Summum Bonum: an analysis of the complex conceptual relationship between happiness, meaning, and self-delusion

Abstract

Both happiness and meaning are intimately connected and important to analyse together for they are closely *interrelated*. Understanding this will help to mitigate the potential for banal conceptions of happiness from gaining a footing. In particular, I advance a conception of happiness rooted in meaning and transcendence. I explore some important distinctions and tensions between various *meanings* in life (including between subjective and objective conceptions) and highlight how this can lead to a problematic 'othering' of human existence. *Contra* Wolf (2007), I finish by exploring the importance of having a moral orientation in terms of meaningful lives and by advocating a therapeutic conception of philosophy. As I suggest, there is a moral and epistemic imperative to attend to one's delusions if we are to flourish as human beings.

Introduction & structure

Because '[t]he notion of a good life *for* a human being is linked problematically with that of the life *of* a good human being' (Hacker, 2021), there are complicated normative tensions and relations for happiness and meaning in the context of key issues raised in epistemology as well as ethics, and on the proper relations between subjective and the objective norms and values, including notions of the greatest good - *summum bonum*. The notion of *summum bonum* was introduced

by the Roman philosopher Cicero,[1] although the term was also a central theme in Aquinas' philosophy with his synthesis between Aristotelianism and Christianity.[2] This influence has extended into analytic philosophy too, notably through Moore (1903) who had an aesthetic conception of *summum bonum*. MacIntyre (1981) also discusses these related concepts in 'After Virtue' in a modern context of traditions and social practices. In contrast, however, I advance a conception of *summum bonum* that is influenced by the philosophy of the latter Wittgenstein and in the practice of 'therapeutic' ways of thinking but rooted in the primacy of adopting a moral centre. As I will show, this has an ethical as much as an epistemic orientation applicable in both philosophical inquiry as much as psychological and moral development; the goal in both contexts is largely the same: human liberation and transcendence.[3]

This paper is therefore, structured as follows: in section one ('The delusion of circumstantial happiness') I sketch out some of the key *uses* of happiness including exploring the relations with pleasure, joy, and satisfaction with one's life. This is important to highlight some of the central *subjective* dimensions to happiness, and the relations with satisfaction in life. In section two ('Flourishing under fire') I explore these issues further through Camus' (2013) use of 'The Myth of Sisyphus' in his rendering of meaninglessness and absurdity paying attention to his justification for the apparent absurdity of human existence. I then contrast his view with that of Frankl's (2006) in order to highlight the importance of *attitude* in the face of the challenges and vicissitudes of life.

In section three ('The delusion of *The* meaning of life') I explore the variety of uses for the word 'meaning'. This is important in order to develop some

[1] See *De Finibus*, Book II, 37ff

[2] On his conception, *summum bonum* was defined as a righteous life of a believer in God. See *Summa Theologica* Aquinas (2020).

[3] See Baker (2004) for further exploration on this style of thinking and method. Also see McFee (2015) who builds further on Baker's insights into Wittgenstein's therapeutic method.

clarification for what kind of question/s we are asking when we ask what *the* meaning of life is, or indeed, whether life is the kind of thing that can have a meaning. In section four ('One possible root of the problem: telos') I build on Hacker's (2007) insights with regard to teleology and the ancient Janus-faced concept of *telos*. In particular, I highlight some problems with its backward - and - forward-looking orientations in the context of similar features of the concept of *the* meaning of life. In section five ('The Otherness of existence') I continue this theme and highlight the incomprehensibility of the notion of either everythingness or nothingness, which as I show, is trigger for what Schinkel (2017) calls 'deep wonder'. In contrast I suggest that this is based on a flawed dualist conception of 'reality' (based on the inner/outer dichotomy).

Finally, in section six ('The delusion of 'significance' in assessments of meaning and meaningless') I address some of the moral dimensions to happiness and meaning which I explore through one of Wolf's (2007) cases, 'The Blob'. I will develop Wolf's case using what I call 'Good Blob' versus 'Bad Blob' to help highlight an important piece that is missing from Wolf's analysis of meaning. In the concluding remarks, I will tie lessons learnt from these various strands of delusion to suggest that, *ceteris paribus*, our human predicament of ignorance actually provides endless possibilities and logical spaces of hope for anyone leading a meaningless life. Following Wittgenstein's insight with regards to overcoming an illusory problem,[4] I suggest that the way forward is not solely an epistemic one but rather one of the 'will'. Thus, building on points made in previous sections, I propose that 'attitude' plays a critical role in liberating oneself both epistemically as much as characterologically. As I suggest, such a move

[4] Wittgenstein (2009), says in §97: 'We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, inference, truth, experience, and so forth. This order is a super-order between a so to speak a super-concepts. Whereas, in fact, if the words "language", "experience", "world" have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door".' [Also see Wittgenstein (2009), §109]. **NB**: as per convention, Wittgenstein (2009) is hereafter referred to as '*PI'* followed by section number.

plays a central role in developing happy and meaningful lives in ways that contribute to one's flourishing.

