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Masters Research Report.

Meaningful Loving

by

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(9812468x - 2006)

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“Take away love and our earth is a tomb.” – Robert Browning.

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INTRODUCTION

MEANINGFUL LOVING probably sounds better suited to the title of a Barry White album than it does to the title of a rigorously philosophical thesis purporting to bring together two topics contemporary analytical philosophers have tended to give a fairly wide berth. These two seemingly maligned topics being 'love' and 'the meaning of life'; the relationship between the two being the focus of this report. Both love and meaning have received relatively scant attention in the recent literature and it is not easy to see how this can be justified. Even grouping together 'love' and 'life's meaning' and suggesting that something like love might make something like life worthwhile tends to be met with allegations of "banality"[1] and in some cases even a "yawn"[2]. At the very least, I hope this report will provide reason to think that 'meaningful loving' deserves as much a place in robust philosophical discourse as it does anywhere else.

The truth is, as human beings, we care about things, and sometimes, we care very deeply about things. In certain cases, it is appropriate and most accurate to describe our care in terms of *love*. As such, love can be a particularly potent and expressive form of caring of which we seem naturally to possess the capacity to form loving-type relationships with a wide and diverse range of objects. It is no secret that what and how we love often deeply affects our thoughts about the quality of our lives.

[1] Taylor, Richard. 'The Meaning of Life,' *Philosophy Now* :24, (1999), pp13-14.
[2] Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), p573.

Not only are we the types of creatures who often care about things, but we are also the types of creatures often deeply *curious* about things. We spontaneously raise queries about all sorts of issues: some trivial, some not so trivial. On some occasions we ponder even fundamental problems whereby we wonder about the very character and significance of life itself. We want to know what it is about this earthly experience, if anything at all, that makes it worthwhile. We want to know whether life is meaningful. And if it is, what *is* the meaning of life? It is seemingly as much an expression of 'being human' that we pursue meaning, as it is that we avail ourselves to enter into loving relationships.[3]

I wonder whether there is some philosophically interesting connection between love and a theory of life's meaning. I take it for granted that some lives are more meaningful than others and further that there is a superlative amount of meaning available to those who seek it correctly. Is it possible that something like love (on its own) can ground the most meaningful life? Or better, '**Is love of a certain kind a necessary and/or sufficient condition for a superlatively significant existence?**' When we reflect upon the life of the person who loves nothing, or who journeys through life without a single thought about its significance, it is easy to see how such an existence resembles Robert Browning's vision of an earthly tomb; in so many ways this person is strikingly like the walking dead. She, with no interests and no attachments, lacks something *fundamentally* important to the human experience. In contrast, however, just the very presence of love

[3] see Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), p112. Fankl claims "Man's concern about the meaning of life is *the* truest expression of the state of being human."

can transform a life that is otherwise unremarkable and desperately drab into one of invigorating energy and renewed intensity.

I think many of us share the intuitive sense that love does indeed possess the ability to infuse our lives with meaning – not always happiness, but certainly meaning. The person in love – whether it be with themselves, their work, their partner, their pets, their God, their family, their neighbour, or any other object – will usually enthusiastically insist that the world is full of meaning (at least in relation to their beloved). Even the philosopher who declares her life to be meaningful because of philosophy is after all, quite literally, a '*lover* of wisdom'. A correct account of the nature of love and its essential features is, of course, notoriously difficult to nail down. For example, there is much controversy over the differences between erotic, agapeic or neighbourly love. Our present task, however, is relatively more manageable in that our central concern is less about securing a true elucidation of love and more about a kind of love that would serve as a good candidate to confer meaning on our lives. We can therefore avoid being drawn on a comprehensive analytical account of love (in all of its complexity and diversity) and instead we need only focus on the more limited characteristics of love essential to the relationship with meaning.

While the question of the relationship between love and meaning seems to me to be meaningful in itself, it is more than merely of intrinsic interest; an examination of how love relates to the question of meaning may well help illuminate other puzzling problems as well, like: Why do we even bother with love? Is love essential for the living of the

good life? What is it about some lives that we consider to contain more meaning than others? What is it about boredom that worries us? Why might a good marriage be more desirable than a great one-night stand? Why might people need God in their lives?[4] What role is there for love in practical reasoning? What is important when choosing one's career prospects? What attitude should we encourage towards the self? And what is it about the lives of individuals like Mother Theresa, Mahatma Ghandi, or even Jesus Christ that we regard as admirable?

In this report I wish to defend the claim that not only is love a suitable candidate to ground the meaningful existence, but love, of a particular kind, is essential for the *most* meaningful existence possible. I have divided what follows into five chapters:

In Chapter I, I begin our discussion by focusing on the question of life's meaning itself. What is it that we are asking when we ask about life's meaning? Is there some commonality to all or at least most of the familiar theories purportedly engaging with the question? In other words, how are we to understand the *concept* of the 'meaning of life'? I will argue in this chapter that the meaningful life involves reaching beyond particular restrictions and connecting with something of great value beyond our purely animal existence. That is, meaning is about transcending specific limits autonomously. I take this to be the beginning of a workable concept of the meaningful life and I will seek to develop it sufficiently to enable us to move forward in the remaining four chapters on more substantive issues.

[4] see Metz, 'The Concept of the Meaningful Life,' *American Philosophical Quarterly*. 38:2, (April 2001), p137.

To this end, in Chapter II, I pick up on a suspicion I remark upon at the end of the opening chapter that love is surely one of the most potent ways in which we might transcend our limits and connect with something of considerable value. I turn therefore to consider competing *subjectivist* and *objectivist* accounts of the way in which love might ground meaning. I defend the notion that, in terms of meaning, it is not only the case that we must love something, but the something we love must be in some way worth loving.

Of course, this naturally raises the question of what it is that makes something *worth* loving. In Chapter III, I try to sketch a corresponding theory of objective value. I briefly consider whether there might be a *unitary* value at base upon which all other value depends, but ultimately I am sympathetic to the idea that there is a *plurality* of higher-order values at the foundation – each equally suitable for conferring meaning. I tentatively suggest that even if there is one highest value, higher than which we could not possibly conceive of: God, for instance, there is still reason to guard against apportioning our love for the sake of utmost meaning to such a value purely on the basis of desert.

In Chapter IV, I present two competing conceptions of love in order to determine the kind of love best suited for conferring the most amount of meaning on life. I first consider a conception of love necessarily involving some *aim*, a kind of benevolent affection. I then discuss a love that essentially involves no standing aim or desire to benefit the beloved whatsoever. It is a love described by one theorist as an *arresting awareness* of value of the beloved, a case of 'really looking'. I argue that the latter, the love that does *not*

fundamentally involve an aim is better suited to secure superlative amounts of meaning than the discussed alternative.

Finally, in Chapter V, I defend the claim that my analysis of love is not only a *sufficient* condition for superlative meaning but a *necessary* condition as well. I consider a challenge to my view from Neil Levy's contention that work, and not love, is required for ideal meaning. I try to show how his account is neither sufficient nor necessary in this regard and how my account avoids Levy's problems. I mention too that meaningful loving fares favourably with many common sense intuitions about meaning and morality. I end by noting how meaningful loving seems to track both active engagement and the real world. It is love of the right kind and the right thing that allows our lives to burst forth with vast amounts of meaning.

In sum, I claim in this report that the most meaningful existence is one in which we love something so long as the something we love is in some way worth loving, and the way in which we love this thing is the right kind of way. These, I argue, are the conditions for the ideally meaningful life. Meaningful loving as such secures the most meaningful existence.

It makes sense now to begin with a discussion about the concept of 'life's meaning'. We need to know what we mean by 'meaning of life'. We turn now to Chapter I.

CHAPTER I

The Question of Meaning

What are all the philosophical theories of life's meaning about? The short answer is, of course, 'life's meaning', but this is neither helpful nor revealing. The longer answer is therefore the focus of this chapter. In the discussion that follows, we need to determine whether there is something at the core to all, or at least the majority, of theories pertaining to be about the meaningful existence for us to get clearer on the task at hand. Essentially, when we ask the question what, if anything, is the *meaning of life*, we need a workable concept of life's meaning to help clarify what it is exactly that we are asking.

I begin the discussion, in Section I of this chapter, by noting that perhaps part of the elusiveness to the question of life's meaning is attributable to a recent history in which the question itself was rather regrettably the subject of much questioning. Putting aside, in Section II, any potentially lingering concerns from the logical positivists, I will try to clarify, as best I can, the *meaning* of the "meaning of life" by focusing on how it is constituted. This begins our search for a satisfactory concept. As such, I introduce Sisyphus and the Blob, two examples of paradigmatically meaningless lives. In the sections III-V, I attempt to wrestle with three competing concepts, namely: meaning as *purposiveness*; meaning as *what's worth loving*; and meaning as *transcending limits*. If any of these concepts of the meaningful life is to be satisfactory, it needs to accommodate the most commonly held supernaturalist, subjectivist and objectivist accounts of meaning.

In expanding on what these three descriptions entail, I suggest that some kind of autonomous choice is *inherent* to the concept of meaning. Supposing I am correct, the issue of autonomy proves to influence our conclusion.

Essentially this chapter is a *conceptual analysis* aimed at capturing the central sense, should such a sense exist, of what philosophers have in mind when attending to the problem of life's significance. The position I wish to defend in this chapter is that "life's meaning" is best understood in terms of "transcending limits". More specifically, the meaningful life is the life that transcends the animal self and connects with something valuable in the process.

I. Questioning the Question

The previous mid-century saw questions like, "What is the meaning of life?" withstand sustained attack from the then-influential logical positivists. The positivists succeeded, for a time, to replace this original question with, "Does it make any *sense* to ask questions about the meaning of life?" The logical positivists hold that since statements about life's meaning are not empirically testable, they do not express anything meaningful. The direct result is that the question of life's meaning is itself deficient in meaning.

According to logical positivism, analytic statements (and their contraries) are meaningful because they are true or false wholly in virtue of their meaning, and synthetic statements are meaningful, when and only when, their truth or falsity is demonstrable by perceptual

experience. Accordingly, all other statements fail to express propositions thereby rendering them 'cognitively meaningless'. Thus, statements about the meaningful life, clearly neither analytic nor open to verification by sense-data, are considered nonsensical since they express no proposition verifiable to all rational agents.[5]

Perhaps it is a logical positivist hangover that explains the lack of extensive engagement in the question of life's meaning that marks much of contemporary philosophical dialogue on the topic. Logical positivism has, thankfully, long since lost its persuasiveness and no longer exerts significant influence within the circles of philosophy. The upshot is that even if the question 'What is the meaning of life' remains somewhat vague, we still have some sense of what we are asking when we pose it. When we hear someone inquire into life's meaning, our initial thoughts are not that the question itself lacks content, but rather that it expresses a legitimate concern of some philosophical intent. The question of life's meaning deserves careful analysis and at least an attempt to clarify prevailing ambiguity.[6]

II. Two Paradigmatically Meaningless Cases

[5] See Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' *Ethics* 112, (July 2002), esp. pp801-802.

[6] While writing this report my local newspaper published a random sampling of five people asked the question, 'What is the meaning of life?' Their answers varied: "The meaning of life is actually about having fun. Living for the moment"; "To create more generations, to become successful and to look after nature"; "Life is about being happy, being yourself. You must have respect, take care of yourself and enjoy living"; "Having both parents, living a happy life and enjoying every day of it."; and, "We are here to better ourselves, live our lives and then die", Benoni City Times, 15/09/06. My point is that even in the backwaters of Benoni, people not only wonder about the meaning of life, but also have a sense of what's at issue by the question. Some of the answers even reflect some definitive 'philosophical' undertones. The question, I suspect, deserves definitive philosophical attention.

It is common for theorists working on substantive theories of life's meaning to address intuitively meaning*less* lives in the hope that such a discussion will help illuminate its contrary: the meaning*ful* life. Perhaps the same tactic can aid us in the conceptual problem as well. Instead of asking about what we mean when we wonder about the 'meaningful life', let us briefly consider what we mean when we talk about the life that appears to be clearly deficient in meaning. It will benefit us firstly to sketch two paradigmatic cases of meaningless lives.

Consider first the hapless Sisyphus. Condemned by the gods to repeatedly roll a large rock up a steep hill, only to reach the summit and watch helplessly as the giant boulder crashes back down to the very point he started from. His life is a continuous cycle of rolling the same stone, back up the same hill, only to be met each time with the same result. Sisyphus is a paradigm example of the meaningless life because his efforts are so pointless and so utterly in vain. He can boast no achievement, no success and no discernable influence on the world. Nor can it be maintained that he has any interest in his endless toil, he is not engaged in what he is doing in any meaningful way, nor is he connected to anything worthy of admiration or awe; his existence, in a word, is futile.[7]

Alternatively, consider the less mythical and disturbingly recognisable figure of Susan Wolf's, "the Blob"[8]. The Blob is Wolf's embodiment of the meaningless existence and represents the beer-drinking-TV-addict whose life consists of little more than a stream of beer cans and television commercials; this is what he lives for. Nothing much matters to

[7] If Sisyphus thought of himself as a rock band, he might call himself something like, 'The Rolling Stones' and he'd probably sing songs like, "I can't get no satisfaction." With apologies to Mic Jagger of course.
[8] Wolf, Susan. 'The Meanings of Lives,' p6.

the Blob (other than the bottle store and the remote control) and he consequently does not matter much to anything or anyone else. A minimal functioning passivity is the hallmark of this man's life and it leaves him unattached and unconnected in any significant manner. He is quite literally a 'Blob', his life is primarily an empty void and although his heart may still be beating, it does so without much purpose. It is a feature of the Blob's life that it has little point to it and his interests are desperately narrow. His existence is almost entirely devoid of meaning.

While Sisyphus and the Blob are by no means manifestations of all the ways in which lives lack meaning, they do suggest that when we talk about the *meaningless* existence we often talk about the life that is largely pointless or unconnected or small. It is a life that is most centrally "without purpose", "without much worth loving", or "somehow restricted and constrained".

Since the appropriate concept of 'life's meaning' will explain what the major theories of the meaningful life all have in common, we must consider whether 'life's meaning' is most satisfactorily portrayed by 'life's purpose' (as is common to maintain), or 'what's worth loving', or 'transcending limits'. The appropriate concept of life's meaning will have to accommodate the major theories about life's meaning accordingly captured by the various *supernaturalist*, *subjectivist* and *objectivist* conceptions of the meaning-filled life.

III. Supernaturalism, Subjectivism and Objectivism

The bulk of modern analytical discussion regarding what, if anything, confers meaning on life is effectively either *naturalist* or *supernaturalist* in content. Supernaturalist theories about meaning defend the view that the locus of meaning is essentially situated in some non-natural or spiritual realm beyond the immediate influence of empirical science. Naturalism, in contrast, makes no such commitment to any supernatural realm but defends the view that meaning is a feature of some part of the physical world in which we find ourselves.

