It is striking that we can express a preference for meaningful lives and activities while recognizing that meaningful courses of action can often lead to lives of dramatically reduced overall well-being. As part of the choice to live meaningfully, moral and prudential reasons are sometimes set aside for courses of action that we recognize as important in other ways.

Consider the following case:

² I am grateful to Don Marquis, Richard De George, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal for emphasizing the moral rationalist objection to this argument.

Józef and Wiktoria Ulma, lived in south-eastern Poland during the German occupation in World War Two. In spite of grave danger, they attempted to rescue Jewish families in their home. On 24 March 1944, Lieutenant Eilert Dieken was informed of their attempt to save the Szall and Goldman families. He ordered his troops to murder the eight people sheltered by the Ulmas before killing Józef, Wiktoria, and their six children in front of their assembled neighbors. As parents, Józef and Wiktoria understood the risks to themselves and their children but subordinated normal moral and prudential reasoning to the principle guiding their actions.³

Conventional senses of prudence and the demands of morality are inadequate to the task of understanding the value of their actions. The actions of Józef and Wiktoria are deeply meaningful, and while they failed to achieve their goal of saving the people they sheltered, they gave their own lives and the lives of their children in a manner that religious people would describe as blessed. They are recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by the State of Israel and may soon be beatified by the Roman Catholic Church. Independently of religious considerations, most of us recognize that we should honor their memories. For many of us, our aspiration to live meaningfully is activated by their example. And yet, the actions of Józef and Wiktoria Ulma are challenging for conventional moral theory.

The positive account I defend here is that meaningfulness is an objective dimension of importance that exists for beings capable of freely adjudicating between kinds of normative reasons. This adjudication involves the reality of distinct kinds of value corresponding to distinct kinds of normative reasons. On the view defended here, the way an agent decides to rank competing kinds of normative reasons in a decision-making context *is* that agent's judgment of what counts as meaningful. One's determination of what kind of value should count as most important in the context of a particular decision; whether one places aesthetic value above moral value, or whether one subordinates prudentially good choices to religious values are examples of how one might constitute one's commitment to an overall conception of meaningfulness.

In order to justify this view of meaningfulness the first step is to explain what it means to freely adjudicate between kinds of value.

³ See for example: <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/righteous/ulma.asp> (last accessed Feb 15, 2020)

Promise-keeping and non-moral reasons

Let's imagine a time in the not too distant future, say 2072, when neuroscience has completed its job and neurocosmetic surgeries and treatments are safe, commonplace, and widely accepted. Just as consumers in the 2020s surgically alter their appearance to increase their physical attractiveness, consumers of neurocosmetics in the 2070s modify their brains to improve their moral dispositions and their powers of moral judgment.

Among the many market niches created in this imagined future, it is likely that the financial industry would find opportunities to profit. Under these conditions, imagine applying for a loan at the bank. You are offered, for example, a 3.5% interest rate to finance the growth of your successful business. Your banker is a pleasant person who tells you about a new program for borrowers like you with excellent credit scores and high net worth. In this age of neurocosmetics you are not surprised when the banker asks whether you would be willing to take a pill that would prevent you from ever generating the desire to not repay the loan. Somehow, this is the only target that the pill would act upon. In return for taking the pill your banker offers to lower the interest rate to 2.4%. You have some background understanding of how the pill works on the brain, how it targets very specific kinds of motivations, and you are confident that it will not harm your body in any way. Furthermore, you have been told by trustworthy sources that the pill causes no detectable difference in the qualitative experiences of those who ingest it.

How one reacts to the offer might take one of the following forms: One might simply agree to the lower interest rate and take the pill. One might reject the pill because one believes that there is something morally objectionable to precluding the possibility that one might have the desire to fail to repay the loan. Perhaps, more plausibly, one might be sensitive to the uncertainty of one's future financial situation and because of this one might hesitate. Perhaps one will need the money for some morally or prudentially significant purpose that one would regard as more important than keeping the promise to repay the loan. One might worry, for example, that one's cousin might need an expensive liver transplant and that they would be relying on the support of others.

You trust your banker's good intentions and so you express your hesitations. In response to your concerns, the banker might use his best available actuarial techniques to

determine the price of the uncertainty involved in taking the pill and might then reduce the interest rate accordingly. Having done so, it would be irrational for you to continue to object on the grounds of uncertainty. It is likely that even after pricing in the uncertainty along these lines there remains some residual hesitation concerning willingly abandoning the capacity to will, even in this very restricted context. Are we being irrational?