1. The delusion of circumstantial happiness

Happiness is a complex and disputed concept for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is first and foremost a psychological concept and as such it can be a report of how things are with oneself (subjective happiness). We can say that we are happy *about* something (like a football team winning); happy *that* something is the case (e.g., our friend got married); happy *with* somebody (i.e. we feel loved and contented). Just these few examples suggest a huge range in emphasis and force with conceptual connections ranging from ecstasy or joyousness, to pleasure (being pleased *about*), delight or indeed bliss. In these cases, happiness is a report for how things are with oneself (subjectively speaking) and so, we say, that a great deal hangs on what *makes* one happy. These uses suggest one taking *pleasure* in some goal or activity, something or someone. In a different sense, it can also mean being pleased *with* some state of affairs (e.g., a promotion). Happiness is thus closely related to the concepts of goals, goodness, enjoyment, satisfaction, pleasure and even bliss. These connected concepts might suggest a sense of transience, but happiness is more than that, for in saying that we are happy we do not mean something that is transient like a mood, but rather we mean a *lasting* state of mind. There is a sense that things are generally good *with me* over a significant period of time.

The sense for overall happiness here is not to imply an insight into every aspect of our own lives, clearly, we don't. We may be happy about certain aspects and unhappy about other aspects; indeed, we may be deceived about what happiness is, or otherwise deceiving ourselves about whether we are in fact happy. Context helps us to clarify the meaning of a use of happiness, for in speaking of happiness regarding aspects of life - such as with relationships, jobs, or hobbies - we do not mean happiness *per se*, but rather, *satisfaction* with the aspect of my life. In

speaking about happiness as a state of mind, we make an overall assessment for how things stand *with me* as the kind of being that can be said to have a good, including, for example, the goodness of biological health. Although no form of value can be rendered intelligible save by reference to 'living beings', in asking about someone's goodness in terms of health, this is not a biological or necessarily a medical question.[5] We are rather primarily interested in their overall well-being and only a sentient creature may possess a state of wellness. This indicates, then, a complex set of relations between subjectivity and satisfaction (*my* state of mind or being), as well as longitude and totality (*my* assessment for the overall state of affairs for my life).

Whilst that assessment can be as a result of aspects of life that justifiably provide me with satisfaction, whether on subjective or objective criteria, such assessments can be in spite of the absence of such aspects of happiness. In this important sense, happiness is *attitudinal* and a matter of choice, agency, and free will. For example, I can be in the middle of a relationship break up but instead of seeing the breakup as bad news, I could see the possibilities for other relationships. My job could be ending, but I can look ahead to taking on a new challenge. These are rather ordinary circumstances that impact our lives that most of us must develop an ability to address positively in order to flourish for without this flexibility of attitude we can be said to flounder. Further, in even the direst of circumstances happiness is possible. Frankl (2006), an Auschwitz survivor, relates how in the early days of his being held prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, '…how content we were; happy in spite of everything'. One can imagine the survivors nurturing a mindset that seeks for reasons to be happy and goodness wherever it may be found. It is also, of course, testament to the resilience, faith and dignity of

[5] *Cf*, Von Wright (1968, p50) & Maslow (2013).

the human soul in the face of what might appear as meaningless suffering.[6] This sense of striving ahead *in spite* of an apparent sense of meaninglessness is of course reminiscent of the Myth of Sisyphus (Camus, 2013). I will now turn to a brief analysis of that text in order to elucidate my point regarding the importance of attitudinal factors in shaping meaning and happiness.

2. Flourishing under fire

In 'The Myth of Sisyphus', Camus sees the problem of absurdity for human beings stemming from the 'impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle. And suggests that there is a gap between human concerns and the world of 'reality' (so conceived as everything outside of the human mind). He sees no way out from this predicament and so in finishing he declares the only option is existential abandon, a form of cynical acceptance: 'The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy'.[7] Camus' suggestion that Sisyphus could be happy is itself an affirmation of this absurdity, albeit a heroic one. Camus suggests that once we go through the process of 'absurd reasoning', adopting a position of acceptance and meaning towards one's life is all that is left, but that this is fine. Meaning is bravely created by human beings *despite* the fact that life is apparently meaningless. Whether or not this counts as a reason for living is debatable, but for Camus, it certainly counts as a 'reason for dying'. For Camus this forms the most 'fundamental question of philosophy', the question of suicide. Camus bases his assessment, however, on an expectation that there *should* be an explanation to the fundamental problems of life for human beings and that these will be discoverable (at least potentially) 'out there'. Camus cites meaningless of work as an example of pointless existence:

[6] Frankl relates later: 'I said that someone looks down on each of us in difficult hours—a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or a God—and he would not expect us to disappoint him. He would hope to find us suffering proudly—not miserably—knowing how to die.' (*ibid,* p.74).
[7] *ibid,* p.90.

> Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. (Camus, 2013, p17)

He suggests that this 'unillustrious life' is filled with wishful thinking about a hopeful but unlikely future. He relates the pointlessness of routine work with Sisyphus' pointless daily grind of pushing the rock uphill at the whim of the gods. The point of redemption comes when one day the 'why' question 'arises' in the hearts of human beings; it's the question that drives us. Camus' problematization is therefore based on a particularly alienating way of seeing the world. For Camus, *in lieu* of an intelligent being that might be able to explain the reason for human existence, we are left to arbitrarily design our own meaning. It's for this reason that Camus suggests that our lives lose any explanatory force, we become *lost* in wonder and captured by misapprehension. Camus suggests that human beings are caught in the absurdity between the self-consciousness that makes them aware of their own predicament, whilst lacking the conceptual tools to reason or find a way to justify their own existence. Camus, however, seems somewhat constrained by his choice of analogy. As Hacker (2021, p326) observes, Sisyphus is not a 'social creature', neither does he have a 'self-transcending task'. Whilst Sisyphus is useful to demonstrate resilience, determination, and courage in the face of powerlessness and the possibility of an apparent sense of absurdity, Sisyphus' life is about as one-dimensional as one could imagine and not at all like the life of an actual human being.[8]

[8] In this sense, Sisyphus's lot is more like an invented language game (like Wittgenstein's language game of the builders, see Wittgenstein (2009 §23), hereafter standardly cited as '*PI*' for 'Philosophical Investigations'. Also see Baker (2004 p.133). The allegory serves a useful purpose but is limited for no matter how bad things are we almost always will have something redeemable with which we can be thankful for and thus an opportunity to transcend the horrors of experience.

To contrast, for example, Frankl (2006), an Auschwitz survivor, appeals to the reasons for living *outside* of the self (friends, family, or God) and although suffering in and of itself is meaningless he suggests that rather than robbing human lives of meaning, the meaning we get is found in which we respond to the suffering. For Camus the very fact that we must choose meaning seems to be a source of absurdity - but for Frankl it is a source of redemption. Adopting an attitude of gratitude and a willingness to transcend one's circumstances affirms the importance of life and acts as a buffer against the worst experiences imaginable.[9] As Frankl (2006, p131) avers:

> A negative attitude intensifies pain and deepens disappointments; it undermines and diminishes pleasure, happiness, and satisfaction; it may even lead to depression or physical illness.

Whilst Frankl's use of happiness above must of course be relativized to the appalling circumstances he, and others, had to face where ordinary conceptions of happiness, fulfilment, enjoyment and pursuit of one's goals or abilities must abate. It must also be granted that most of us will face moments of suffering and anguish in life (for example, ill health, bereavement, job loss or divorce). Though for obvious reasons these are not of equal intensity, they may be *felt* as such. It is not necessary to defend such a comparison for all that is needed here is to highlight the need to transcend our suffering whatever it may be, and to highlight that the logical possibility of transcendence relies on *attitude*. Indeed, because of the relativity of circumstances it is misguided to think that our purposes are 'uniformly meaningless' or indeed uniformly meaningful; what matters most is how we choose to address the challenges and vicissitudes of life. There are therefore aspects of happiness that relate to transient states of mind (feelings and

[9] There is a risk of sounding glib. There are circumstances of incomprehensible evil and suffering which we don't need to explore here. Suffice to acknowledge that possibilities for adopting such an attitude are not without exception.

emotions), states of affairs (good luck, fortune) as well as attitudes towards life (how I choose to see life, despite the circumstances).[10] The former two classes being more susceptible to the whims of luck and good fortune, the latter consisting in a position that one can adopt, for *reasons*. This latter aspect is one that elicits lasting satisfaction and meaning for it is one which I shape and rationalize as a moral agent in the world. What Frankl's and Camus' contrasting perspectives help us to see then, is that there are at least those two *ways of seeing* the world, each with their own logical and practical commitments in terms of how they attend to the world and how they navigate through the problems of life.

Now that the relations between happiness and meaning are clearer, I will now address a fundamental delusion with regards to 'The' meaning of life. I will do this by conducting a brief exploration of the plurality of the concept of meaning in order to highlight some important distinctions that may assist in dispelling this particular form of delusion. I will then build on this with an exploration of other roots to confusion through an analysis of the Greek concept of *telos* and the existential notions of the 'otherness' of existence.