The most commonly advanced supernaturalist theories of meaning usually regard God or a particular composition of one's soul to be the essential feature of meaning. Some supernaturalist theorists about life's meaning hold that an individual's life is significant because of how she relates to God whereas other supernaturalist accounts maintain that meaning is dependent on how God relates to the individual. Still others hold that this relationship must be mutual for it to be meaning-conferring. The shared central idea is that the way in which the individual relates to a supreme being is what renders her life worthwhile. Alternatively, certain supernaturalists hold that it is the state of an individual's soul that secures a significant existence. That is, the individual's life is meaningful insofar as her soul, in a particular state, is destined for an eternity of paradise, or destined for immortality of some form.[9] Perhaps, on another account, life is meaningfully dependent on the soul reaching a certain level of "karma" or even through

[9] see Tolstoy, Leo. 'My Confession,' in Klemke, E.D. *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp11-20.

transcending one's soul. The essential feature of all supernaturalist accounts of meaning is the notion that meaning necessarily depends in some way on the supernatural.

In contrast, naturalists about meaning stand apart from their supernaturalist counterparts in that they advance no non-natural commitment. Meaning-conferring conditions are wholly accessible within the physical universe as we know it. Naturalistic theories of the meaningful life hold that meaning is accrued through various features of our natural existence. Loosely speaking, depending on whether meaning is merely a matter of personal perspective or whether meaning is somehow (at least in part) independent of the subject, the naturalistic framework is further divided into *subjectivist* or *objectivist* accounts of meaning respectively.[10]

Subjectivist theorists of meaning submit that the meaningfulness of an individual's life is wholly dependent on the variable mental states of the individual. Meaning, on this account, is relative to the individual (or group's) particular positive mental attitude. Objectivists, in contrast, deny that meaning is variable or dependent on the subjective states of the individual, they argue instead that meaning is conferred on an individual's life through intrinsically valuable activities and projects.

Richard Taylor is an interesting theorist against which to frame the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism. He has argued for both views at different points in his academic career. Probably the most well-read and widely discussed subjectivist account

[10] See Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' esp. pp792-801; and Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life,' esp. pp138-140.

of meaning is Taylor's discussion of the previously cited mythical figure Sisyphus.[11] Taylor wonders whether the lack of meaning so apparent on Sisyphus's life is affected if the gods implant within him an intense desire to repetitively roll these rocks up a hill. Taylor suggests that since Sisyphus's life then becomes a continual satisfaction of his desires, his life is as meaningful as can possibly be. The sense of satisfaction Sisyphus enjoys on fulfilment of his desires confers meaning on his existence.

In a subsequent paper, Taylor comes to reject this subjectivist conception and he defends an objectivist account of the meaningful life such that meaning is not wholly dependent on the particular mental state of the individual. Taylor suggests that *creativity* is the essential feature of the significant existence.[12] He argues that the meaninglessness of Sisyphus's existence stems from his lack of creative involvement in any projects of lasting worth. His repetitive and unstimulating drudgery takes on a different dimension if Sisyphus is involved in projects where he uses the rocks he rolls up the hill to build a temple of great originality and beauty. His account is objectivist because life becomes meaningful through involvement in a creative project of objective value.

Supernaturalism, subjectivism and objectivism thus comprise the three main conceptions of what makes a life meaningful. It remains to be shown that the various accounts of life's meaning which fall under these headings all address the same thing. That is, is there a single idea that unifies the assorted conceptions of the meaningful life? What, if

[11] Taylor, Richard. 'The Meaning of Life,' in Klemke, E.D. *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp167-175.
[12] Taylor, Richard. 'The Meaning of Life,' *Philosophy Now*, 24: (1999), pp13-14.

anything, is at the core of supernaturalist, subjectivist and objectivist accounts of life's meaning?

The philosopher Thaddeus Metz suggests that the mark of a revealing conceptual analysis of meaning is one that is neither too narrow nor too broad.[13] On the one hand, the concept of life's meaning must allow for the logical possibility of supernaturalism, subjectivism and objectivism, on the other hand, the concept of life's meaning must also distinguish between theories about a life that is meaningful and theories about a life that is moral or happy (for example).

If historically prominent theories of the meaningful life are *logically* excluded without cause from being theories about life's meaning, then the concept involved is patently too restrictive. In turn, if we cannot separate the happy life from the meaningful life the concept involved is too all-encompassing. The latter point is crucial because a life dedicated to solving and discovering new mathematical proofs is a *prima facie* good candidate for a meaning, but supposing the enterprise is both very physically and mentally demanding on the individual, it might not (at least not initially) be a good candidate for happiness. In sum, a satisfactory analysis of the concept of meaning must account for *all* theories of meaning and *only* theories of meaning.[14]

IV. Competing Concepts of Meaning

[13] Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life,' esp. pp138-140.
[14] Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life,' esp. p140.

I have alluded already to the fact that there seem to be three good candidates for explaining what we are asking when asking about life's meaning. Perhaps then when we ask about the life that is *meaningful*, we are asking how it is "purposeful". Or alternatively, we may be asking whether the various aspects of life are "worthy of our love", or lastly how it is that life "transcends limits". We have here three plausible and promising *concepts* of "life's meaning". Keep in mind then that to capture a central sense of what questions about the meaningful life are about, the proper candidate be neither too broad nor too narrow. I have already pre-empted the fact that I think the latter concept of meaning as 'transcending limits' holds the most promise and I will now attempt to demonstrate as much in the remainder of this chapter but first I must address the idea of meaning as 'purposiveness' and meaning as 'what's worth loving'.

i. Meaning as *Purposiveness*

It is common for concerns about life's meaning to be associated with concerns about life's purpose.[15] Often queries about the meaning of life are accompanied by an implicit desire for an answer to the question, "Why am I here?" or more specifically, "Am I here for any particular reason?" I mentioned already how largely purposeless the lives of the original Sisyphus and the Blob seem to be. Perhaps then, what we are referring to by "meaningful life" is what purposes we ought to pursue. To evaluate this proposal we need to fill it out in greater detail.

[15] For a detailed discussion, see Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life,' esp. pp140-145.

Supernaturalists about life's meaning usually interpret the notion of purposiveness in terms of God's purposes. A life is meaningful just so long as it reflects the reasons it is created for by God. The pursuit of meaning thus involves determining what God has created us for and then fulfilling this God-given purpose. It should be obvious that such an analysis of the concept of meaning immediately rules out naturalistic conceptions of the meaningful life. It also rules out those supernaturalist conceptions that appeal to the state of one's soul rather than the purposes of God. As it stands, it is patently too narrow to capture a central sense, if there is one, of what constitutes meaning.

Metz points out that a more inclusive analysis of the concept of meaning interprets purposiveness in terms of the purposes of rational agents.[16] A life is meaningful just so long as it involves pursuing what it is proper for human beings to strive for. What is up for debate then is just what the proper ends are people should endeavour to realise. As Metz indicates, supernaturalists might maintain that rational agents should pursue the ends assigned to them by God. Or human beings should seek to pursue the purpose of the soul, perhaps by seeking to achieve some sense of enlightenment. Subjectivists might suggest that humans should pursue what they deem to be proper upon reflection. Objectivists, in contrast, might maintain that we ought to pursue objectively valuable goals like truth, justice, or beauty. On the face of it, all three conceptions of the meaningful life are accounted for on a concept of meaning as pursuing (and realising) the appropriate kinds of human purposes.

[16] Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life,' pp140-145.

Kai Nielson articulates the purposive viewpoint when he equates the question of life's meaning with the question, "What ends – if any – are worthy of attainment?"[17] The trouble with a concept of meaning that necessarily involves a goal of some kind, or an aim worthy of attainment, is that this automatically excludes any non-aim theory from being an account about the meaning of life. However, there are accounts – seemingly about life's meaning – that do not necessarily involve promoting an aim.

Consider first what motivates a parent's assurance to her child that "everyone is a winner" even when, strictly speaking, on the hundred metre sprint this really is not the case. Or consider what lies behind the sugar packet wisdom, "Life is a journey, not a destination." A view which holds that meaning depends on a particular kind of involvement in life's activities, but where meaning is not necessarily dependent on the attainment of a particular goal, does not appear to be logically contradictory to theories about life's meaning. Consider a theory in which meaning is thought to accrue simply from being alive. This is not a goal we aspire towards, even if it is something we could sabotage if we wished.

Alternatively, perhaps meaning depends on an individual's *reactions* rather than what we might call their *proactive* conduct. For instance, consider a theory of meaning which holds the meaning-conferring aspects of a life are contingent on a person responding to something in a particular way. Perhaps meaning is held to accrue from responding with awe and wonder towards the natural world. Furthermore, it is not clear that many of our

[17] Nielson, Kai. 'Linguistic Philosophy and 'The Meaning of Life,'' as quoted in Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life,' p141.

relationships we commonly regard as good candidates for meaning involve any sort of aim whatsoever. The meaning just is the relationship, not some purposive arrangement. A defender of a non-aim concept of meaning would argue that meaning as purposiveness contains an unwarranted *proactive* and *result-related* bias. It would seem that this concept is still to narrow.

In addition, the concept of life's meaning as involving purposes human beings ought to pursue is also too broad.[18] It is unable to distinguish between theories about the meaning of life and, for instance, theories about right action. An account about pursuing what is good and proper for human individuals to strive for is not unique to theories of life's meaning. Concern about the purposes that human beings ought to pursue is also a concern of our moral duty considerations. The purpose analysis as sketched here is unable to secure that central sense of meaning that we are after.

ii. Meaning as *What's Worth Loving*

Of particular concern to the wider scope of this paper and the inquiry into whether love grounds the meaningful life is whether the question "What is the meaning of life?" is equivalent to the question, "What is worthy of our love?"

Charles Taylor suggests that there are certain goods and ends in this world that have a special "incomparable" status which distinguishes them from our more common place goods and ends. It is not that these 'higher' goods carry greater weighting or are more

[18] Metz, 'The Concept of the Meaning of Life,' pp144-145.

desirable on some common scale, but the 'higher' status of these goods uniquely commands our respect, admiration or awe. Such goods, in turn, connect with these latter modes of strong evaluation such that the "[…]ends or goods stand independent of our own desires, inclinations, or choices [and] represent standards by which these desires and choices are judged."[19] The concept of life's meaning involves connecting with a sense of higher worth by determining what is worthy of our love, allegiance and admiration.

We might think, then, that the concept of life's meaning concerns what is worthy of our love. The meaning of life is thus understood in terms of what conditions deserve our love. Our wider project seems more problematic however if equivalence between the meaning of life and what's worth loving turns out to be the case. If I were to hold that love is a necessary and/or sufficient condition of life's meaning and "life's meaning" is synonymous with "worth loving", then this is merely to contend that "love is worth loving". While some concern may surface as to whether this involves a tautology, a deeper concern persists as to whether there is something fundamentally wrong with effectively making this claim.

To hold that love is worth loving involves the notion that love merits or deserves our love. We do not however ordinarily think that the love that makes our life meaningful is apportioned on the basis of desert. Rather it is a response to some other object, activity or project we encounter. In making love integral to the concept of life's meaning, this fails to capture the regular sense we have in mind when we think that love makes life meaningful. To hold that the meaning of life corresponds on a conceptual level with what

[19] Taylor, Charles. *The Sources of the Self*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), p20.

is worth loving excludes the logical possibility that any theory not fitting this description is also a theory about life's meaning. If we can show that there are some accounts about the meaningful life that fall outside this concept, then the concept itself is too narrow.

The most obvious contender of such a theory of life's meaning is one in which love is not apportioned in terms of worth or desert. Perhaps the theory holds that one should love one's God because a particular sacred text instructs it. The meaning that results is not a process of loving what is worth loving. Or consider a theory of life's meaning which holds that one should respect one's culture, one's family, or the moral law and this brings meaning. Loving might be thought of as a superogatory attitude but the attitude that is responsible for meaning is the attitude of respect.

This concept of meaning may well be too broad as well. Think about a theory of practical reasoning that holds that we should act on what is worth caring about. That is, when we ask what reasons there are for performing a particular action, we make our decision on whether or not that action is a loving action. What is worth loving provides reasons for acting. Perhaps the current analysis of meaning, as what is worth loving, is unable distinguish theories about meaning from certain theories of practical reasoning. Insofar as a care-based construal of practical reason captures the *essence* of practical reason and insofar as love is particular variant of care, the present analysis of life's meaning is too broad in not excluding theories that are not about the meaningful existence.

At the very least, I take it that this analysis is certainly too narrow and we ought to continue by evaluating a further concept of life's meaning. To this extent, we turn now to consider a proposal inspired largely by Robert Nozick's discussion of meaning in terms of *transcending limits*.

iii. Meaning as *Transcending Limits*

According to Nozick, there is an interesting parallel between the general enquiries we make into the meaning of various things and the more specific enquiry into the meaning of life. For instance, when we ask about the meaning (or importance, or significance) of specific words, we find out how this word corresponds to something external to it. That is, how this word connects with something outside of itself. For instance, when we ask about the meaning of global warming for the future of this planet, we become informed about the consequences of global warming for other things such as the polar ice caps, the average summer temperatures, or the impending extinction of various species. Consequently, Nozick maintains that the question of life's meaning involves "the question of how it connects up to what is outside it."[20] Thus, the concept of life's meaning, as involving transcending limits, holds that meaning in life, by definition, is a matter of reaching beyond boundaries and engaging with something external and of greater intrinsic value than ourselves.

Once again, Metz points out that this concept of the meaningful life, as connecting with external value, is unable to account for theories about life's meaning that emphasise the

[20] Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, p601.

role of internal goods like self-respect, honesty and integrity, or those that emphasise the development of the soul. It would certainly be odd to suggest that since such theories do not involve us going beyond ourselves and connecting with external value, they are not therefore about life's meaning but about something else. Metz suggests we amend Nozick's account to allow for a meaningful connection to *both* internal and external goods. He suggests we amend the concept of the meaningful life to involve "connecting with intrinsic value beyond one's animal self"[21] (as distinct from the rational self).

The advantage of the current analysis is that it can distinguish a theory of meaning from a theory of right action that the purpose analysis was unable to achieve. It also seems to account for the vast majority of the theories we intuitively consider to be about the life that is significant. The supernaturalist conception of the meaningful life involves connecting with value beyond the animal self through a relationship with God or by relating to one's soul in the appropriate manner. The subjectivist connects with this value beyond the animal self by pursuing what she reflectively deems worth pursuing. And lastly, the objectivist connects with value beyond the animal self through creative activity (to use Taylor's example) or by connecting in some other way with objective goods like truth, justice and beauty.