Let's consider possible sources of hesitation. A first thought might be that there is something morally objectionable to abandoning the capacity to will. But this doesn't seem right. There is no moral reason to categorically refuse to willingly limit one's range of options in pursuit of morally good ends. If the banker were a moral rationalist you might be scolded; your banker might tell you that one shouldn't need any incentive to do what one regards as the right thing. In fact, you are informed, the bank has a bowl of these pills at the door and morally good people voluntarily take a pill as they leave simply because they want to act in conformity with their higher-order intentions to be good promise-keepers. It is praiseworthy for example, for a recovering alcoholic to avoid situations in which they are tempted to drink. Similarly, your banker contends, it is morally praiseworthy to organize one's life in conformity with one's higher-order moral intentions. Taking the pill reorganizes one's nervous system along the same lines.

It is implausible to argue that one is *morally* prohibited from freely choosing to limit one's options for the sake of pursuing morally good ends. But perhaps there are other reasons for leaving the door open to sin. One source of hesitation might be the concern that taking the pill would mean that our faithful repayment of the loan would be less morally creditable than ordinarily would be the case.⁴ Is this a moral reason? It is surely morally creditable to decide to increase the probability that one will act well in some later context, so perhaps whatever moral credit would be obtained from the action in the later context is simply assigned back to the decision to increase the probability that one will engage in the good action later.

Our hesitation here is that the banker is asking us to abandon our capacity to make judgments with respect to the ultimate, or all-things considered, value of the morally right course of action. Your banker is insisting on what Owen Flanagan has called the sovereignty of the moral good (1986, 41). We might actually agree with the banker's view of the moral situation and with his characterization of our higher-order moral intentions. However, we

⁴ Thanks to Jada Strabbing for raising this objection.

value being in a position to choose to act against the demands of morality from an all-things considered perspective. Notice that this is not because of a strong commitment to the moral value of willing freely but is instead due to possible conflicts between kinds of values.

We might wonder whether our hesitation in this case is the product of weakness or a flaw in our moral character and whether we ought to be eager to submit to the sovereignty of the moral good. After all, what could possibly justify the desire to be able to act in a way that's morally wrong? If we believe that nothing justifies such a desire, we are assuming some form of moral rationalism. As we saw above, for the moral rationalist it is impermissible to act against the demands of morality on pains of irrationality. Arguments against the notion that the right thing to do will always be the morally right thing to do are familiar since the late 1970s. Michael Slote (1983), Bernard Williams (1981), and Susan Wolfe (1982) followed Philippa Foot (1978) in arguing that one is sometimes entitled to override the demands of morality for prudential or other reasons. Unless one believes that there are *only* moral norms then one is open to the possibility that there are distinct kinds of normative authority. Dale Dorsey (2016) not only argues that we are not always required to act as morally required but that we are sometimes normatively prohibited to act as we are morally required to act. On his view, this prohibition can arise in virtue of voluntary commitments to specific projects and roles or even in virtue of rules of etiquette or social propriety. According to Dorsey, there are circumstances where taking on these roles or projects can make it impermissible to follow the dictates of morality.

I will assume that it is reasonable to believe that it is sometimes legitimate to override moral considerations in favor of other kinds of normative reasons. If this is the case then we are in the position of sometimes having to evaluate the relative importance of different kinds of normative reasons. In contemporary moral philosophy, the other kind of value that is ordinarily contrasted with morality is prudential value. For the sake of brevity I will assume that the contemporary distinction between prudential and moral value is correct and while I do not think that this is an exhaustive distinction, it is enough for the purposes of defending and explaining a context in which agents must rank distinct kinds of normative reasons.⁵

⁵ My own view is that there are additional kinds of value, but for the purposes of the remaining argument we can assume that the reductionist argument against meaningfulness assumes that value comes in just two flavors.

In the banker example, we explored reasons why we might hesitate to put ourselves in the position to be unable to do something other than what we regard as the morally right thing to do. So far, if my argument has been convincing, it supports the view that we are sometimes required to make decisions between kinds of value. Philosophers who emphasize the importance of prudential reasons might automatically think that our hesitation in the banker case is simply due to our recognition that prudential reasons sometimes override moral reasons. In order to demonstrate the irreducibility of meaningfulness to both moral, prudential and other kinds of value we will need to explore more pills.