3. The delusion of 'The' meaning of life

To understand the question of life's meaning properly, we need to first understand the kind of presuppositions that support *that* kind of question. For example, the word 'meaning' itself can be used in a number of ways. For example, when we say, "What is the meaning of this interruption?", we are interested in knowing what possible insolent *reasons* you might have for doing something (justificatory). Whereas, if we ask, "What is the meaning of beach walks?", we know that this is patent nonsense, for beach walks are not the kind of thing that can have a meaning. Why then do we ask what 'the meaning of life' is? Is it not

[10] We could also add the religious attituded to life. For example, in Book of James 1:2, he says: 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds'. Similarly, this suggests a transcendent conception of happiness.

equally obvious that it is not the kind of thing that can have a meaning? Part of the problem is that because of the plurality of related but distinct meanings of meaning it is quite easy to be perplexed by such a question. We could, for example, re-phrase the question in order to make it more intelligible. One can imagine a psychotherapist speaking to a patient and asking: 'What was the meaning of *that* beach walk for you?', or "What do beach walks mean to you generally?" (eliciting a subjective response). Equally, however, we can also use meaning to ask questions that require an objective answer: "What is the meaning of this calculation?", e.g. "What is the meaning of the mathematical formula of Pi (π)?". But if we were to ask, 'What is the meaning of Macbeth?', it might not be clear what we were asking. Perhaps, something like "What does the text signify *to you*?". But if we were to ask what the plot of Macbeth is, then we could answer that perfectly lucidly in objective terms. In short, questions of a certain order require subjective responses alone and framing such a question *as if* an objective answer were possible leads us into confusion. In each case, the meaning of 'meaning' is somewhat distinct, or at least, requires distinct kinds of more particularised questions and responses. In other words, questions of a certain order require subjective responses alone and framing such a question *as if* an objective answer were possible leads us into confusion. I will now explore one possible route of confusion, the Greek concept of *telos* and how this may have influenced our thinking on notions of meaning as an ultimate end.

4. One possible root of the problem: 'telos'

Wolf (2007) has rightly suggested that 'the question [of the meaning of life]… is extremely obscure, if not downright unintelligible. it is unclear what exactly the question is supposed to be asking'. The question of *the* meaning of life seems to be interested in two kinds of teleological explanation, *causative* (backward looking and explanatory) as well as *functional* (goal-oriented and purposive), retrospective *and* prospective. In English, ends and goals differ in important

senses, whereas the concept of *the* meaning of life seems to track at least partly along ancient Greek conceptions of *telos*, looking in both directions.[11] For example, the notion of *the* meaning of life can mean either the purpose or ultimate goal, whilst also looking for a causal explanation or reason for life and existence. Causative ends imply the result of something else (like a ripple in the pond being the end result (*telos*) of a pebble being thrown into it. The pond could not choose to ripple as a result of the pebble landing on its surface; the ripple is the ultimate result of an event or process. Simply put, the chain of causation is a matter determinative of cause and effect. In this sense *the* meaning of life amounts to an explanation for the inception of existence (e.g. creation or the Big Bang) as much as its end (in both religious and scientific terms seen as the destruction of the universe). This can be contrasted with *purposive* ends which are rational and agential in nature.[12] The further link with *eudaimonia* or flourishing (as the highest good, or *summum bonum*) is also clear from a teleological perspective to help explain what is most worthy of our attention and what we should direct our lives towards.

That said, although we usually understand teleology in terms of 'goals' and 'ends', this bidirectional perspectivism need not be contradictory. Hacker (2007, p162) gives a case to consider in terms of teleological explanations for human behaviour that may help. If we imagine how we might explain a revenge act, we could explain it in both retrospective as much as prospective terms. If we imagine a murder has taken place, we can say that the *goal* (G) of a murderer was to kill a person (P). But we can also say that the reason for that goal (G) was revenge for another murderous act (M). In this way we can arrive at a point of teleological explanation for the murder: i.e. G was *caused* by M. In other words, there is a

[11] The ancient Greeks had a range of distinctions between kinds of 'cause'. For example, Aristotle distinguishes (*aitia*): matter (*hyle*): mover (*kinoun*): form (eidos): and end (*telos*); *cf* Preus, (2007).

[12] Von Wright (1974, p49) held: 'causal relations exist between natural events, not between agents and events.'

'pattern of reasoning' which explains a given outcome causally in a chain; the backward-looking component 'renders the *purpose* of the action perspicuous'.[13] This teleology works fine for human behaviour (though because human behaviour is agential, it does so undeterminably) but cannot be applied to life as a whole. Partly this is because life is not the *kind* of thing to have 'reasons' or goals, but also because we have no 'God's eye' perspective within which to know the end of life as a process either.

In asking *the* meaning of life, we want to know not just *what* brought life about and where we are going but importantly, *why*. This has naturally led to endless religious (theist) as much as scientific (rationalist) speculations and theorizing.[14] Indeed sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between them. I suggest that it is this speculative element that is so attractive and alluring for romantics as much as rationalists. It is possible, however, only within a certain way of thinking about the world, rooted in either religious or scientific speculation. It's useful in a number of ways (not least to help in terms of self-knowledge and concept development) but as soon as we take the question too seriously, we err. *A fortiori* when we infer meaninglessness from ignorance as to the reasons, meaning or purpose of life (as Camus does). This is partly why Wittgenstein (1980: §64) said:

> It appears to me as though a religious belief could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of coordinates. Hence although it's belief, it is really a way of living, or a way of judging life.