Of course, the glaringly obvious exception is Taylor's subjectivist account of Sisyphus's life of desire-satisfaction. Sisyphus does not go beyond his animal self in satisfying his desires yet Taylor argues his life is as meaningful as he can hope for it to be. Sisyphus's life is thought to be meaningful even though he makes no appeal to his rational nature.

[21] Metz, 'The Concept of the Meaningful Life,' pp145-147.

The current concept of life's meaning, as connecting with value beyond the animal self, seems to be too narrow because, although it accommodates a great number of other subjectivist views, it fails to include Taylor's subjectivist account as a theory about the meaningful life.

We are thus faced with a significant challenge to our search for a concept of life's meaning. One solution would be to give up the goal of a single satisfactory concept altogether. Metz suggests the most plausible explanation for why it is seemingly so difficult to nail down a central sense of what philosophers have in mind when dealing with life's meaning is simply that no such sense exists. I think we can rescue the current concept of meaning as transcending limits by appealing to come important considerations about our personal autonomy.

V. Meaningful Autonomy

I noted that one way to explain the difficulty in securing a satisfactory concept of life's meaning is that there are *no* necessary *and* sufficient conditions for a theory to be about the meaning of life.[22] The implication is that there is *no* single sense that is shared by the philosophers involved in discussing the issue of the significant existence. According to Metz, what unites the various (and diverse) theories of life's meaning is that they all exhibit family resemblances. He writes:

[22] Metz, 'The Concept of the Meaningful Life,' pp150-151.

> […] a theory can be identified as one about life's meaning if it answers questions such as these: what should an agent strive for besides obtaining happiness and fulfilling obligations? Which aspects of human life are worthy of great esteem or admiration? In what respect should a rational being connect with value beyond his animal self? And, from Charles Taylor, which goods command our awe? How may an individual identify with something incomparably higher? What is worthy of our love and allegiance? [23]

Metz proposes that theories about life's meaning are united in all addressing at least one of these six questions. At the same time, no one of these questions can stand on its own as a satisfactory concept of the meaningful life. Individually, they are all either too narrow or too broad, and sometimes both. Although this explains the difficulty in making sense of what we mean when we ask what, if anything, is the meaning of life, I wish to suggest an alternative to this family resemblance approach that will allow us to employ a certain analysis of life's meaning in terms of transcending limits.

I noticed the problem with this concept of life's meaning, as connecting with value beyond the animal self, is that it excludes Taylor's much discussed subjectivist conception of the meaningful life. Neil Levy suggests we simply bite the bullet and write off Taylor's account as not only false, but completely to have missed the point.[24] This is an attractive solution to secure our analysis but it carries the uncomfortable implication that a great many of the theorists who take Taylor's account to be a legitimate theory

[23] Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' p803.
[24] Levy, Neil. 'Downshifting and Meaning of Life,' *Ratio (new series)* XVIII, 2, (June 2005), see footnote p180.

about the meaning of life are, every one of them, misled in this regard. It would therefore be unfair to simply write off this account without at least an attempt to explain why.

It seems to me that for a theory to be about the life that is in some way significant and worthwhile it must allow the individual some say over the conditions of meaningfulness that comprise his life. That is, it seems to me that there must be some minimal condition of autonomy and self-rule for a life to count as a candidate for meaningfulness.

Plain desire satisfaction, like we find in the account of Sisyphus not only lacks meaning, but lacks something that marks an individual's life as in some way his own. The meaninglessness of Sisyphus's existence is therefore not essentially his repetitive, endless and pointless routine, but rather that he has no say whatsoever in what he does. He is more like a puppet than a human being. In Taylor's original discussion of Sisyphus, he notices the similarity between Sisyphus's life and the life of one member of vast colony of glow-worms deep in the caves of New Zealand.[25] Both Sisyphus and the glow-worm lack an element of self-determination to reach beyond the mere animal self. It seems to me that when we ask about the meaning of life, we are really asking about the meaning of a life that involves (at least minimally) the non-animal self.

As such, I cannot avoid a brief comment on our nature as human beings as I am suggesting that the meaningful life will track, at least to some extent, what is appropriate to human nature. The human animal is (seemingly) uniquely endowed with a level of sophisticated intellectual capacity allowing for a greater opportunity for rational

[25] Taylor, Richard. 'The Meaning of Life,' in Klemke, E.D. *The Meaning of Life*, esp. pp170-172.

deliberation than other animals. As such, the kind of life we choose to live is up to us, as human beings, to a far greater degree than is the case for the glow-worm, or for that matter, the most intelligent dolphin or chimpanzee. Richard Kraut describes the difference well, "The good of a non-human animal is, as it were, built into its body, whereas for human beings the good is an object of rational choice and its achievement requires the training of desires and emotions so that they take the appropriate objects as determined by reason."[26]

Human beings are not limited to desires causing us to act. We have a natural capacity to exercise choice based on reasons, which in turn influences our standing desires and inclinations. The ability to reflect upon our desires provides the conditions under which we evaluate these desires and correspondingly make reasonable choices. Since plain desire satisfaction is not good in itself, at least not insofar as human beings are concerned, it is not able to provide the *prima facie* relevant conditions for satisfactory account of the meaningful life. Since Sisyphus is unable to reflect upon his desires nor exercise an ability to employ rational choice he is not a suitable candidate for meaning.

There are however a number of theories about the meaningful life that conceive of meaning as bestowed upon the individual or group rather than as in some way chosen.[27] Consider a kind of 'tribal' view of the significant existence where it is suggested that birthright or a particular bloodline determines which lives are significant. Meaning is conferred upon a particular set of people in virtue of their heritage and essentially by

[26] Kraut, Richard. 'Desire and the Human Good,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* Vol. 68, No.2 (Nov., 1994), p47.
[27] see Metz, 'The Concept of a Meaning Life,' esp. 141-142.

accident of their birth. Historically, views similar to this have endured in certain societies, especially those with strong religious undercurrents (think of the idea that life is meaningful because God prefers or favours a certain set of people). On the current analysis, not only are such theories substantively weak and not good accounts of life's meaning, but they are logically incompatible with the question of meaning. Theories by which meaning is construed of as wholly bestowed upon a life are ineligible to be about life's meaning.

If this is the upshot of what I am suggesting, then I am willing to accept this. I maintain that accounts which hold that meaningfulness is solely a result of one's birthright or bloodline, or solely a result of God loving one's soul, or even solely a result of being loved by another person; do not properly address the question of the meaning of life if they do not include a sense of recognition, honouring, or acknowledgement from the subject.

Taylor's own revised account of Sisyphus takes issue with the manner in which Sisyphus's desires are formed in the first place. Since Sisyphus does not formulate his goals himself, his life is not suitable for meaning. I take it that this criticism is similar to mine insofar as Taylor does not put subjectivism, per say, out of action. Rather, Taylor's objection is directed at the lack of autonomy on the original analysis of Sisyphus. As Metz points out, we can just as easily ensure that the agent freely form his desires without losing the central thrust of the subjectivist account.[28] By implication, these considerations and my preferred analysis of the concept of life's meaning as transcending limits and

[28] Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' p795.

connecting with value beyond the animal self, puts Taylor's subjectivist account out of play on questions about meaningful lives and provides us with a workable account for the rest of this paper.

VI. The Way Forward

So, if we are to understand the concept of life's meaning to be about ways in which we connect with value beyond our animal selves, one way in which we connect with objects is specifically to love them. Love (of the right sort of object) invariably expands our horizons and takes us beyond our most basic selves by seeking to engage with goods that count towards the meaningful life. It is not usually the case that we think our world grows smaller when we are in love, to the contrary, our world is apt to explode forth with meaning, and we tend to enjoy a very real sense that our world is growing larger. Similarly, when we love ourselves appropriately, we are able to go beyond the animal self, and this enables us to connect with those internal goods like, amongst others, self-respect, self-worth, integrity, confidence, or tolerance. In short, the sorts of goods that confer meaning onto life.

The long answer, then, to the question of what theories about the life's meaning are about, is that meaning is a matter of transcending one's animal self and connecting with value. Assuming that love is a suitable candidate to ground the meaningful life, we must turn now to explore the various distinctions between subjectivist and objectivist accounts of meaning in order to develop a more substantive account. With this in mind, the

discussion about the relationship between love and the very meaningful life is only just beginning.

CHAPTER II

Life's Meaning on the Naturalistic Framework

I suggested in the previous chapter that when we ask questions about the meaningful life, we ask questions about how we transcend our non-rational limits and connect with some value beyond the animal self. I suggested that pure desire satisfaction is not an answer to the question of whether life is meaningful since there is good reason to think that some kind of autonomous choice is inherent to the concept of meaning. Furthermore, I have suggested that love – at least initially – looks a very good candidate by which we might readily connect with the relevant value beyond our animal selves. The present chapter begins a more detailed analysis of this latter claim.

I noted that although we have reason to think Richard Taylor's subjectivist account of meaning is not addressing issues relevant to the meaningful life, this is not reason to write off subjectivist accounts of meaning in their totality. Within a purely naturalistic framework, the idea that love is a necessary and/or sufficient condition of the meaningful life can take either an objectivist or subjectivist interpretation. Where objectivism and subjectivism differ is over what is necessarily involved in the love suitable to confer meaning on our lives.

I begin this chapter by observing that subjectivism is particularly well suited to explain three *prima facie* judgements commonly brought to bear on lives containing meaning.

Firstly, subjectivism meets our widely held intuitions about the *plurality* of meaningful lives; secondly, subjectivism obviously correlates well with the emphasis we commonsensically tend to place on the *subjective* perspective; and thirdly, subjectivism explains the negating effect we pre-reflectively think *boredom* has upon meaning. I cite Harry Frankfurt as one of the more prominent subjectivist theorists to defend these three *prima facie* judgements. In what follows, while I affirm the proper place of (1) and (2), I question the supposed intuitive force of (3). I also note that Frankfurt's account as it stands is unable to avoid some clearly counterintuitive implications to his theory. By the end of this chapter I hope to have provided cause to conclude we are better advised to adopt an objectivist account of meaning instead.

I. Frankfurt and a Subjectivist Account of Life's Meaning

To contend that love makes life meaningful leaves open the question of *what* to love as well as whether it is simply the fact *that* we love, irrespective of the object of our love, that confers meaning on our lives. This latter notion, that loving something (anything) is a necessary and sufficient condition for a life to be full of meaning is a feature of Frankfurt's subjectivist account of meaning. In his recent book, *The Reasons of Love*, Frankfurt suggests that the meaningful life consists of a wholehearted pursuit of what one cares about. Frankfurt argues that when we care about something wholeheartedly, we are entirely satisfied with the fact that this is what we care about. What separates Frankfurt's subjectivism from the difficulties faced by Taylor's original subjectivist account is his recognition of human autonomy. He notes that the capacity for reflection is the mark of

human autonomy, "… we have the capacity to form desires regarding [our] own desires – that is, regarding both what [we] want to want, and what [we] want not to want."[29] In terms of human agency, an individual who is wholeheartedly satisfied with her motives for acting is as free as she could possibly wish to be. It is our capacity to form such higher-order desires about our desires that sets Frankfurt's account apart from Taylor's 'Sisyphus' interpretation. On Frankfurt's account, we transcend the animal self through *reflecting* on our lower-order desires. To be fully autonomous is not about having a choice of actions to perform, but is instead about having certain actions ruled out by what we care about. For Frankfurt, to be fully autonomous is to be fully wholehearted.

When we love something, it is impossible not to care about it, in Frankfurt's sense. Love is thus the most authoritative form of caring. The person who loves something, anything, is the person whose life is made significant as a result. His theory is subjectivist insofar as life's meaning depends entirely on an individual's particular mental states. What counts as worth loving and therefore meaningful is relative to the subject and could conceivably vary from person to person or culture to culture. With regard to what we ought to love, Frankfurt holds we should love what we find ourselves capable of loving. His central conception is that it is through loving (regardless of the object of our love) that we fill our world with meaning.

The most obvious advantage of subjectivist accounts of meaning, like Frankfurt's, is that they offer plausible explanations of three commonly held intuitive notions about the meaningful life. In short: that meaning is pluralistic; that the perspective of the individual

[29] Frankfurt, Harry. *The Reasons of Love*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), p18.

is crucially relevant; and that boredom is a feature of meaninglessness.[30] As a result, subjectivism is (at least) a promising theory of life's meaning.

i. *Pluralism.*

The general consensus within contemporary philosophical circles is that more than one kind of life really matters; the notion of a *single* ideal life – most famously held by some of the ancient Greek philosophers – is less frequently defended these days.[31] Contrary, I think, to the musings of Plato and Aristotle, I take it that the life of the *philosopher* – as meaningful as it surely is – is not the *only* kind of life that is significant to a significant degree. Instead, we tend to think that doctors, artists, poets and scientists (for example) also live the types of lives that are highly meaningful in their own right too (and not only insofar as they are reflections of a life devoted to philosophy). Richard Kraut describes our current situation as follows: "A consensus has arisen in our time that there is no single ultimate end that provides the measure by which the worth of all other goods must be assessed."[32] We are, in a sense, presently predisposed to be pluralistic about meaningful lives.

I tend to think that we are rightly suspicious of any theory that fails to be pluralistic (at least to some extent). We are usually moved to condemn those who dissent from this assumption as unreasonably narrow-minded. It does seem to me that to suggest that only

[30] See Metz, 'Recent Works on the Meaning of Life.' esp. p794.
[31] There are of course exceptions to the rule, see Adams, E.M. 'In Defence of a Common Ideal for a Human Life,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXIV, (2000), pp35-45.
[32] Kraut, Richard. 'Desire and the Human Good.' It is evident that the trouble with the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Hedonists is much the same as the trouble with monists about life's meaning in that they offer unduly narrow accounts of meaningful lives.

one kind of meaningful life exists involves a bold kind of arrogance, potentially fanatical even. Such a restrictive worldview does not accurately reflect what we commonly intuit. As human beings we enjoy a wide and diverse array of different interests and concerns. Not only do we care deeply about different things but we also cherish this fact. The complexity and diversity of individuals, cultures and causes add flavour to the overall human experience. Subjectivists about life's meaning, like Frankfurt, suppose that what makes a life meaningful is the ability and degree to which we are able to invest of ourselves in our particular interests and concerns. Or, more specifically, life is meaningful when we love what we love.