Pills moral and prudential

It turns out that by 2072 moral philosophers have been just as successful as the neuroscientists. Moral philosophers have achieved broad consensus on a range of topics that had traditionally been subject to dispute and in order to make their best available moral reasoning available to everyone, they educate a supercomputer to perform decision-making tasks based on combining sensitivity to relevant aspects of specific contexts with the always updated best, latest moral reasoning. The result is a super-Watson for moral reasoning that can outthink and outargue any human moral philosopher. Teaming up with the soon to be unemployed neuroscientists, the builders of MoralWatson devise a system that communicates with swarms of tiny nanobots implanted in the brain. These machines modify the structure and processes of the brain in real time so that the subject behaves in accordance with the best available moral reasoning. Let's suppose that these bots are conveniently delivered to the customer's brain in a pill. Taking the pill means filling your brain with tiny robots that operate on you in ways that ensure that all your actions are in accordance with the demands of morality to the best extent possible.⁶

⁶ An anonymous reviewer for this journal has objected that this line of reasoning would be unacceptable to philosophers like Kant or Augustine who would insist on an internal connection between the exercise of human freedom and moral action. The situation for the Kantian is not so clear. Should one take a pill that would make one invariably act according to the categorical imperative? Would the categorical imperative require you to take such a pill? Some might argue that the categorical imperative would require you *not* to take it, because the internal connection between freedom and moral action would bind all future behavior in ways that eliminate the very possibility of praise and blame - one's future actions wouldn't really be actions. Even if this is the correct way to characterize such future behavior, notice that the initial decision to take the pill itself would be free. Notice also that freely deciding to follow the categorical imperative in one's future actions simply cannot be a violation of the categorical imperative.

Should one take the morality pill? One might be skeptical concerning the ability of an artificial intelligence to understand the demands of morality and one might object that in the case of particular moral decisions such a system would not have access to all the relevant empirical details or the ability to understand the relevant contextual features of specific problems and decisions. Alternatively, one might argue that these objections are simply technical challenges rather than limits in principle.

Suppose that there is no in principle argument against building a MoralWatson, and we regard it as something like a far superior system for moral reasoning than an unaided human brain. MoralWatson, in this case, is something like a very wise person. We needn't regard MoralWatson as infallible. For the purposes of this argument it is simply sufficiently superior to us that we should take its judgment very seriously. If so, is there any legitimate reason to hesitate before taking the morality pill? The reason some of us would decline the morality pill is similar to the reasons we might decline the banker's pill. We reject moral rationalism and following philosophers like Dorsey and Foot, we believe that there are sometimes prudential or other non-moral reasons for not always following the dictates of the moral law.

At this point, neuroscientists and moral philosophers might detect another market niche among such sometimes immoral, but prudential philosophers, embark on the development of yet another pill. The Well-Being Pill acts in a manner analogous to the morality pill via another artificially intelligent system PrudentWatson, except that the outcome is that relative to one's unaided reasoning abilities one has a more satisfying life given one's circumstances, one's preferences with respect to the way one's life should go, one's life-plans, commitments, and the roles that one has voluntarily assumed. At this point, the question is whether there is any rational basis for not taking both the morality pill and the well-being pill?

What are we to make of the question as to whether one should take these pills? While the scenario is ridiculously exotic, notice that our question is not what Carnap would have called a pseudo-problem. After all, there is a range of alternative courses of action in these scenarios and thus, one's choice is a genuine one. One could take the morality pill and not the well-being pill or vice versa, both pills, or no pill. The fact that there is a conceivable question with distinct consequences (even if merely in the context of a thought experiment) means that morality and well-being are not necessarily independently self-

certifying. If we can conceive of a question to be decided by the imagined denizens of the 2070s then these two dimensions of value stand in some relation of relative importance. Thus, this decision occurs in a space of adjudication that is distinct from both moral and prudential judgments.