Wittgenstein draws a distinction between commitments that might provide meaning in life – that is, a way of seeing life, or, an *attitude* – as opposed to applying standards for knowledge typically used in addressing concerns that are

[13] *Ibid* p.163, my emphasis

[14] Also see Metz (2013) and Cottingham (2005)

epistemic or philosophical. This is at once a tighter definition of 'philosophical' but also a loosening (and clarifying) of how we should approach human knowledge and understanding. That is, although language games differ substantially, religion and science often operate with similar attitudes to life for both see the world in cosmic and teleological ways; it is for philosophy to help to unravel them both where needed.[15]

So, we have seen that the framing of the question is problematic (e.g., asking a subjective question as if it were objective). We have also seen that the ancient Greek concept of *telos* may also have contributed to a lack of clarity in English. What else is so wrong with the question? In the following section I explain why I think that 'otherness' is another central root of confusions related to *The* meaning of life.

5. The 'otherness' of existence

Although Schinkel (2016) notes the possibility for a plurality of meanings, his notion of 'life' is taken to mean the overall experience of human existence, being, consciousness and all that this entails including thought-life, activities and relationships etc.[16] But in that case, it is hard to know what could not count as 'life'. The trouble is that just as nothingness is incomprehensible, so too is the notion of everythingness (e.g. all of 'life'). In order for a question or a doubt about existence, that is, in order for it to be debatable, we would need to have something to contrast it (all of existence and life) with. If no distinction is drawn, then it's hard to know what is being communicated. So, although we can express a doubt regarding the reason for our individual existence in causal terms (for example, why I was born, whether or why my birth was accidental or intentional, natural or via invitro etc.), what would it be to doubt the reason of *all* existence? Perhaps

[15] See Vainio (2020) for a thorough and very recent critique of religious language and some arguments against Wittgenstein's notion of distinct language games (which he calls 'mimimalism').
[16] Also see, Schinkel (2017) and Mulhall (2013)

these kinds of questions make sense in the context of my death, i.e. my *non-existence*; as Camus claimed, 'suicide' is the fundamental question in philosophy. But in that case, I am merely asking *whether* I should live, i.e. whether my *reasons* are good enough *for me*. This expresses an existential crisis for an individual person, not a state or condition of human beings more widely, *a fortiori*, for the whole of existence.

The notion of the very possibility for their being a meaning for all existence seems fixed by a certain way of seeing the world, one where humanity is somewhat at odds with everything else outside. For example, Schinkel (2017, p546) states: 'The paradigmatic example is the 'philosophical' wonder at the bare fact of existence, the fact—and the mysteriousness of that fact—that there is something rather than nothing'. Interestingly it is this inner/outer dualist picture of humankind existing in the 'bare fact of existence' that is a source of *both* despair (à la Camus) and idealised deep wonder in the case of Schinkel. The wonder, or mental cramp, that either everythingness or nothingness elicits should help us realise that the question of the *reason* for the existence of life is poorly framed. Certain 'facts of life' just are as they are.[17]

To use one of Wittgenstein's metaphors, 'nothing in the seed corresponds to the plant which comes out of it—this can only be done from the history of the seed' (Wittgenstein, 1991) [b] §608) - that is, there is no essential end to the plant which could express itself in any number of ways.[18] Wittgenstein's interest there was human behaviour, but I think it is a useful metaphor for life in general as well which is quite chaotic (or so it seems to *us* from *our* perspective – and what other perspective could there be for us). This is why I suggest that the question of doubting why something exists (their function, purpose or reason) is related in

[17] '... the fact that we act in such-and-such ways, e.g., punish certain actions, establish the state of affairs thus and so, give orders, render accounts, describe colours, take an interest in others' feelings. What has to be accepted, the given – it might be said – are facts of living' (Wittgenstein, 1991 [a] §630).
[18] E.g., subject to environmental factors

kind to the sceptical question of doubting *that* something exists, or at least whether I can know that it does.[19] The former is based on the cosmic nature of reality with human beings (as agents) pitted against the real world and the otherness of existence. Similarly, the latter is based on the misleading notion that my consciousness or awareness is pitted against an external and unknowable world.