Frankfurt contends, "Meaning in life is created by loving. Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved."[33] Frankfurt is thus clearly pluralistic about meaningful lives. The *philosopher's* life, for instance, is meaningful because of her love of knowledge. Or more accurately, the philosopher's life is meaningful because she loves something; it is the loving itself that grounds meaning. Similarly, the *philanthropist*, the *phillumenist*[34], and the *philatelist*[35] are likewise examples of meaningful lives. The people, objects or activities that we love are made meaningful to us by loving them, but it is the loving activity itself which secures meaning. By so doing, we are inventing meaning in our lives and since we are able to love an enormous variety of objects and

[33] Frankfurt, Harry. 'Reply to Susan Wolf,' in *Contours of Agency*, ed. Buss, Sarah & Overton, Lee, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), p250.
[34] A student or collector of match box labels.
[35] A stamp-collector.

activities, the kinds of superlatively meaningful lives can assume correspondingly many forms.

ii. *The subjective perspective.*

It is not unusual for a person to express a deep longing for more meaning in her life. My hunch is most of us, at one time or another find ourselves in just such a position. It seems to me that it is (at least partially) a desire for meaning that motivates many life-shaping decisions. It is frequently considerations about meaning that prompt individuals to shift to a new line of work, or undergo religious conversions, or make a decision adopt children, or become involved in political or social activism, or any number of activities the individual deems to be worthwhile.

Susan Wolf (although not herself purely subjectivist) notes that the desire for meaning usually indicates a measure of unhappiness within the agent.[36] Her intention is not to match up some necessary connection between meaning and happiness, but is to contend that people searching for meaning often have a desire for something more, or a nagging feeling that something is missing. What this surely indicates is that the search for meaning and our thoughts about meaningful lives involve some subjective criteria. The person searching for meaning is looking for something meaningful *to* her personally. Our thoughts about a life's meaning are influenced by considerations about the mental state of the individual involved. By taking account of a person's emotional investment which seems to accompany meaningful experiences and activities, we stress the importance of

[36] Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives,' esp. pp11-15.

the perspective of the individual concerned. It seems therefore that for an activity, relationship, or object to be meaningful depends to some extent on the individual recognising or being aware of it as meaningful. Subjectivist theories of meaning, none more so than Frankfurt's, are ideally suited to meet this intuition.

iii. Boredom.

One of the things to strike us about Sisyphus is that his life seems incredibly boring. "Boredom", writes Frankfurt, "is a serious problem."[37] And it is a serious problem because it involves a sense of gradual psychic strangulation. Our resistance to boredom is analogous to a resistance to a form of psychological suicide. When we are bored for any prolonged period of time, we start to lose a lively perspective of the world in which in inhabit. A prolonged lack of stimulation dovetails into our surroundings which suffer a loss of clarity and sharpness as a result. In general, our world shrinks, our experiences tend to blur and our mental life undergoes an effective meltdown. A life of boredom is devoid of its vitality.

Frankfurt notes, "The essence of boredom is that we have no interest in what is going on. We do not care about any of it; none of it is important to us."[38] Crucially, boredom diminishes the desire to remain actively engaged in the world. It would seem, certainly initially, that the person in love experiences the exact opposite. The person in love – whether it be with themselves, their work, their partner, their pets, their God, their family,

[37] Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p53.
[38] Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p54.

their neighbour, or any other object – will almost always insist, often enthusiastically, that the world is anything but boring. On the contrary, they tend to consider their life to be one full of meaning, at least in relation to their beloved. To the extent in which boredom is held to undercut meaning in life, love, in contrast, is held to underpin meaning.

I wish to question the supposed intuitive force of boredom. I suggest in contrast to the above that a life lacking in boredom is no guarantee of a life that is meaningful and, perhaps more importantly, the presence of boredom is no guarantee of a life lacking in meaning. That the former is the case is evident if I think again about the Blob. The Blob's life need not be utterly boring for us to maintain that it is relatively meaningless. While the Blob may not be living the most exhilarating life, his TV watching and "hazy passivity" is not necessarily boring. If he does feel that he is getting bored, he simply changes the channel. The beauty of the remote control is that he need not even leave his chair to do it.

We can quite easily imagine that the Blob watches the Series Channel and enjoys repeated episodes of Seinfeld and The Simpsons. Then, he switches to the Travel Channel to enjoy film footage of various different countries and cultures. After which he turns to MTV for some music, to FTV for some good-looking men and women and even Reality TV for I'm not sure what really. His persistent TV watching need not be disagreeable to himself. The crux is that there is no guarantee that because he is not bored, his life is therefore meaningful. On the contrary, the fact that the Blob's life

revolves around his TV means that his life does lack meaning even if we concede that his psychological state is one of mild enjoyment and contentment, and not necessarily boredom.

Alternatively, just because a person experiences incredible boredom does not mean that what she is doing is not meaningful as a result. Consider the real life situation in Palermo where currently the Sicilian government is trying to prevent its inhabitants from getting involved with the Mafia by offering them menial jobs. The theory behind their thinking is that chronic unemployment makes a life in the Mafia an attractive option. Solving the unemployment problem will help solve the Mafia problem. Palermo has thus recently employed 50 people to keep track of the city's manholes. Their job includes counting the manholes, taking photographs of them, and asking residents whether they feel the city is dirty or clean. Furthermore, the work is supervised by an additional 20 'environmental inspectors'. Clearly this is boring work, but if it succeeds in preventing people joining the Mafia then it is not completely meaningless.[39]

One possible reply to this example is to pick up on the fact that the meaning obtained is not intrinsic to the activity of the work. The job is boring, menial and pointless, and it is therefore meaningless. If it is argued that the gain in extrinsic value does not offset the lack of intrinsic value in such activities, then the fact that this is boring is what makes it deficient in meaning. These considerations touch on an interesting debate of how the

[39] Published by IOL on http://www.iol.co.za, 2006-09-19. Perhaps this is a weak example in more ways than one. As things turn out, the money used to pay these 'environmental inspectors' is European Union (EU) funded but all 70 individuals employed have close family relationships to people in the Palmero council. Enough said.

intrinsic-extrinsic distinction affects the value of life's meaning.[40] We can put this aside there though because I can think of at least three additional examples of lives that contain boredom yet are not lacking in meaning.

Take the example of Ruth First, detained for her links to the banned African National Congress (ANC) during Apartheid South Africa. She was arrested under the Ninety-day Detention Law, which allowed for detention without trial or charge for (in theory) a maximum of ninety days. Of course, in typical apartheid-era efficiency, there was no prohibition against releasing a prisoner after the elapsed ninety days (usually without facing a charge), only to be rearrested under the same Ninety-day Detention Law the moment she steps outside the police station. Essentially, the Ninety-day Detention Law amounted to indefinite detention without trial. As a rule, political prisoners, like Ruth First, were usually incarcerated in solitary confinement. In her memoirs, First describes the effects of the "deadly boredom"[41] that was such a feature of her imprisonment and indeed of her life at the time:

> I was appalled at the absence of my inventive and imaginative powers. But I determined to survive by adjusting to a state of enforced hibernation. This was life at quarter-pace. It was a matter of waiting for time to go by, a matter of enduring, an anaesthetising of self to diminish problems and defeat the dragging passage of days.

[40] For a summary of the discussion see Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' pp807-809.
[41] First, Ruth. *117 Days. An Account of confinement and interrogation under South African 90-Day Detention Law*, (Johannesburg: Penguin Books Ltd, 2006), p69.

> Life in suspension was the perfect trap for a meandering mind like mine. Daydreams replaced activity and purposeful thinking.[42]

Life in solitary confinement is anything but stimulating, fulfilling or rewarding; amongst other things, it is definitely boring. Yet, it would be odd to declare that Ruth First's life is meaningless because of the overwhelming boredom that she experiences.[43]

We might worry that in First's case it is the solitary confinement that is responsible for the lack of meaning available to her, her resultant boredom being more of a symptom of the police crackdown. While we would correctly describe First's life as meaningful overall, the meaning her life contains is not the result of her time in prison. That is, if she had not been arrested, her life would have been just as meaningful, all else being equal, because the meaning-conferring activity is not the time spent in jail but the time spent on the anti-apartheid struggle. So perhaps First's case is less than ideal.

Consider instead years and years of painstaking research by an academic into the effects of globalisation on the environment, or the mathematician agonising for decades over a particular proof, or a medical researcher tirelessly working on discovering a cure for a particular type of cancer.[44] Consider too the person waiting impatiently for their coming messiah. We can imagine that each involves copious amounts of dreadful tedium. Each

[42] First, Ruth. *117 Days*, p66.
[43] I use 'overwhelming' deliberately for the boredom of her life in solitary eventually led her to attempt suicide. Ruth First overdosed on medication prescribed for her by her personal doctor which a warder had inadvertently left in her cell. But for the forward thinking of her doctor, who ensured that an overdose would not be sufficiently lethal to kill her, the boredom would have ended her life. But even so, she remained defiant in that moment and the exact opposite of indifferent to the cause of social justice.
[44] This last example is from Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' p797.

day is the same as the next, perhaps with some minuscule change but with no immediate end in sight, no suggestion of a breakthrough, no enjoyment, and no satisfaction. We might plausibly think that each individual cited is bored stiff but it is not clear that they lack meaning as a result. The fact is that although they are bored, they are certainly not *indifferent*. They remain as aware of the value of what they are involved in and their lack of indifference is what shields them against a lack of meaning. If they were indifferent, then they would lack meaning, but boredom does not entail indifference.

It might plausibly be replied that although these individuals are bored with the regular day-to-day activities of their lives, they are not bored with the overall aim or goal of their activities. That is, they are not bored with the potential end result of their involvement. So far as their lives are meaningful, their aims are not considered by them as boring. Respectively, it is the potential impact on government policy, the solving of the proof, the break-through cancer cure, or the impending day of judgement which stimulates them, motivates them, and keeps them interested, even if their days are quite generally tedious, they are not bored with the greater goal. But this need not necessarily be the case. We can surely imagine these people to have started out very enthusiastic about the relevant process but, many years down the line, they find even the goal itself boring and tiresome. They are still well aware of the end value of her project but are thoroughly bored by it. That is, she is bored even though she still cares and is thus not indifferent.

If what I've mentioned remains less than convincing, there is a final example I find convincing. Consider the married couple who are bored with one another. This is not an

unusual state of affairs. The marriage is not then meaningless because of the presence of boredom. On the contrary, often the most meaningful marriages are those that somehow seem to weather or manage the boring times. Boredom does not mean an individual does not care. It seems to me that a person can be very bored within a marriage, but so long as this person is not indifferent to the marriage, it is a good candidate for meaning. Perhaps then, it is indifference, not simply the presence of boredom that is a feature of the meaningless life. For our present purpose, if indifference is the least amount of care we can have for something (as in, "I couldn't care less") and love is the most amount of care, then indifference is the exact opposite of love and it is indifference that is a mark of meaninglessness.

I would suggest, then, that boredom does not carry the intuitive force hoped for by Frankfurt. The consequence of which will be spelled out below. In the meantime we can continue to examine Frankfurt's account in more detail.

II. Some Counterintuitive Implications for Frankfurt

Frankfurt provides a highly pluralistic account of meaning that accords well with the intuitive sense that there is more than one possible kind of life that really matters. I suspect however, that Frankfurt's conception of the meaningful life errs in that it is overly pluralistic. A subjectivist account of meaning like Frankfurt's is too broad to be satisfactory. The trouble with his account is that there are counterintuitive descriptions of

lives not usually thought of as meaningful, which Frankfurt is unable to depict as anything else.

Frankfurt and Wolf offer diverging views on the theme of love and the meaningful life.[45] In particular, although both philosophers agree that love can play a significant role in a meaningful existence, they disagree on whether a question of worth is an appropriate consideration on matters relating to what we love. Whereas Wolf insists that we live in a "world of goods" and it is only proper that we consider the worthiness of what we love in relation to meaning, Frankfurt remains highly sceptical that we can make any sense of a so-called "world of goods" or objective value. Frankfurt specifically contends that, "An enthusiastically meaningful life need not be connected to anything that is objectively valuable, nor need it include any thought that the things to which it is devoted are good."[46]

Frankfurt holds that there *is* an essential connection between what we love and what we value, but it is not the connection commonly endorsed by objectivists like Wolf. Frankfurt reflects on the love he has for his children and the meaning in his life that is a result.[47] It is obvious to Frankfurt that his children are of value to him because he loves them; he does not think that he loves them because of an awareness of some inherent value. Wolf, on the other hand, maintains that what we love must be in some way objectively worth loving for it to count as meaningful. Of course, Frankfurt naturally

[45] Wolf, Susan. 'The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity,' pp227-244; Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf,' pp245-252.
[46] Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf,' p250.
[47] Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, esp. pp38-39.

considers his children to be of infinite worth because he loves them but whether or not they are "worthy of love" is on his account a hopelessly misdirected inquiry.[48]

Frankfurt recognises that love can sometimes be a response to the perceived value of the beloved, but, in terms of meaning, he suggests that the necessary connection is that we value what we love, not the other way round. I suspect however that there is something suspect about the idea that if something lacks some feature to make it worthy of love, then loving it will make up for this lack and, in so doing, confer significance onto life.

The counterintuitive implications of Frankfurt's account become clear when we refer again to our intuitive judgements about the meaningless life of Sisyphus. Imagine that, instead of implanting within Sisyphus the *desire* to repetitively roll a stone up the hill, the gods implant within him an intense *love* for this objective. As a result, Sisyphus lovingly devotes himself to rolling rocks up the hill for the rest of eternity. The previous problems of autonomy encountered by Taylor's original account are avoided by allowing Sisyphus's love for rolling to stones to be *wholehearted*. According to Frankfurt, Sisyphus is as truly autonomous as he could hope to be. Does this alter our intuitions? Does Sisyphus's life become significant just because he is now consumed with a wholehearted love for his task? I suggest it does not.

I tend to think that there is a need for an objective theory of value to support the notion (for example) that no matter how much, or wholeheartedly, we love McDonald's chocolate milkshakes, an individual human being is always of greater value with the

[48] Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p39.

result that a life devoted to human beings is likely to be more meaningful than a life devoted to chocolate milkshakes. On Frankfurt's subjectivist account of meaning, a person's life could conceivably be considered meaningful because she loves caramel Twinkies or good red wine – hardly what is needed to ground the meaningful existence. Indeed, an unhealthy valuation of the latter is likely to realise the exact opposite conditions. Being stuck in the gutter but deeply in love with a bottle of red wine still leaves one lying in a gutter. It seems to me that Frankfurt's account of meaning is too accepting of what we love.

In particular, it is the extreme cases where the object of our love is a bottle of red wine, a chocolate milkshake, or a caramel Twinkie that really trouble Frankfurt's notion that it is simply the fact *that* we love, irrespective of *what* we love, that confers meaning on our lives. Frankfurt himself discusses the case of a person who lives devoted to avoiding cracks in the pavement. He is not only living an extremely innocuous existence, but is also living an existence deficient of meaning – or so I will argue. Frankfurt's response to the *prima facie* case against the meaningfulness of such a state of affairs is to admit the following:

> It is indeed a pity if someone wastes his life on inconsequential matters. But if there were someone so limited that he could really do nothing better with his life than devote it to avoiding cracks in the sidewalk, then it would be better for him to care about that than care about nothing.[49]

[49] Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf,' p250.