One concern that might occur to us is that taking both pills might lead to occasions where PrudentWatson and MoralWatson would come into conflict. Should I keep the promise to water my neighbor's geraniums every day or should I skip it just this once so that I can go to the Yngwie Malmsteen concert in a neighboring city. Seeing the seventh or eighth best hair metal guitarist of all time might contribute to my well-being given sufficiently disordered preferences but doing so would cause me to violate my moral obligation to my friend. At this point a contradictory set of instructions would be sent by the two Watsons to their corresponding nanobots and chaos would ensue. To avoid this problem, moral rationalists would program the systems such that in cases of prima facie conflict, the instructions from MoralWatson should always trump the instructions from PrudentWatson. By contrast, those who think that prudential considerations sometimes trump moral considerations would need to spend a little longer organizing their code accordingly. Of course, as we explore the convolutions involved in the cases of conflict highlighted in this thought experiment we are involved in decisions about the relative importance of moral and prudential criteria. Notice that in doing so we are in a space of deliberation that is not itself straightforwardly moral or prudential. We are weighing the relative importance of distinct kinds of normative reasons in varying contexts.

In fact, if there were a genuine clash between moral and prudential reasoning, it would imply either

- (a) that there is no non-arbitrary way to settle the dispute, or
- (b) that there is some non-arbitrary way of ranking prudential and moral reasons in case of conflict that is, itself, neither moral nor prudential.

If there were no non-arbitrary way to settle the dispute, then one could simply toss a coin to decide which system should dictate an agent's actions. This would be an unacceptable option for both the moral rationalist and the advocate of the importance of prudential reasons. Of course, both could object to the claim that a non-prudential and non-

moral space of deliberation genuinely arises in this thought experiment as suggested in option (b). They would likely argue that there are reasons to entertain rejecting one or the other or both pills that are reasons drawn from within the framework of prudence and morality. The goal of a response like this is to say that either moral or prudential reasoning alone can be sufficient to settle the question of how to decide between conflicting moral and prudential reasons. We have already seen how this line of reasoning plays out in the case of moral rationalism. The rationalist simply claims that the right thing to do is always the morally right thing to do, end of story. If we are unwilling to go full moral rationalist, we might be tempted to think that the space of reasons for doing anything is completely exhausted by some combination of moral or a prudential reasons. The space of practical deliberation might be bigger than the moral rationalist would prefer, but ultimately the same reasoning applies; doing the right thing simply is doing the morally/prudentially right thing to do, end of story.

How could such a position license an objection to (b) above? Let's think about moral or prudential reasons for taking or not taking the pills: Perhaps, for example, one believes that autonomy is essential for true well-being. In this case, taking the prudence pill would be self-defeating, because the pill could never maximize well-being. Similarly, one might believe that it is morally irresponsible (and hence morally wrong) to hand one's ethical decision-making power over to some other agent, even if one has reasons to think that it would be better at making the right decision. Whether or not these two arguments are convincing is less important than the fact that they are plausible. For the objection to the thought experiment to have force we must simply provide moral and prudential reasons to forbid taking the pill. One could certainly imagine a person thinking that they had morally or prudentially good reasons motivating them to reject the pills. The fact that such lines of reasoning are available does not mean that they are correct of course.

Let's first consider the objection from autonomy. Notice that for the objection to work, free will must be regarded as intrinsically (morally and/or prudentially) good. In the first counterargument, an agent who has taken the pill is said to not have true well-being in virtue of not having autonomy. True well-being essentially involves freedom according to this objection. In the second case, abdicating true decision-making power is thought to be immoral and therefore taking the morality pill is impermissible. The reasons for rejecting the latter line of reasoning were tackled above in the banker case and need not be repeated. The

prudential reasons for valuing autonomy are more of a pressing challenge. But let's modify the mechanism for PrudentWatson in the following ways: PrudentWatson 2.0 (the autonomy-valuing updated version) will simply monitor your actions and will not intervene in your freely chosen course of action as long as they are in pursuit of your well-being. This is because you value autonomy as one of the many elements of true well-being. But you value autonomy precisely because of its role as part of a prudentially valuable life. You value it for well-being and not in-itself. If you value it above prudential value, then the counterargument misses its mark. To value freedom more highly than well-being would be to indicate that something higher than well-being is important to the agent. This line of argument would not be available to someone arguing for the importance of freedom on prudential grounds. Furthermore, to value autonomy as part of well-being presumably means that *qua part* it is not the only thing you value as part of your overall conception of well-being. Given that you are concerned with well-being and given that autonomy is one of several constituents of the prudentially valuable life, then there will be cases where autonomy will come into conflict with other valuable ends. In these cases, PrudentWatson 2.0 would intervene in your brain function at the expense of autonomy for the sake of your well-being.