Of course, Wittgenstein's insight was targeted at epistemic scepticism. It was intended to lay bare that there are some things that you cannot doubt, and thereby, cannot be said know. Further, it was intended to lay bare the fact that our entire game of knowledge, and its logical possibility, depends on the very fundamental facts we take for granted (like I am alive, am an agent, and have power over various affairs in my life etc.). In the context of the meaning of life, it's goodness or badness does not consist in our ability to know whether it exists or indeed why it exists, both of which are nonsense; one is beyond epistemic doubt, the other is beyond perceptual purview, both are beyond the limits of language. Rather, our evaluations are only possible from a particular vantage point, a view from 'somewhere' within which to evaluate it.[20] This is not to say that we do not have a use for such a concern, as suggested, in religious (or literary) contexts which adopt a religious kind of metaphysics (in some cases as metaphor, in others as claims to knowledge). After all, we have innumerable problems in philosophy and who is to say that a given set of problems are to be barred from troubling us as thinkers; quite the opposite - philosophy gets its purpose from such problems.[21] The religious metaphysical picture of the world provides the kind of framework

[19] Wittgenstein suggested: 'The questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those [doubts] turn'. [Wittgenstein (1975) §341-44]. Also see Moyal-Sharrock, (2017, p.18) where she has stated: 'The nonepistemic nature of our basic certainties is ascertained by the logical absence of justification and verification as regards our assurance of them'.

[20] This is to contrast with Nagel's (1986) concept of a view from 'nowhere'. Nagel's primary aim was to seek 'to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included… to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole' (*ibid*, p.11*)*.

[21] *Cf, PI* §109: 'All explanation must disappear, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light a that is to say, its purpose a from the philosophical problems'.

within which such an idea could gain a footing and we can learn some lessons from *within* it. Outside of those cosmic frameworks of meaning, we would do better by asking questions like: why things exist in this particular way – e.g. *why* is the earth spherical - *why* do we worship these kinds of gods – *why* do we have these kinds of religious practices – or indeed, *why* do we think it important to ask these kinds of questions etc. These questions are comprehensible, explainable, and thereby, answerable in philosophy, in particular, along objectivist lines. By way of contrast, I will now explore subjective conceptions of meaning *in* life through a case study of Wolf's (2007) 'The Blob' where she advocates for 'significance' as a primary means of evaluating meaning in life. In contrast, I will suggest that in being human (a social, moral, and rational creature), there is a moral imperative to develop one's moral compass. Hence, moral orienteering is what truly counts when making assessments of value and meaning 'in' life.

6. The delusion of 'significance' in assessments of meaning or meaninglessness 'in' life

Susan Wolf is one of the most prolific writers on the topic of meaning in life.[22] She is also known for her 'hybrid theory' of meaning aiming to bridge the apparent gap between objectivist and subjectivist conceptions of meaning in life.[23] Let's therefore consider a case that Wolf (2007) raises that challenges our conception of meaningfulness on the subjective route. Her aim in that paper is in locating 'the possibility of finding meaning', through the 'hazy' life of 'The

[22] For example, she is the author of a variety of books including *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning & Love (2015),* and *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters (2010).* She has also published a number of papers including "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1997 [b]); "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy & Policy* (1997)[a]; and "The Meanings of Lives," in Perry, Bratman, Firscher, eds., *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (2007).

[23] Wolf (1997)[a] 'meaning arises in a person's life when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness'. Also, see Calhoun (2015) for a critique of Wolf (1997)[a] and a defence of his conception of agent-centred subjectivism in regard to meaning.

Blob'.[24] The Blob spends his days and nights in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching sitcoms. Wolf argues that this is paradigmatic of a meaningless life because it consists in a life disconnected from everyone else. It's not an 'unpleasant level of consciousness', rather, it's quite comfortable. He is not hurting anyone either (at least not directly). Yet, his life seems meaningless – or at least, seems to lack meaning. Blob seems to be existing like the lotus eaters discussed by Edgar & Pattinson (2016), a life of pleasure and indulgence. We might justifiably deem such a life quite useless and meaningless, both to The Blob and to others. Other than the most degrading consumerist of reasons for living, Blob's existence is one which certainly lacks *substantive* meaning or purpose; even *trivial* meaning is doubtful. We don't have a rich picture for the Blob's life, but he seems to be living somewhat of an automated existence without any substantive engagement with life, for example, pursuing goals, activities, and relationships. Indeed, Wolf (2007, p4) suggests that '[i]f any life, any human life, is meaningless, Blob's life is.' So, what can we say about The Blob in terms of meaning in life (trivial) or a meaningful life (substantive)? What's wrong with it?