Presumably then, from comments made by Frankfurt elsewhere[50], this person's life goes better because his life is in some way enhanced by his loving devotion to crack-avoidance. His life is "enthusiastically meaningful" because he loves something and he loves this something wholeheartedly. I take it Frankfurt contends that by caring so deeply about what the crack-avoider cares about, he prevents himself from being otherwise, "idle and bored"[51] and he enjoys experiences that are, to him, rewarding, stimulating and fulfilling, or at least *more* rewarding, stimulating and fulfilling than if nothing concerned him at all.[52] I think Frankfurt is probably correct to hold that this individual's life is more interesting to him due to his devotion to avoiding the sidewalk cracks, but I submit that this is not enough to make his life meaningful.

Recall the earlier suggestion that a *boring* life is not necessarily devoid of meaning, but rather that *indifference* is the mark of meaninglessness. If this is correct, I must say a little more about this indifference. It is quite apparent that the person devoted to avoiding cracks in the pavement is not indifferent to his task. We can imagine, with Frankfurt, that he finds stimulation and fulfilment from his project of crack-avoidance. We could even imagine that he devotes himself so intensely to this aspect of his life that he invents a special silicon-based gel to fill in all the cracks, in all the sidewalks, in all the cities and countries of the world. Perhaps he even hires a crew to begin filling in the cracks in pavements citywide with a vision to eventually go global –all with the view to avoiding

[50] Just prior to his discussion of the crack-avoider, Frankfurt considers the meaningfulness of the life of Hitler. He writes, "The fact that a person loves something, considered simply in itself, makes his life better for him." Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf,' p246. Hitler's life, for Frankfurt, is meaningful for fundamentally the same reasons that the crack-avoiders life is meaningful. Both individuals love what is most fulfilling, rewarding and satisfying. Hitler is a difficult case, I will return to below.
[51] Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf,' p246.
[52] see Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf,' esp. pp246-248.

the cracks in the sidewalk. Whatever else, it cannot be said that he is indifferent to crack-avoidance and he may even come to boast considerable success in his activities, even on quite a grand scale (he may even become famous and world renowned as a result).

What the crack-avoider *is* indifferent to, however, is to something worth loving and caring about. This man's life lacks meaning because he is unconnected and unattached to anything worthwhile. It is beside the point, insofar as meaning is concerned, whether he is bored or the exact opposite. In this respect, he is no better off than the individual who is indifferent to *everything*. In fact, we may even wonder whether the effort, expense and commitment involved in his crack avoiding activities are not a complete waste of time and resources. We may justifiably wonder whether he would not be better off if he had done nothing at all – there would at least be less waste. Either way, his life is no more meaningful than the person who loves *nothing*. I think there is reason to believe that it is not boredom that is the mark of a meaningless life, it is instead indifference to anything objectively valuable.

III. Towards an Objective Account of Life's Meaning

Providing the space for considerations about the inherent worth of what we love has a number of advantages the subjectivist about life's meaning is unable to match (especially if the presence or absence of boredom is not as indicative of meaning as initially thought). Theories about life's meaning which discount the appropriateness of questions about value make it difficult to confidently ground claims like Frankfurt's that "It is

indeed a pity if someone wastes his life on inconsequential matters." Without appealing to objective value it is especially difficult to see why it is less of a pity for someone to devote herself to mastering the game of chess (for instance), rather than pursuing activities associated with avoiding cracks in sidewalks. Contrary to Frankfurt, if we hold that what we love should be in some way worth loving, we are far more readily able to explain why the life of the crack-avoider is justifiably pitiful.[53]

Think of it this way, there is simply no value in avoiding cracks in sidewalks; a person who devotes his life to such a project devotes his life to a project not *worthy* of devotion. There is no readily available answer to the question, 'What is the value of avoiding cracks in the sidewalk?' In contrast, there is always something to say in response to the question, 'What is the value of learning the game of chess?' Conceivably, amongst other things: chess involves tactical *nous* and the ability to think laterally; it encourages a sophisticated understanding of and a systematic approach to problem solving; it reveals a certain aesthetic beauty to the logical and mathematical structure of the world in which we operate; and so forth. A life devoted to the mastery of chess involves a devotion to an activity that is in some way worthy of devotion. Chess, and various other forms of sport, is not important enough to make life very meaningful, although the activity of chess playing can confer some meaning. Frankfurt's subjectivism about life's meaning cannot allow for these types of value considerations. It is difficult to see how Frankfurt is able to support the common sense understanding that chess is better suited to a life of meaning than avoiding cracks in the pavement. In contrast, the common sense view is readily supported by appealing to an objective theory of value.

[53] See Wolf, 'The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity,' p243

It is a fact of life that we sometimes come to change out minds about what confers meaning on our lives. Wolf describes a kind of *epiphany* that sometimes accompanies the realisation that we are mistaken about something we once considered deeply meaningful.[54] Such a moment, the moment of epiphany, is not easily explained on Frankfurt's account though I suspect many of us are familiar with the notion. Sometimes, moments like these are life-changing and couple with a burning desire to live *more* 'meaningfully'. Although our individual experiences may be markedly different, there is a degree of familiarity to the wealthy executive who suddenly experiences a crisis in meaning when she realises that her relentless pursuit of wealth has left her impoverished in other areas of her life.

To slightly belabour the point, let us assume that the wealthy executive has not invested time or energy into personal relationships and she suddenly recognises that she is terribly alone and that all she has achieved is really of relatively little consequence. Such a sense of loss and waste is almost tangible and she longs to connect with something valuable to make amends. The deep desire for meaningfulness that our wealthy executive experiences seems to demand a change in the object of her devotion, not simply a recapturing of a *sense* of meaningfulness. As Wolf holds, such moments "would be nearly unintelligible if a lack of meaning were to be understood as a lack of a certain kind of subjective impression."[55] It would be unintelligible because purely subjective criteria

[54] Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives,' p11.
[55] Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives,' p11.

compromises the difference we intuit between a life that merely *feels* meaningful and a life that really *is* meaningful.

Perhaps for similar reasons, Frankfurt seems to me to be unable to explain the full story of 'downshifting'. 'Downshifters' are individuals looking for more meaningful lives largely through a reconfiguration of their life priorities.[56] In some case, downshifters choose to spend less time at work or change careers entirely in order to invest more deliberately in other aspects of their lives, like: family, friends, education, personal health or general wellbeing. It seems to me that these individuals will have more to say about their new lives and the perceived increase in meaning that results than simply, "this is what I wholeheartedly love." It is highly likely that downshifters will be able to explain why the objects they choose are valuable independently of their love for them, and attribute the increase in meaning accordingly. They may even try to convince their ex-colleagues, through rational argument, to more meaningful loving. The idea of downshifting seems to presuppose a theory of objective value.

IV. Subjective Attraction to Objective Value

Securing a theory of objective value is notoriously difficult. Frankfurt sums up the mood of many a philosopher who shares (if not the specifics of his theory of meaning) the underlying scepticism about objective value:

[56] See Levy. 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life,' Levy acknowledges that downshifters often achieve more meaning, although he thinks downshifters are necessarily restricted from achieving the most amount of meaning. We should shift up, not down, according to Levy.

> Given that our capacity for caring about things enables us to be creators of value, the possibility of meaningful life does not depend upon there being anything that is valuable independently of ourselves. *To believe otherwise leads easily to despair, as efforts to make sense of "objective value" tend to turn out badly.* Locating the source of meaning in the activity of loving renders opportunities for meaningful life much more readily accessible.[57]

I suspect there is less reason for despair than Frankfurt supposes. It is significant that Frankfurt's own theory of meaning loses its plausibility when confronted with extreme cases like that of the person devoted to avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk. So long as Frankfurt refers to meaningful lives on account of: a love for his "children"[58]; or devotion to activities such as the pursuit of "justice"[59]; or, the "love of oneself"[60], his theory of meaning appears eminently plausible. As objects of love, however, these are already valuable independently of whether or not anyone comes to love them. Frankfurt's account of meaning suffers when we consider objects that lack value independently of our attitudes towards them.

Frankfurt is perfectly correct to hold that the potential for a deeply meaningful life is affected by loving something but he underestimates the relevance and appropriateness of considerations pertaining to the worthiness of the things we love. While I have suggested that there is reason to doubt the intuitive force of the presence or absence of boredom on

[57] Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf,' p250 [my emphasis].
[58] Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, pp38-40.
[59] Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, p40, 42.
[60] Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, pp67-68.

the meaningfulness (or lack thereof) of a life, there is however no reason to think the importance I attached to the subject's personal perspective is any less valid.

Perhaps part of what drives Frankfurt's reluctance to afford a proper place to the importance of objects of inherent value is the reality that, at least to some extent, we do not choose what we love. Of course, we can habituate ourselves to love something, we can grow to love something, and we can even learn to love something, but the fact remains that, often, what we are initially attracted to is beyond our immediate ability to control. This is not to say that what we love is therefore unsuitable for evaluation. It is to suggest though that this will impact in some way on our thoughts of a meaningful existence. In Wolf's terms, it is when this "affinity" for an individual, object or activity meets with worth that meaning results. She sums it up well in the following:

> Meaningfulness in life, in other words, arises out of people's responding to things that are and that they see to be *worth* responding to. One's life is meaningful in proportion to the degree to which one can see oneself is bound up with things, people, activities or projects of worth in a deep and positive way. […] *meaning arises in a person's life when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness*.

The view I wish to develop in the remainder of this report is that for love to be the love that grounds meaning, it must be the love connected to an object of appropriate inherent value. For love to be the type to confer meaning on our lives, there are at least two conditions: firstly, that we love something and secondly, that the something we love is in

some way worth loving. It is therefore most pressing that we explore what is involved in an appropriate kind of objective value.

CHAPTER III

A Theory of Objective Value

So far, our discussion about a meaningful existence suggests that it is not only a condition of meaning that we love something, but the something we love ought to be in some way *worth* loving as well. Most pertinent, then, is what objective value or values beyond the animal self must we love in order for love to make our lives meaningful? Is there something that all the objects we commonly take to confer meaning on our lives have in common, which makes them worth loving?

In this chapter I will consider whether there is a *unitary* value that makes the worthy objects of our love *worth* loving in order to confer meaning. I will consider briefly whether *dignity* is a suitable candidate to ground a theory of value. I go on to suggest however that dignity is unable to properly explain why certain objects are worth loving for the sake of meaning despite the fact that these objects are pre-reflectively good candidates for meaning. I consider instead whether *creativity* might better succeed as a unitary value but I arrive at similar results. There seem to me to be good *prima facie* reasons to favour an understanding of value that is *pluralistic* at base rather than seeking a single fundamental value. I suspect we can mark a distinction between higher-level values and lower-level values loosely in terms of their importance. Although relatively vague, I tentatively suggest that what is common to each worthy object is that it tracks a variety of different human flourishings.

Having sketched the main thrust of this chapter, I begin instead on a slightly different track with a view related to the idea that we should love what we discover to be most worth loving for meaning's sake. Certain supernaturalist theorists defend the view that meaning is dependent on loving *God*. Since God is clearly objectively valuable (and surely the highest value) we ought to love God if we want out lives to be meaningful. I will argue in Section I that it is possible to live deeply meaningful lives *without* loving the supernatural. Although loving God might be a good way to secure a largely meaningful existence, it is not the *only* way to secure a largely meaningful existence. I proceed more specifically in Sections II and III to discuss the issues cited in the previous paragraph of what makes something objectively worth loving. Finally, in Section IV, I return to the matter of God and meaning, and query whether the *most* meaningful life is dependant on us loving God. I intend to argue that even if we agree that God most deserves our love, superlative meaning is not dependent on apportioning love in terms of desert.

I. For the Love of God

It is common among those who defend the view that a particular relationship with God is a necessary and sufficient condition for meaning to hold that this relationship must, most fundamentally, be one of *love*. Considered theological reflection leads many God-centred theorists about life's meaning to suggest that since God is a God of love, it follows that

the meaning conferring relationship must be a loving relationship.[61] Many sincere and thoughtful individuals will testify that life acquires meaning when we love God. And many emphasise the Judeo-Christian significance of the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." (Deut 6:4-9). Life is meaningful insofar as the individual chooses to love God. On this account, the individual's love for God is the meaning-bearer of the relationship.

Any account suggesting we *must* love God to secure a meaningful existence, does not match up with some commonly held *prima facie* judgements about some very meaningful lives. It seems abundantly clear to me that the lives of Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, Joan of Arc, Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King are all supremely meaningful. Those who disagree are guilty of some fault: either in their reasoning or more broadly in their overall outlook on life (or at least so it would seem plausible to argue).[62] It is little secret that an intimate relationship with God is a feature of each of these lives. Which is probably why it seems initially odd to submit, as I do, they would still be hugely meaningful even if no such relationship with God existed. Consider a life similar to Mother Theresa's but involving no relationship with God whatsoever. It seems to me that such a life retains its high degree of meaning, even if it fails to retain an intimate relationship with God. Any individual so lovingly devoted to the poor, so ceaselessly

[61] Pope Benedict XVI declared that the ultimate reason for loving God is that "God is love" (Deus Caritas Est). He adds that since humankind is made in God's image, we should love humankind too, but the fundamental relationship, and I assume, the one that would count as the prmary source of meaning, is the love of God.

[62] Mahatma Ghandi is perhaps more controversial than widely assumed, Martha Nussbaum for instance refers to him as a "moral monster". I will return to Ghandi and the relationship between meaning and morality later in this report.

invested in easing the suffering of the sick, the leper, and the social outcast – basically in all other aspects identical to Mother Theresa with the exception of her religious convictions – still seems to me to exemplify a decidedly significant existence. This suggests that it is not the relationship with a supernatural being that counts as the essential determining factor of meaningfulness on our lives. I submit that a relationship with the supernatural, while it may be a sufficient condition, is not a necessary condition of the meaningful existence via love.

Perhaps it is disingenuous to argue as I have done. It certainly appears plausible to suggest that Mother Theresa would not (and perhaps could not) have lived as she did if not for her relationship with God. The marks of meaning so evident on her life would not be there if she did not spend an allotted time in prayer and communion with God, a direct result of her loving devotion to God. Having said this, the motivational source of her actions do not seem relevant to the meaning they confer. Mother Theresa's love of God may have caused her good deeds, but she could just as easily have been motivated to do what she did in honour of a deceased relative or a natural desire help people. God may be the means by which Mother Theresa is moved to act, but it is her actions that constitute the meaning on her life.