Another objection to the thought experiment runs as follows. One might argue that it is conceptually impossible to take both pills together. As we have seen, prudential reasons and moral reasons often come into conflict. Thus, there is no guarantee that both pills could always work completely effectively at the same time, to maximize both the morality and prudence of our choices - one would have to win out. Assuming taking both pills simply meant that neither pill would work effectively, our remaining options would be to take either one of the pills, or neither. In this case it seems plausible that one could opt to take neither, even if morality and prudence were the only values out there, because it would be better to have a life with a mixture of both rather than a life entirely devoted to one or the other. Again, notice that the kind of reasoning that we are now undertaking involves considerations other than moral and prudential reasons. Thus, the putative objection ends up conceding the existence of the space of deliberation that the pills argument is intended to establish.

The matchmaker and the zombie

The thought experiments described above involve many exotic assumptions. Their purpose is simply to establish a conceptual distinction between moral and prudential reasoning and another kind of deliberation that is associated with meaningfulness. I described the space of adjudication where we are capable of weighing the decision to take the morality pill or the well-being pill in extreme terms so that this space of adjudication may be clearly distinguished from moral and prudential judgment. Some philosophers have methodological objections to the use of conceivability arguments for such purposes, preferring instead to begin from real cases.⁷

More familiar cases can do some of the same work as the thought experiments described above although less conclusively. Imagine, for example, a matchmaking service that reliably paired people who are optimally matched, sparing them the business of dating and evaluating potential spouses. The fact that one might hesitate (rightly or wrongly) before accepting the service indicates that one is weighing distinct kinds of values. Perhaps one regards the time spent in failed relationships as an important part of one's growth as a person, perhaps one regards such services as somehow dehumanizing in some difficult to articulate sense. As one reflects on the decision, one must explore what it is that one ultimately cares about. Meaningfulness emerges via the capacity to engage in all-things-considered judgments of this kind. The possibility that one might reject (again, rightly or wrongly) the spouse who is chosen by a system or person that one recognizes as being wise indicates that there exists a familiar conceptual space wherein one must determine what one ultimately cares about. Imagine a scenario in which a paternalistic authority, perhaps a government or one's own family forced single people to accept the *right* spouse for them. We are inclined to rebel, even when we are aware that we are unable to provide a reason to reject the wisely chosen spouse.

Human persons are in the position to distinguish prudential, aesthetic, and moral value from one another. More importantly, we are capable of ranking those dimensions of value in ways that mark our affirmation of some them as ultimately more important than others.

Consider lives that are marked by high degrees of immorality, but which are still highly meaningful. Consider for example the lives of Mozart, Napoleon Bonaparte, Coco

⁷ For an overview of methodological concerns related to conceivability see Gendler and Hawthorne (2002). My view of the role of conceivability and intuition in philosophical argument is defended in Symons (2008).

Channel, Martin Heidegger, or Paul Gauguin. If my way of thinking about meaningfulness is correct, it is relatively easy to make sense of our intuition that they led meaningful albeit, perhaps immoral lives: These people lived meaningful lives insofar as they made commitments to distinct kinds of normative value and they have done so in ways that indicate that they did not blindly stumble into their lives, nor were they forced to live their lives as they did. Ultimately, I am suggesting that their lives are meaningful insofar as they voluntarily decided to live according to some kind of value over others.

Notice that this is not a matter of how those lives seem to others. A life's signifying ultimate value to others does not necessarily make it a meaningful life. Imagine, for example, two farmers. The first is a college-educated person with a range of options who returns to their hometown in Kansas because they have committed to the value of agrarian life. The second is another Kansan to whom it has never occurred to live any other way. Like the first, the second lives a life that signifies commitment to the value of agrarian life, but insofar as he has not actively decided to make this commitment, what his life signifies to others is irrelevant to its level of meaningfulness. The subjective aspect of this difference *is* relevant. One could have two lives that signify some particular kind of value where one has the subjective component that the other lacks. On the view defended here, the relevant subjective feature of the life is the space of deliberation and agency in which the agent actually made the decision one way or another.

In the most extreme case, imagine someone living a life that signifies to observers that the agent is committed to some particular kind of value without their having *any* qualitative experiences – a philosophical zombie. The fact that the life of a philosophical zombie might signify ultimate value does not make those lives meaningful. Meaningfulness requires conscious voluntary commitment and genuine agency.