Wolf makes some effort in arguing against a moral dimension to meaning. She states that 'it is debatable whether even the Blob deserves specifically moral censure', by which she means that we should think a bit further before we judge or prohibit such a life. She says so partly because of the apparent lack of negative impact on others for the Blob harms no one through his one-dimensional existence (though this is contestable) – he only seems to be harming himself. Her strategy, however, is to detach the notion of morality almost entirely. She contrasts 'paradigms of meaningful lives' which seem to exemplify 'great moral virtue or

[24] For context, the Blob is one of three cases raised by Wolf, the other two is the pig farmer, from one of Wiggin's (1976) examples, and the other is the alienated housewife. The pig farmer 'buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs' and so seems trapped in an endless cycle of business growth with little else in his life. The alienated housewife is very active but lives a life of relentless household duties devoid of self-expression. Wolf characterises her life as one that is full of activity but where she is 'not actively engaged'.

accomplishment' such as Ghandi and Mother Theresa. However, she contrasts such lives with other 'morally unsavory' figures of history like Gauguin, Wittgenstein, and Tchaikovsky (Wolf, 2007). This is an interesting list. I'm not sure anyone would argue with her exemplars. Nevertheless, a central problem is that she argues for a deflationary account of the importance of morality and an inflationary account of 'significance'. Whilst we know that Gandhi, Mother Teressa, and others *typify* a meaningful life because they gave a great deal of their lives up for others, we do not actually know everything about their lives, nor do we need to. But our watered-down pop conceptions of them are problematic *if* we are going to then compare them with other figures of notoriety, for what we know about them is equally dubitable. Assuming they were not superhuman, the moral exemplars may well have had equally dubious lives to those in the list of morally 'unsavory' characters like Wittgenstein.[25] For sure he made mistakes, but he also showed depth of character in giving up his fortune and living a somewhat simpler existence as a philosopher – and this is not to mention the transformative impact he has had in helping philosophers to overcome their own confusions. These seem to be indicative of admirable character traits such as generosity, humility, courage and insight. That is not to say that these are sufficient for an attribution of meaning (far from it), but it is to throw a light on a diminished account of meaning based on what we might know about someone in the public eye.

Wolf's comparisons don't seem to work for her. In making the point she wishes to make about the lack of connection between meaning and morality, she inadvertently sheds light on its importance. I suggest that a meaningful life is one that is, rather, imbued with moral activities and substance. We should recognise that the fame or success one achieves is not a *measure* of the value or meaning of one's meaningfulness in life (certainly not in isolation). No matter how well

[25] Notably, physically abusing children whilst a teacher in rural Austria [*cf*, Monk (1991) pp.163-195].

recognised that person's activities are, as Hacker (2021, p319) suggests, they are only a 'token' of the substance – not the substance themselves. That is, they are dubitable *indications* of deeper characterological strengths and virtues being applied in meaningful contexts within one's life. This is not to place morality of too high a pedestal, but it is to affirm, *contra* Wolf that without it there is no meaningfulness in life.[26] Wolf's focus on activities and significance in her conception of meaning, leads her to miss an important distinction between personal achievement and a morally defensible life. I think if she went a bit further, for example, by comparing Gandhi to Hitler, then that would have been a clearer comparison for it would rightly locate meaningfulness in terms of what is *valuable* rather than merely 'significant'. Hacker (2021, p312) has aptly suggested that '[n]othing that is evil can give meaning to a person's life, for evil is the paradigm of disvalue' and this is why I suggest that the aspect that gives *substance* to a given conception of meaning is one that has a 'characterological hallmark'.[27]

I also suggest that this is what is centrally wrong with The Blob's life: through characterological weakness, he is failing to live up to the moral imperative implied in his being the *kind* of creature he is, namely, a human being with immense rational and moral powers. This further suggests to me that *awareness* of one's own powers matters too, at least in terms of responsibility, so this is both an epistemic as much as a characterological concern. So, bearing in mind this characterological hallmark, what may we infer in terms of Wolf's case of The Blob. I think we can see his case in at least two ways. For example:

[26] Calhoun (2015, p15) orients this tension between achievement and goodness better I think when he says: ''Meaningful' nestles among 'admirable', 'humanly good or excellent', and 'significant'. It is to be connected with accounts of distinctively valuable human capacities and their exercise, of human achievement and contribution to human progress, and of the duty of beneficence, particularly supererogatory discharges of that duty'.

[27] There is a competing moral theory called 'ethical egoism'. This is an interesting ethical problem broadly defined as 'the doctrine that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively'. *Contra* that view, Rachels & Rachels (2014) suggest that 'our morality must recognize the needs of others', not as separate but in equal measure. This is roughly equivalent to one of the central Christian tenets 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' (Book of Luke 6:31).

I. We can imagine the Blob being somewhat unaware of what is important or valuable, so he may be innocent and ignorant about what is meaningful in life.

Perhaps the Blob had poor role models, parents or experiences which helped to shape his character. It may also be the case that he is somehow impaired (e.g., through having some health issue). In such cases I think we can agree that his behaviours do not amount to meaningless living; rather, a *limited* life. I'm going to call this Blob, 'Good Blob' because the major factors in his life that helped to shape it are largely out of his control.

II. We can also imagine that the Blob is fully aware of his meaningless existence and carries on regardless even in the face of such knowledge.