I can make myself clearer by considering the lives of less explicitly religious individuals. Let us think instead about Julius Caesar, Albert Einstein, Ruth First, Nelson Mandela, Simone de Beauvoir, Ché Guevara, Leo Tolstoy, Salvador Dali, Ludwig von Beethoven, Nadine Gordimer, or Oscar Wilde. We are just as likely to agree that these are deeply

significant lives, yet we are unlikely to argue that their meaningfulness depends on any loving relationship with God or, for that matter, any relationship with the supernatural realm at all.[63] Meaningful loving and therefore meaningful living, I conclude, need not necessarily feature any explicit relationship with God (loving or otherwise).

To be sure, I am not claiming that loving God will not (or could not) result in a meaningful life. I am suggesting, instead, that if love is indeed tied in some way to the meaningful existence, the lives of the individuals cited above suggest it is not *necessarily* a loving relationship with the *supernatural* that confers meaning on our lives. In other words, the inability of God-centred theories to capture the meaningfulness of many paradigmatic examples of deeply significant lives indicates that a loving relationship with God is not the *only* way to live a life that is full of meaning. It could be one way, but it is not the only way.

The question remains whether meaning might vary according to how much one loves what's worth loving, in which case, we might think that God is most worth loving and hence loving God is essential for the *most* meaningful life. While I think there is good reason to hold that a loving relationship with God is not all that meaning consists of, I have not yet provided reason to think loving God is not the *best* sort of meaning available. To make headway on this score, we must first take issue with what is objectively worth loving.

[63] Indeed, for this reason, commonly defended theories about life's meaning in terms of honouring and obeying God's purposes are also susceptible to this idea. In fact, all supernaturalist conceptions of the meaningful life have a hard time accounting for some of our firmer intuitions about non-theistic lives that seem nevertheless very meaningful.

II. Foundational Monism

To contend that meaning demands we love something in some way *worth* loving naturally raises the question of what it is that makes something worth loving. An answer to this question requires an appropriate theory of objective value.[64]

To claim that something possesses objective value is to claim that this thing is, at least to some extent, good in itself. That is, its value is logically independent of any individual's subjective mental states or preferences. Often, we regard things as valuable because they are a means to something else. Money, for example, possesses only instrumental value because it is valuable only as a means to some other end. For something to be objectively valuable, it is not as a mere means but is valuable as an end in itself. For example, a piece of music possesses some objective value as a result of its inherent beauty or sophistication; we also properly value supreme athletic ability because of the human strength and skill involved; or we regard scientific truth as intrinsically valuable because it informs and enlightens us about the world in which we live. These things are valuable for their own sakes and not just for the sake of something else.

A satisfactory theory of objective value will have to account for the wide variety of the things we love that we commonly regard as good candidates for conferring meaning on

[64] If the presence of something objectively valuable is essential to the meaningful life, and it is true that we are not the sole creators or inventors of this sort of value, then we can make sense of the idea that meaning is something that can be *discovered*. Thus, describing the person who longs for a more meaningful existence as someone "in *search* of meaning" is often an entirely appropriate and accurate description.

people's lives. We have already mentioned God, and to mention a few more: other human beings, non-rational human beings, cultures, religion, knowledge, artistic creativity, various ideals – moral and non-moral –, certain non-human sentient creatures, nature, sport, and so forth. On the flipside, a satisfactory theory of objective value will also provide insight into the things we love that are *not* good candidates for conferring meaning (at least not of a deep kind) on people's lives, such as: TV, crack-avoidance, chocolate milkshakes, Twinkies, money, and so forth.

One influential theory of objective value is the Kantian-inspired distinction between price and dignity. In Kant's words, "If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an equivalent; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has dignity."[65] Kant assigns dignity to human beings on account of their rational nature. As such, when it comes to persons, all persons are unconditionally worthy of a meaningful kind of loving. Kant's distinction between price and dignity ties in neatly with our reluctance to apportion meaning conferring love to those individuals who, conventionally speaking, might deserve to be loved less (or more), say the troubled teenager or perhaps even the convicted felon.[66]

Human beings are beyond price; and therefore comparison is forbidden and questions of desert do not even feature. All human beings are worthy of a meaningful kind of love and all human beings are therefore equally good candidates to confer meaning on the lives of those who love them. So far, so good; such a theory of objective value seems sensible and

[65] Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* trans, H.J. Paton, (London: Routledge, 2004), p95.
[66] Wolf, 'The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity,' esp. 231-235.

is especially good at capturing many of our most cherished experiences of meaningful loving. However, there are difficulties for any value theory that posits a unitary value. The difficulty becomes clear when framed against the wider dispute over whether, at base, value is one or many.

It should be clear by now that a great variety and diversity of lives contain meaning. I have long since noted we should abandon any attempt to claim that there is only one of life suitably construed as meaningful. Having said this, it is seemingly unmistakable that some people live more meaningfully than others. For instance, Bertrand Russell's life (surely) contains more meaning than the lonely old woman with only cats for company. Similarly, Tiger Woods' life contains patently more meaning than the Blob's. On our present conception, this greater degree of meaning is conceivably due to the fact that Russell and Woods are far more successful in loving things that are *worth* loving to some extent.

On a normative level, I am committed to a pluralist conception of meaning. Being pluralist on this level however remains logically consistent with both foundational monism and foundational pluralism.[67] That is, assuming numerously different kinds of lives are rightfully thought of as full of meaning; at the base, value may be one or it may be many. As I see it, the current philosophical debate is most intense and most interesting at the foundational level of value.

[67] see Elino Mason's entry on 'Value Pluralism' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-pluralism/. (June 2006), downloaded August 2006.

Those who contend that there is a unitary value that grounds objective value maintain that all other values are underpinned by a single fundamental value. This ultimate value is responsible for conferring meaning on all the many and diverse forms of meaningful lives. Since meaning, in this case, reduces to *one* critical value it is foundationally monist, with the implication that some grand scale on which to measure the worth of what we love holds much promise. I suspect, pre-reflectively, that Bertrand Russell's life as devoted to philosophy contains more meaning than Tiger Woods' life as devoted golf. Presumably – given the appropriate unitary value – it is a relatively simple undertaking to show why there is more meaning on Russell's life than on Woods' life. The difficulty is to work out what exactly this foundational value is that makes some objects (more) worth loving. Once determined though, it is a relatively simple matter of drawing comparisons and reaching conclusions.

If we find the earlier Kantian distinction between price and dignity convincing, we may propose that dignity grounds the theory of objective value we seek. That is, priceless human dignity is the unitary value on which all other value depends. Meaning results when we are able to transcend the animal self and connect with the foundational value of dignity. However, Kant reserves dignity solely for rational human beings which seems to exclude anything beyond personhood or rationality from being suitable for conferring meaning on life. This is clearly counterintuitive because Russell's life, his love for knowledge and pursuit of truth certainly seems to be a meaningful life even though the objective value of knowledge is not a feature of some rational agent. Similarly for Tiger

Woods, his love for golf and pursuit of sporting excellence is perhaps not quite as meaningful as Russell's projects, but it is certainly meaningful.

Perhaps though, it is in Russell's exercising of his reason that makes loving certain knowledge valuable. It is proper to love knowledge because in doing so, Russell is thereby loving personhood. Perhaps for Woods, the skill involved in his golfing, the strategy and the tactical requirements exercise his rationality and thereby make loving golf valuable. It is therefore proper to love golf because in doing so, Woods is loving personhood.[68] This last point certainly seems like a stretch and sounds more like the kind of lame excuse the golf addict who neglects his family might use to try to justify the copious amounts of time spent on the golf course. Perhaps, though, this is precisely the case; golf is less worth loving than knowledge because it has less to do with loving personhood. Therefore, a life devoted to knowledge contains more meaning than one devoted to golf.

Can the same be said about the person who devotes her life to aesthetic value? Is it in exercising her rational capacity that she lovingly connects with aesthetic value, causing her life to be meaningful? If this conception already seems somewhat fanciful, it seems even more so when we consider those who devote their lives to certain sentient creatures, or to the conservation of the rainforests, or to sustaining various cultural traditions, or to rock n' roll. These objects, projects and activities are seemingly good candidates for conferring meaning on people's lives when loved, yet we need not reduce them to a

[68] Not withstanding English TV character Arthur Daley's assertion that, "Golf is like a love affair. If you don't take it seriously its no fun, if you do take it seriously, it breaks your heart."

matter of loving personhood to understand them as bearers of meaning. It seems odd to suggest that some of these values are measurable only in terms of a fundamental value of human dignity in order to be the sort of value to confer meaning when loved.

Some theorists hold that creativity is the defining feature of the meaningful life, is there some kind of creative element operating on objects worth loving?[69] On this view, what makes the objects worth loving is their creative potential, for instance, it is proper for Gauguin to love his artistic projects because in doing so, he loves creativity. Similarly, it is proper for Beethoven, Robert Frost, and Antjie Krog to love their projects because in doing so, they love creativity. However, when we enquire about what makes the objects of culture, persons, God, and nature worth loving, it is not because they reduce to creativity. Although creativity can explain what it is about some of the objects we love that make them worth loving, it cannot explain what it is about all the objects we love that make them worth loving.

We are stuck with the same question, what is it that makes objects like philosophy, art, nature, culture, music, God, and people (more) worth loving? What is it that makes objects like TV, crack-avoidance, chocolate milkshakes and Twinkies not (or less) worth loving and where does golf fit in? What is it that the former set has that the latter set lacks?

For one thing, this latter group seems severely lacking in importance. The goods on the former set are far more important than those on the latter. Perhaps then what makes

[69] see Taylor, 'The Meaning of Life,' *Philosophy Now* 24 (1999): pp13-14.

something worth loving is its level of importance. The more important something is, the more worth loving it is. This helps explain why golf probably fits in somewhere in between these two sets. Golf is not, all things considered, all that important, although in some situations golf is not completely unimportant. Golf has, shall we say, medium importance, it adds meaning to life when we love it but it is limited because it is not the type of thing able to add great meaning. The trouble with talk about 'importance', however, is that this seems worryingly synonymous with 'meaningful'. Can we unpack this further and in a way that avoids simply rehashing what has already been said?

The obvious question is what makes these things important enough to be able to add great meaning? Perhaps we can get some idea by determining what is at stake on meaningfully loving various objects. The more important something is, the more risk there is involved. The person who meaningfully loves TV risks very little, there is nothing required of her other than to sit there, she is as extended as she is going to be. The person who meaningfully loves golf risks frustration and ruining a good walk (in the opinion of Mark Twain), if his golf goes wrong, then he risks losing a few hours of recreational relaxation. The person who meaningfully loves something like truth, justice, beauty, or freedom risks a lot more because the associated activities demand a lot more of her, both physically and emotionally. We must guard against the claim that what makes an object worth loving is what most deserves our love because this is clearly circular, but we must try find something concrete to support the intuitive notion that objects that are important are worth loving for meaning.

I suspect we will struggle to avoid being somewhat vague. Perhaps what is common of each object is that it tracks a particular variety of different human flourishing. What makes something the object of love that confers meaning is its potentially important part it plays in the growth and flowering of an individual human life. Each object, of the right kind, picks out a human virtue in the sense of human excellence and good qualities internal to a person. To this extent meaningful loving may well leave traces in the world but, most essentially, meaningful loving of important objects leaves traces internally by affecting us emotionally. The more important something is, the more it potentially affects us. It seems highly unlikely that we can capture this with a single unitary value.

III. Foundational Pluralism

For the foundational pluralist, there are many basic values capable of conferring meaning on life. Accordingly, plurality at the foundational level helps explain plurality at the normative level. If we take Susan Wolf seriously and seek to remain "maximally tolerant and open-minded" on the question of objective value, it is a natural step along to a foundationally pluralist conception of value.[70] Wolf does not provide detail of what such a theory looks like, but she does maintain that we live in a world of goods and within this

[70] Metz notes that a difficulty shared by the majority of contemporary objectivist accounts of meaning is that they "tend to be either too vague or too narrow". Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life', p796. In much of Wolf's writing on the meaning of life she remains seemingly purposefully noncommittal on the specific details of a theory of value. At one point she writes, "[…] a plausible unified account remains to be developed, or perhaps we should find a way of coming more fully to terms with the possibility that no such account may be forthcoming." Wolf, Susan, 'A World of Goods,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LXIV, No.2, (March 2002); it is clear here and elsewhere that Wolf favours this latter option although Wolf offers only bare hints (no pun intended) as to how best to come to terms with this fact.

world, "the realm of value is both *complex* and pocketed with *indeterminacies*."[71] The apparent complexity in our choices and the seeming indeterminacy of many values is what leads those like her to favour the idea that value is foundationally plural.

The complexity in our choices is particularly noticeable when we are called on to make difficult decisions, especially when our values are seemingly in conflict. Sometimes we have to choose between two worthy options and even when we are confident we have chosen the better option, we still experience a feeling of rational regret.[72] For instance, an impending deadline may lead the philosopher, whose love for her work brings her meaning, to forgo a round of golf, her love for golf also brings her meaning (though perhaps not of a very deep kind). To be sure, the regret she feels is not a moral regret but it could conceivably be explained by a conflict of value, perhaps between truth and recreation.[73] The regret is rational because she regrets the loss of value golf adds to her life, even though she has not changed her mind about the choice she made. The challenge to the monist is that if there is one foundational value for meaningful loving and, as in this case, she has chosen this value, then how is it possible to experience a loss of value? The experience of rational regret seemingly entails the presence of a plurality of values.

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[71] Wolf, 'The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity,' p234. [*my emphasis*].

[72] The argument for value pluralism from rational regret is offered by, amongst others, Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp241–77; Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency", in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp172–175; John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp57–58 Mason, 'Value Pluralism'.

[73] There is seemingly no moral obligation to pursue meaning, or even to maximise meaning. Nor is it necessarily a universal concern of all human beings. However, we do feel a sense of pity for someone for whom the issue of meaning never features. We certainly would encourage them to consider the importance of meaning in their life. For those of us, in contrast, who are concerned about the meaningfulness of our lives we do sometimes experience rational regret even if we have chosen to do what is most meaningful at the expense of something equally or less meaningful.

The foundational monist might respond by claiming that the regret our philosopher experiences is more like 'situation-regret' than 'action-regret' and it is the latter that is necessary for the foundational pluralist argument.[74] That is, it might be unclear whether she regrets her actions or the fact she has to choose at all. Her regret is directed at the situation in which she finds herself and the fact that it is her deadline and the potential for a round of golf are in conflict, not two distinct values ("Oh, if only the deadline was not due so soon."). The foundational monist can account for the kind of regret that we cannot have it both ways. Furthermore, the regret is rational because it would have been better if our philosopher did not have to choose between the two at all

However, the loss now described is no longer a loss in meaning. The intention of our story is not simply to provide a case detailing a sense of loss, but specifically to provide a case detailing a sense of loss in meaning. If foundational monism is true and there is one ultimate value at base, by choosing to forgo a round of golf, our philosopher realises more meaning rather than less. How then is it possible to rationally regret a situation in which we connect with more of a value rather than less of it? She cannot reasonably regret not playing golf if value is monist, but the fact that she does experience regret and the fact that it seems reasonable for her to regret this loss, points to a conflict between two distinct values.