Notice that we might even *feel* as though our lives were meaningful and on my account live meaningless lives. For example, no matter what the subjective psychological states of the people who were subject to the morality pill and the well-being pill, their lives would resemble those of tamed animals or robots rather than genuine human persons. These lives might signify ultimate value to others, but they would not count as meaningful in the sense defended here.

The zombie cases help to distinguish meaningfulness from other forms of value in another way. Imagine siblings, one of whom is a maximally unreflective opera singer. He

studies and practices his art, but he has never had a “what’s the point of it all?” moment and has never considered the value of his work.⁸ All the same, he has a successful career, producing great art that benefits hundreds of thousands of opera lovers. He enjoys his work, thrives in some sense from it, and commits few morally blameworthy actions. By contrast, his underachieving sibling had a range of talents and capacities, none of which were fully developed. Unlike his brother, the underachiever *has* given thought to questions of ultimate value, he has asked the “what’s the point of it all?” question. He has engaged in adjudication between kinds of value in ways that his successful opera singer brother has not. The trouble is, let’s say that he has failed to reason correctly while deliberating. For example, imagine that the underachiever has dedicated himself wholeheartedly to fandom for the movie *The Big Lebowski*, which he watches repeatedly and which he regards as the best movie ever made. He has a circle of *Big Lebowski* loving friends, becomes an officer in the fan club, purchases the right merchandize, and studies related trivia. He could do better, but he fails to. In spite of underachieving, in spite of failing to live up to his capacities, and in spite of being seriously mistaken about the relative quality of movies, the *Big Lebowski* fan lives a more meaningful life than his unreflective opera-singing brother.

Admittedly, it is difficult to imagine that an accomplished opera singer would fail to thoughtfully reflect on his practice at some point, but if this were the case, the opera singer would count as a meaning-zombie, albeit a morally, aesthetically, and prudentially praiseworthy zombie. If the opera singer were to come to realize that he is living a meaningful life, this realization would require him to activate his capacity to adjudicate between distinct kinds of value. In doing so, a new dimension of value would open up for him. He would now be the kind of being who, like his brother, can recognize the value of the kinds of commitments that he has made. Again, he might be mistaken, but at the very least, he is now deliberating about the meaningfulness of his life.

The view defended here contrasts with many of the prominent accounts currently available in the literature (see, for example Calhoun 2019, Kauppinen 2015, Wolfe 2010). Nevertheless, this account has the virtue of allowing that one can live a very simple and relatively private life without having any distinctively meaning-flavored emotions or feelings,

⁸ The fact that it is difficult to imagine a completely unreflective opera singer is instructive.

without making any grand gestures or signifying important values to others, and one can even fail in one's central life projects, while still living a meaningful life.⁹

Conclusion

Meaningfulness is the dimension of importance that exists for beings capable of freely adjudicating between distinct kinds of value. To ask whether a course of action, a way of life, or even a whole life is more or less meaningful is not to ask whether it is morally, prudentially, or aesthetically valuable. The question of meaningfulness emerges most sharply for an agent when one is faced with decisions that involve conflicts between kinds of value. Given some decision where one encounters conflicting kinds of normative reasons, say moral and prudential reasons, one's judgment that, for example, in this case the prudential should outweigh the moral, takes place according to one's understanding of what is most meaningful in this case. One's all-things-considered ranking of different kinds of value in some decision-making context is one's sense of what is most meaningful in some context. Meaningfulness is a personal matter, but it also has an objective component. From the subjective side, the way an agent decides to rank kinds of value constitutes that agent's understanding of what counts as meaningful for it. From the objective side, an agent can be mistaken in its ranking and such rankings are themselves subject to assessment and evaluation by others.

One can be mistaken or confused with respect to what is meaningful and one can update one's view of what counts as meaningful in light of new experiences, evidence, or philosophical reflection. While it is difficult to imagine human persons living completely meaningless lives, some conceivable agents will not have access to meaningfulness. Meaning zombies are agents who are just like us except that they do not rank kinds of value. Such an agent can act well in many ways; their actions can prudentially valuable, aesthetically pleasing, or morally praiseworthy. While they can be valuable, such actions are not necessarily

⁹ An anonymous reviewer for this journal has suggested that there are strong connections between the arguments in this paper and arguments about the relationship between agency and freedom that one finds in existentialist and Christian philosophical writings. This is certainly true, but explicitly making these connections would require a much longer paper.

meaningful. This is because, on the view defended here, meaningfulness essentially requires autonomous deliberation with respect to kinds of value.

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