The Blob seems to be a clear case for exemplifying the vices of laziness, avarice, and cowardice. Worse still, Blob may be in self-denial about his predicament with a tendency towards epistemic insouciance and bullshitting others.[28] I'm going to call this Blob, 'Bad Blob'. In such cases we might be happier to condemn Bad Blob for failing to live up to his own potential and, as a result of his lack of honesty with himself, to be somewhat trapped in a cycle of vice, self-deception and vicious behaviours. The normative standard suggested here requires no heroism *per se*, certainly not as conventionally conceived.[29] But it does require the practice of ordinary virtues like diligence, patience, self-control and courage, even on a minimal level. On this basis we could rightly consider Bad Blob's life as quite absurd and meaningless for he has forsaken his most basic of duties, the exercise

[28] See Cassam (2018; 2019) and, Frankfurt (2005) for a comprehensive account and exploration of epistemic vices and bullshitery.

[29] The fact that we must practice these virtues daily without much fanfare suggests to me that daily living is somewhat of a heroic experience (or can be). This is related to the Christian daily practice of taking up one's cross through self-sacrifice (thus exemplifying or expressing the fruits of the Spirit of God, so conceived (see Book of Ephesians 2:8). Of course, we need not have a religious belief system in order to practice such virtues (as any Stoic will tell you), but having a framework within to operate provides a strong motivating factor, e.g., whether through fear of God, fervour for holiness or deep love and compassion for others.

of his powers and abilities as a human being.[30] In terms of the logical features of meaningfulness, what seems to matter is that a person has a sense of foresight and responsibility over the choices s/he has, and - being guided by a well-informed moral compass - the bravery, determination and persistence to see pursue those challenges through.

Concluding remarks

I have suggested that happiness and meaning are so closely related that to separate them would amount to their disintegration for they are both closely interrelated. The factor that pulls them together is one of substance, goodness, and morality. Because of the particular kind of philosophy, I advance here (a therapeutic one), I have shown how asking the wrong kinds of questions can often lead us into confusion; in particular I explored the Greek concept of *telos* and how this translates into our related English conceptions of meaning, purpose and explanation. Further, I argued that there is a tendency to see existence in terms of the 'other', and that this too is another root to confusion. In particular, by pitting human consciousness and existence against everything else, we artificially distance ourselves from that which we are embedded within. We have no possibility for a 'view from nowhere' as Nagel supposed and our subjective viewpoint is the only one that we may access. This is not to discount the importance of objective perspectives (in terms of the normativity of concepts) but it is to lay bare the confusions regarding the assumed possibility for objective knowledge regarding any notions of *the* purpose or meaning of life.

Finishing then with an exploration of the Blob, I developed Wolf's (2007) case a bit comparing Good Blob with Bad Blob. As suggested, *contra* Wolf, the role of morality and character are central features of subjective meaning in life for in

[30] For obvious reasons there will be other more local factors to account for within particular normative frameworks which have had favour over various periods of history, such as strength, rationality, knowledge or magnanimity etc.

asking these perfectly reasonable questions we are most interested in what is *valuable* in life (as the epitome of goodness). I have also shown how responsibility plays an important role and by implication, knowledge. The added good news, then, is that despite our very human and flawed circumstances, the very predicament of ignorance provides the logical space for hope. Wolf (2007) makes a related claim in her final assessment: '…[there is] no reason to doubt the possibility of finding and making meaning in life – that is no reason, in other words, to doubt the possibility of people living meaningful lives.' A life without meaning, even a meaningless life (so conceived) is logically redeemable, whether in fact it manifests that potential is a matter of individual character, and to a degree, circumstantial luck.[31] This is important to remember because it affords us a degree of mercy to others and humility regarding our own flaws of character. In either case of both Good and Bad Blobs, such patterns of living can have vicious impacts on one's life with real effects on health, relationships, financial independence, conceptions of personal efficacy, confidence and happiness etc.

Crucially, if we fail to pay sufficient attention our own vices, tendencies to delusion which *all* of us have, we can become exemplars to others for meaningless living (as Bad Blob has); this is, ordinarily, something which we want to avoid if nothing else but for reasons related to maintaining one's reputation – an important factor in succeeding in one's career whatever that may be.[32] If we are not very good at this iterative process of learning, and importantly, if we do not attend to our delusions and blind-spots, then our development can be a 'hard-won' self-knowledge.[33] What seems important then, for our flourishing and development, is rather, a therapeutic *praxis*. Specifically, the greatest good is one where we are

[31] This is not to be conflated with 'moral luck' (see Pritchard, 2005, and Williams 1982)

[32] Bortolotti (2018) suggests delusions can also (at least potentially) make 'a contribution to people's sense of themselves as competent and largely coherent agents.' This is because self-delusion can (and often does) lead to improved conceptions of oneself so there are some 'epistemic benefits' that could be acknowledged.

[33] See Cassam (2014) p.259.

ever more self-enabled to understand what is valuable in life. By attending to that most vital of iterative processes, we can break free from our ignorance and delusions – certainly not to do so, precludes our epistemic and moral development *qua* human beings.

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