A further consideration which also points to the existence of many irreducible values is that the meaning her love for golf confers on the life of our philosopher is relatively small

[74] See Schaber, Peter. 'Value Pluralism: Some Problems.' *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 33, (1999), pp71-78.

when compared to the meaning conferred on her life by her love for her philosophical projects. What is particularly interesting about this example is that even if we increased the number of rounds of golf involved, she would still be choosing the most meaningful option by choosing philosophy. If this is correct then even a weeklong golfing holiday does not outweigh the value of her philosophical project and this reveals a discontinuity to value. As James Griffin suggests, "We do seem, when informed, to rank a certain amount of life at a very high level above any amount of life at a very low level."[75] In other words, we do seem to grade some values on a hierarchical system whereby higher-level values (no matter how little) always trump lower-level values (no matter how great). The foundational monist has difficulty accounting for discontinuity since she holds that there can only be one level of value and one foundational value. Discontinuity then also seems to point us towards a theory of value which is plural at the foundation.

Such a potentially multi-tiered system of value accords well with the common sense idea that certain objects, activities and experiences are more suitable for conferring meaning than others. The foundational pluralist simply chalks this up as the difference between connecting with lower-level value and connecting with higher-level value. I think there is reason to relinquish the idea of a common scale on which to weigh the worthiness of various objects of what we love for meaning. Instead, we should embrace a pluralist conception of value at the very foundation and accept that a great variety of different lives can be very meaningful in a great variety of ways.

[75] Griffin, James. *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), in Mason, 'Value Pluralism,' p5.

IV. Proportional Loving

So what then about God? Since God is presumably the highest possible value, then surely the answer to the question, what is *most* worth loving will always inevitably be God? Should we not love more what is most worth loving for maximal meaning? The idea being that the more an object merits our love the more this object is a good candidate for conferring meaning on our lives. Consequently, the less an object merits our love, the less we should love this object if we want meaning. The degree of meaning we enjoy on our lives is thus related to the degree our love is directed at that which is most deserving, in this case, God.

Guided by the conviction that it does not seem to me that, because of his love for God, Desmond Tutu's life contains more meaning than Nelson Mandela's life, I wish to suggest that apportioning love to valuable objects in terms of desert is in many instances deeply troubling, and as Wolf argues, often downright offensive.[76] The concern is clearly evident when we become aware of its implications for the paradigmatically meaningful love parents have for their children. To suggest that a parent of two children, who wishes to tap into the greatest amount of meaning available, should favour the child that deserves her love the most is profoundly problematic. Especially if meaning is thought to arise insofar as, and to the extent, her love tracks the worth of her children based on the 'relevant' qualities each child embodies. To imagine a parent calculating which child is, say, more talented, more 'good', more intellectually gifted, more kind or even more loving, and then favouring the child of overall superior merit is perverse. Even worse,

[76] Wolf, 'The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity,' pp229-231.

this same parent may well discover that her own children are less worthy of love than someone else's children. To even begin to think that there might be grounds to love these other children more than her own is highly objectionable.

In contrast, often deeply meaningful instances of parental loving involve loving children who, strictly speaking, do not particularly deserve to be loved. The parent of the lying, stealing, cheating, manipulative drug addict suffers great distress as a result of her child's activities but she rightly – so far as meaning is concerned – does not love her child any less for this, even in the face of great trauma and pain. Even so, the question of desert is illegitimate. The truth is, the meaningful loving of the parent is far more likely to be a response to the fact that her child *needs* (or possibly desires) her love, rather than a response to the idea that she *deserves* her love.

I suggest then that apportioning our love to objects in terms of desert is equally problematic. I tend to think that it is a more meaningful kind of love directed toward God on the basis of God *desiring* our love rather than on God *deserving* our love. Assuming that there is a plurality of higher-level values at the foundation of what's worth loving, we might reasonably expect any of the highest values we can conceive of, i.e.: God, truth, justice, beauty, dignity, creativity, etc. to be great candidates for objects of love suitable for making life very meaningful indeed. Thus, when we consider what is *most* worth loving among these higher-level values there is no immediate answer to this question. When there is a conflict of values we will possibly have to appeal to a further theory of value choice to justify our actions.

I have argued thus far that for love to ground meaning we must love what is in some way worth loving. I think there is an additional condition as well. I think we need to love what we love in the right kind of way. To this condition I must devote the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

The Most Meaningful Kind of Meaningful Loving

In *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Robert Nozick unveils the experience machine, a futuristic device designed to replicate the conditions of the best possible life we could wish to experience. It is simply a matter of plugging our brains into a pre-defined computer-generated programme of the life we want and from then on, it is as if we are living this life. Or more accurately, it will feel as if we are living this life because, once plugged in, all we are aware of are our felt-experiences.

Suppose then that we fill our lives in the experience machine with pre-programmed *experiences* of loving relationships. As a result, we experience love for persons and a variety of other objects of seemingly considerable inherent value. Perhaps we programme our experiences to be similar, or identical, to those of a nun working with the poor in Calcutta, or a Jewish Rabbi working with twelve disciples in Jerusalem, or a former political prisoner preaching forgiveness and reconciliation in post-Apartheid South Africa. We have the experience of transcending the animal self and lovingly connecting with things especially worth loving. We seem to have met all the conditions of a deeply meaningful existence and so we must ask ourselves, is this really enough to secure meaning?

I suspect that there is something missing. I suspect that being plugged into the experience machine lacks our being related to the objects of our love in the right kind of way, that is, not artificially but authentically connected with these objects. When we seek love of the kind to confer meaning on our lives, this love just *is* a certain relationship. Meaningful loving is simply not reducible to a kind of replicable emotional experience. For these reasons, theorists like Susan Wolf insist upon the need for a kind of "active engagement"[77] as a necessary aspect of a meaningful existence. It seems clear that the Blob, for instance, in all his passivity has failed to actively engage with anything worthwhile. He is plugged into his TV in a way not dissimilar to an individual plugged into the experience machine.

Actively engaging with value beyond our mere animal selves is, on this analysis, a necessary feature of the meaningful life and the most potent way to engage and connect with something – actively and authentically – is to love it. In this chapter I intend to focus on two different kinds of love. Both are suitable for conferring meaning although I will argue that one is better suited than the other. In Section I, I focus on a kind of love that necessarily involves an *aim* of some sort. In Section II, by way on contrast, I present a *non-aim* kind of love, a love that is most essentially an arresting awareness of the value of the beloved.

What sort of loving relationship would be the best candidate for conferring superlative meaning on our lives? That is, what is the right (or best) way to love the appropriate object if it is to be the type of love to secure the greatest amount meaning? The two

[77] Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives,' p11.

competing conceptions of good ways to love both involve actively engaging with their objects and so neither could be realised in the experience machine. I intend to defend the type of love that does *not* involve an aim as the kind of love best suited to confer the *most* amount of meaning on our lives. To do so, I begin my discussion with the presented alternative, the love that *does* fundamentally involve some kind of directed goal.

I. Love as an Aim

Harry Frankfurt once again provides a good place to begin our discussion. About the best kind of love for meaning, he writes, "What I have in mind when speaking of love is, roughly and only in part, a concern specifically for the well-being or flourishing of the beloved object that is more or less disinterested and that is also more or less constrained."[78] Further, and more recently, he reiterates his view that, "[…] loving consists essentially in being devoted to the well-being of his beloved."[79] Frankfurt maintains that love essentially operates as a motive towards a particular outcome, namely, for Frankfurt, the wellbeing of its object. It is thus a love that necessarily involves an aim of some sort.

Frankfurt is by no means alone in this regard. Similar sentiments are expressed by Alan Soble, "When x loves y, x wishes the best for y and acts, as far as he or she is able, to

[78] Frankfurt, Harry. 'On Caring.' In *Autonomy, Necessity, and Love*. (Camb: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[79] Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p59.

pursue the good for y"[80]. Echoes of this appear in Gabrielle Taylor, "[…] if x loves y then x wants to benefit and be with y etc, […with the] satisfaction of these wants as an end and not as a means towards some other end."[81] Soble, Taylor and Frankfurt agree that love primarily involves some motivation to promote the good of the beloved. Thus, on our current conception, love of the sort to confer great meaning necessarily entails concern for and devotion to the beloved's flourishing. The right kind of love then for superlative meaning involves a particular aim of some sort, in this case, the aim to benefit the beloved. The appropriate 'active engagement' is essentially a kind of "benevolent affection"[82]. However, the current conception of love, with the aim of benefiting the beloved, encounters at least three difficulties in relation to its ability to ground superlative meaning.

Firstly, 'love as an aim' does not immediately provide anything unique to rational autonomous agents. For instance, when I walk my dog around the local Bunny Park[83], there is always a tense standoff at a particular spot (on either side of the fence) between my dog and a typically belligerent gaggle of geese. The tension has only increased with the addition of recently hatched goslings. It is interesting to watch the behaviour of the mother goose toward her hatchlings, especially when confronted by the present danger of my dog. Her natural protective instincts give the impression that she is acting from a standing desire to benefit her offspring, or at least to promote their welfare. Against the perceived threat, she collects her brood and her defensive response is usually quite

[80] Soble, Alan. 'Union, Autonomy, and Concern.' In *Love Analyzed*, ed. by Roger E Lamb, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), pp65-92.
[81] Taylor, Gabrielle. 'Love', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, (1976), p157.
[82] Velleman, David. 'Beyond Price,' http://homepages.nyu.edu/~dv26/Work/Beyond_Price, (Jun 2006), p6.
[83] As the name suggests, the Bunny Park is a park with lots of rabbits and the odd selection of various farm animals, including geese.

aggressive (with much shrieking and wild flapping of wings). During moments when there is no present danger, she shelters her offspring – literally taking them under her wings, she cares for them, she grooms them, and provides for them. It seems to me that the mother goose is acting quite 'lovingly' towards her chicks, we might easily describe her care as a kind of 'benevolent affection'. It would however be very odd to suggest that the goose's love for her goslings confers meaning on this goose's life. It is difficult to see how this analysis of love as an aim offers anything unique to the issue of meaning as it relates to rational autonomous agents.

Of course, it might be countered that the goose is acting on her natural evolutionary instincts and although there is a sense in which she is pursuing some overarching goal, she is not acting *for the sake of* her offspring. Perhaps higher sentient creatures like dolphins or chimpanzees better fit such a description. It is however not clear that even the most intelligent non-human animals act in a way legitimately considered to be a kind of benevolent affection. Jane Goodall for instance *denies* that even chimpanzees are motivated to act *for the sake of* their young. The burden of proof then probably tilts away from the defender of love as an aim in this regard. There is however still a further two arguably more troubling objections still to consider.

Therefore secondly, although in many loving relationships love *does* motivate a desire to promote the wellbeing of the beloved, this is not the case in *all* loving relationships. The current conception of love has a hard time making sense of loving a number of objects that are intuitively good examples of the appropriate objects for a meaningful existence

via love. Although the notion of loving a particular person with a desire to benefit her is commonly understood and experienced, it makes little sense to talk of benefiting or enhancing the beloved's wellbeing when the object of our love is 'God', 'knowledge', or many other intuitively worthy but more abstract 'ideals' (moral or otherwise). How is it possible to improve the welfare of God when, by definition, God's welfare needs no improving? And how does the concept of 'wellbeing' fit on something like knowledge?

One possible solution, if we are to retain the idea of love as an aim, would be to refine the appropriate goal. That is, perhaps love of the type to confer unparalleled meaning involves the aim not of promoting wellbeing but of drawing near to the object, or of investing in the object, or of endorsing it. Thus, the love of God that confers meaning might involve the aim of communing with God, or the love of knowledge that confers meaning might involve the aim of pursuing truth.

Consider however the love we have for our icons, or some of the great leaders and heroes of our time. It is not only that we regard some individuals with great admiration and a measure of affection, but on rare occasions we care deeply enough to say we love these individuals. Think about Desmond Tutu or Nelson Mandela. Two individuals quite literally loved by a nation, even by those who have never met them and in all probability will never meet them. When we say we love them, it is not with a standing desire to draw alongside, invest in, or promote the personal interests of Madiba or Tutu. Rather, we love them from a distance, not with a desire to benefit or promote their welfare, but more like a recognition of their immense value, both as individuals and of what they represent as

well. It is more than a mere passing admiration in that this kind of love involves most essentially an appreciative response to their value, but it need not be a response involving an aim.

It could be countered in reply that love as some kind of appreciative response to the value of our icons confers some meaning but not necessarily superlative meaning. Our love for Tutu and Mandela is meaningful to some extent, but it is not the *very* meaningful kind of love.

Consider then instead the following, many of us are keenly aware that when a person we love dies, we do not stop loving them. If the love that is the best at conferring meaning on our lives is love with an aim, then meaningful loving cannot continue after death since the beloved is beyond any goal we can possibly seek to bring about. But we know from experience that our love does not stop or become meaningless because particular aims cannot be realised when a person dies. When the heartbroken lover tragically decries that life has lost meaning on the death of a beloved, it is not because she stops loving the deceased but because her beloved is no longer around as an object of her love. In truth, insofar as we continue to love those who have passed away, this love continues to confer meaning on our lives (albeit with a deep sense of loss), but it is not the kind of love that necessarily involves an aim or a targeted goal.

Perhaps it is still possible to act for the sake of a departed beloved, even if this does not involve acting for her welfare. Love as an aim, as such, could involve going to our

beloved's grave, setting up a foundation, looking after her children, or a host of other actions motivated by love as a desire to act for the beloved's sake. In this way, our love, as an aim, continues even after the death of the object of out love. How would we articulate this? Perhaps we look after our departed beloved's children *in order to* honour what our beloved would have wanted. That is, the goal that corresponds to love as an aim is honouring our deceased beloved's wishes. However, looking after the beloved's children for *the sake of* honouring her wishes is not the same as looking after the beloved's children for the sake of the beloved herself.[84] It is entirely conceivable to do something for the sake of honouring our beloved's wishes without this being in any way unique to a meaningful kind of loving. For instance, the lawyer in charge of the beloved's estate acts for the sake of honouring her wishes, but this lawyer does not necessarily act for the beloved's sake. The lawyer's motivation might be simply that this is what he is paid to do. Things are different for us though, of course we have the motivation to honour our beloved's wishes, but we have an additional motivation to honour her wishes *for her sake*. To act for her sake, the beloved herself must be the object of our love and the primary motive of our actions but we have already noted that love as an aim cannot account for this meaningful kind of love of someone deceased.

Furthermore, on some occasions we do not fully realise how much a person means to us until this person is gone. In some instances, even though we do not have a desire to be with this person, or to promote her wellbeing, or invest in her life; yet when she dies we realise how much we love this person and we love them without this love necessitating a

[84] See Velleman, 'Love as a Moral Emotion,' *Ethics* 109, (Jan 1999), esp. pp345-347.

particular goal. The current conception of love as an aim seems to struggle to account for some deeply meaningful instances of love.

There is also a third and more fundamental difficulty to active engagement as love with an aim. Consider the individual who connects with some objective value beyond her basic self by actively engaging in the ideal and pursuit of social justice. Her active engagement, or love of justice, involves the aim of promoting a fair distribution of goods in the world. A life devoted to this goal certainly seems meaningful, but what happens should she succeed in achieving her goal? Somewhat bizarrely, the individual's life ceases to be meaningful should her aim be realised.[85] John Stuart Mill finds this particularly disturbing, and he recounts his dilemma as follows:

> I had what might truly be called an object in life: to be a *reformer of the world*. […] it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: 'Suppose that all the objects in life were realised; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to be found in the continual

[85] see Taylor, Richard. 'The Meaning of Life.' in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*; Taylor suggests that Sisyphus could use the rocks he rolls up the hill to construct a magnificent temple and this worthwhile project and activity would seem to suitable for conferring meaning on his life. However, on the temple's completion, Sisyphus has to confront the reality that all that is left is "infinite boredom". But, I would add, not only is Sisyphus likely to be bored, since he is unconnected to anything or anyone of any worth, he is in a state of indifference. His life therefore lacks meaning as a result of his indifference, not solely his boredom.

> pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.[86]

Mill is in the same boat as the person lovingly devoted to social justice. It does not make sense to hold that meaning is located in pursuing a particular aim while the upshot of realising this aim is a resultant lack of meaning. If we connect with objective value beyond the animal self, by loving with a particular goal in mind, it follows that achieving this aim leaves us unconnected and essentially indifferent to the object of our love – we are thus quintessentially lacking in meaning. This conception of active engagement, as love with an aim, entails that by realising the aim, whatever it happens to be, our two '*reformers of the world*' render their lives meaningless.

Neil Levy responds with the suggestion that there are some ends that are inconceivable. That is, there are some aims toward an end that in principle cannot be realised since the projects themselves possess a particular structure whereby progress in an activity is possible but completion is not. Thus Levy suggests that "meaning really is available to us through engagement with goods beyond our individual lives", and further, he thinks we are so engaged when we are "devoted to (the promotion of) goods beyond the self."[87] I think however that Levy incorrectly makes the assumption that 'active engagement' necessarily involves an aim of some sort to bring about superlative meaning. I return to address what I consider to be the implications for Levy's greater project in the next chapter but when Wolf insists on the importance of 'active engagement' she is not

[86] As cited in both Levy, 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life,' pp182-183; and Kekes, John. 'The Meaning of Life.' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXIV, (2000), pp19-20. [*my emphasis*]
[87] Levy, 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life,' p179.

necessarily committed to an aim conception of engagement. I find it particularly telling that at one point Wolf describes the person disengaged from her surroundings as someone whose heart is not in it.[88] I take her to mean that what she lacks is a kind of appreciative response to something of value. There is nothing wrong with the idea that love with an aim can on some occasions be very meaningful, but I think there is a more satisfying kind of meaningful loving available to us, a kind of engagement that advises against the despondency highlighted by Mill because it does not necessarily commit us to meaningful loving with an aim.

II. Love as an Emotionally Arresting Awareness of Value

In this regard, David Velleman develops a non-volitional account of love. On such a view, love of the sort to confer meaning is essentially a response to the perceived worth of the beloved. That is, in recognising the exceptional value that inheres within an object, we come to love that object. To this extent, love is not oriented towards aims or results but is most essentially a particular evaluative stance we assume toward the object itself. Velleman appeals in part to Iris Murdoch's analysis of love as a kind of attention, a kind of 'really looking', and a mode of valuation. It is through becoming aware of the value of an object that we love it in the right kind of way and that this kind of love brings meaning to our lives.

[88] Wolf, 'The Meanings of Lives,' p9.

In Velleman's terms, love of this kind necessarily entails an "arresting awareness of that value."[89] Meaningful loving involves a response to the value of the object by our engaging our emotional selves. Love of this kind releases the internal defensive mechanisms that otherwise prevent the worthy object/s of our love from affecting us too deeply. When we love in this way we arrest or disarm our emotional resistance towards the beloved in response to its intrinsic value. This kind of non-aim love confers meaning in part by rendering us emotionally vulnerable to the beloved. In more metaphoric language, love of this kind turns the heart from a heart of stone into a heart of flesh which in turn is a heart for meaning.

This explains the many accompanying emotions, preferences and desires that often result; for example, the various instances of benevolent affection which, on the present view, are effects of our love rather than necessary components. Nozick points out that this sort of love, which is not an aim but an arresting awareness of value, enables us to transcend some of our limits to a grand extent, he writes:

> In love between adults – their mutual openness and trust, the dismantling of the defences and barriers people carefully have constructed to protect themselves against getting hurt, and the mutual recognition of this (mutual) non-defensiveness – some limits of the self are not merely breached but dissolved. This non-defensiveness is risky. Yet to be fully less than open to growth, because of this, makes the relationship

[89] Velleman, 'Love as a Moral Emotion,' p338.

> itself a limit rather than a mode of transcending limits, while to preserve some armour, as insurance, constitutes yet another limit.[90]

And in dissolving these limits, love connects with objects of the appropriate value in order to confer meaning on our lives. As Nozick notes, it is this kind of loving that really grows our world. In so doing, there is a connection with value beyond the animal self and, as Nozick adds, "The more intensely you are involved, the more you transcend your limits."[91]

Thus, if active engagement consists of love that is not an aim but a disarming emotional response to the value of the beloved object (through an easing of our emotional defensive barriers), the difficulties evident on the previous conception (of love as an aim) can be avoided. The present account of love, as an emotionally arresting awareness of value, is unique to autonomous rational beings and, as such, the potential for meaningful loving is unique to the human experience. There is no chance a gaggle of geese – no matter how benevolent – could love meaningfully. I already alluded to the idea that the meaningfulness of our love for Mandela and Tutu stems from a recognition of their value. Such a response seems to have less to do with a standing desire to benefit either of these individuals, but more in common with something like "wonder and awe".[92] As for those more tragic circumstances, when we mourn the loss of our beloved, we do so *not* in terms of a loss of some aim, but in terms of a loss of a personal presence as we continue to love our beloved even when she is gone. The meaning this confers on our life lives on so long

[90] Nozick, *Philosophical Investigations*, p595.
[91] Nozick, *Philosophical Investigations*, p595.
[92] Velleman, 'Beyond Price,' p16.

as we remain aware of the value of our beloved and allow this value to impact us emotionally too. Of course, love without an aim carries no danger of a loss of meaning when we achieve our ends.

Admittedly, talk about emotional vulnerability with regards to certain objects like knowledge and other more abstract ideals like social justice and beauty may seem at first glance a bit odd. Knowledge, for instance, seems less to warrant an emotional response than a cognitive one. Justice too, seems like a strange object to direct such appreciative responses toward. However, when we devote ourselves to the sorts of things at least in some way objectively valuable, it is not entirely off the mark to describe the process as to an arresting awareness of the value of the object, project or activity. Our response to aesthetic beauty, for instance, often leaves us inwardly 'touched' and 'moved', and therein reflects an emotional vulnerability to the content of the object. There are similarities on knowledge and justice as well. Plato and Aristotle both taught that philosophy is born of a sense of wonder and astonishment.[93] Scientists and researchers often engage in projects in a way that affects them emotionally on perceiving the value of what they are involved in. Political and social activists, in particular, often make an emotional response to something greater than themselves, the value of a particular cause for instance.[94] The meaningfulness of life is not the accomplishment or achievement of our particular aims but the very activity of loving what we love in the way that we love. Love, as it stands on this account, is anything but blind.

[93] We must guard against reducing this to a mere feeling, lest we plug into Nozick's experience machine.
[94] Ruth First describes how, in the cell in which she was detained, a previous political prisoner had inscribed, 'I love Freedom' into the wall above the bed. It would be crass to hold that there is no emotional involvement in these activities. In fact, the awareness of the value of their cause often leaves activists deeply emotionally affected.

CHAPTER V

The Most Meaningful Life

Suppose, then, a person loves something worth loving, in the sense we have considered, and is also connected to her beloved in the right kind of way, that is, in recognising the value of the object, she opens herself emotionally to it in response; she then seems to me to have satisfied the sufficient conditions for a meaningful life. The view I have offered is a less pluralistic account of meaning than the earlier view offered by Frankfurt, but it still allows for a wide variety of different projects and ideals to ground meaning. At the same time, my analysis also allows us to be more discerning about some seemingly trivial cases like Sisyphus, the Blob and the crack-avoider.

We have already noted that some people live more meaningfully than others. My account would suggest that the differing degrees of meaning on people's lives is most likely explicable in terms of, amongst other things, the intrinsic value of the object/s a person loves, her awareness of this value, and how emotionally available she is to it. In this final chapter, I wish to consider whether meaningful loving, as I have advanced, is not only a sufficient condition for meaning but also a necessary condition for *superlative* meaning. On such an account, a person must love, in the right way, something objectively valuable in order to have the *most* meaningful life. This is of course a bold claim although I hope to show it contains a considerable degree of plausibility.

I. Meaningful Work

Neil Levy offers a potentially competing account of the *very* meaningful existence in 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life'. Earlier, we briefly touched on the downshifting trend (particularly evident in the developed West) of people choosing to 'down-shift' by seeking out more meaningful activities involving such goods as family, friendship, personal wellbeing, nature, and so forth. As Levy defines things, down-shifters typically move away from activities that involve work. While these individuals frequently manage an increase in meaning, Levy argues that the meaning available to them is limited. He suggests that it is work (and therefore presumably not meaningful loving)[95] that is the necessary condition of a superlatively meaningful life. According to Levy, if we wish to fill our lives with as much meaning as possible, we should instead 'up-shift' rather than 'down-shift'. We should endeavour to ensure that the central activities of our lives involve very particular kinds of projects towards which we are able to *work*. Therein, claims Levy, lies the potential for lives to contain the greatest amount of meaning.

There is much to admire in Levy's account and where he and I differ, I think, is often in terms of emphasis, rather than on particular substantive issues. However, having said this, Levy's emphasis on work is important (and unfortunate) because it is at the cost of the proper place of love. It is an oversight that effectively compromises his broader project to

[95] Levy does not so much argue that work is a necessary condition of superlative meaning to the *exclusion* of the proper place of meaningful loving. At times it seems like he takes it for granted that active ("effortful") engagement requires something similar to meaningful loving I have in mind. In failing to be more specific, he fails to recognise that active engagement is potentially multifaceted to the extent that the particular type of active engagement affects the meaningfulness of a life. In a footnote, he alludes to the "subjective element" as "essential […] but […] not controversial", 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life,' p179. I think Levy is too quick to put aside the subjective element for reasons I spell out below.

secure the conditions of the most meaningful life. I will argue that insofar as Levy's account of work excludes my account of love, his account is not sufficient for a maximally meaningful life.

According to Levy, an activity is a suitable candidate as an appropriate locus of meaning if it has the following features:

> (1) it must not be circular, in the sense that it must have a point beyond itself. But (2), though we must be able to achieve significant progress in achieving its end, it must be such that either (a) achieving it would not strip it of meaning, or (b) though constant progress in its pursuit is conceivable, a final completion of it is not.[96]

From my perspective, (1) is uncontroversial so long as we understand it not to exclude intrinsically meaningful activities. Levy defends (1) on the notion, with David Wiggins, that an activity which is regressive and repetitive is not suitable for meaning. I have already argued that meaning in life comes from transcending one's limits and connecting with value beyond the animal self. As for (2a), I noted earlier the difficulty for accounts of meaning that involve an aim. I suggested that love as an aim, for instance, is susceptible to that great anti-climatic, "Now what???" when the goal is achieved. The problem, as recognised by Mill, is that success in attaining our aims would seem to leave us unconnected and uninvolved as a result, and thereby lacking meaning. This nullifies the potential for meaning of the particular activity in the first place. At any rate, Levy

[96] Levy, 'Downshifters and Meaning in Life,' p184.

seems to think (2a) requires a supernatural solution (of which he is sceptical) so I will follow him in concentrating on (2b).

In order to satisfy (2b) the activities we pursue must be conceptually open-ended. Levy suggests that superlative meaning comes from connecting with superlatively meaningful activities, or 'projects' as he refers to them, of a very particular shape. Essentially, projects are those activities that contain utmost value and, by their very nature, are such that as we register initial and continued success in them, it becomes increasingly clearer what further success involves. That is, the aim of a project is not a rigid predefined point, but is flexible, evolving and open-ended. The more we are involved in a project, the clearer the aim might become but the final aim remains fundamentally inconceivable.

Levy holds that philosophy, justice, and artistic creativity are projects of this type. We can make progress in these outstandingly valuable activities even though we are unable to comprehend what the final goal would be like. For philosophy, a complete body of knowledge seems difficult to imagine and our efforts to visualise what it might look like are vague, at best; for justice, contextual and cultural variations (and the inevitable conflicts of value) make it difficult to imagine a complete structure of an optimally just society, although it becomes clearer as we make advances; and for creative activity, the ends vary and diverge depending on the influence, just compare baroque with modern art for example. These activities meet the requirements of (2b) and so are good candidates to be a source of superlative meaning. The reason Levy maintains that "work" grounds the superlatively meaningful existence is seemingly two-fold. Less explicitly, he upholds

what he identifies as an "outcome-related" bias to meaningful activities. More explicitly, it is work because engaging in the appropriate kinds of projects, which are highly valuable and open-ended, requires a substantial amount of determined and concentrated effort. Often, such engagement places high stress and demand on our time, educational and theoretical abilities, even physical reserves as well. He writes, "[…] the pursuit of superlative meaning is necessarily *work* in that it will require sustained effort, concentration, attention, striving, and, perhaps more often than not, failing at least temporarily."[97] Quite simply, effortful engagement in projects is hard work. Accordingly Levy claims that downshifters find some meaning in rearranging their life priorities, but since they do not involve themselves in work, as properly understood, they forfeit access to the most satisfying meaning available.

In response to Levy, I wish to contend that his account is neither sufficient nor necessary for superlative meaning. I hope to show that it is both possible for someone to satisfy Levy's criteria without this person being a good candidate for utmost meaning, and I also hope to show that it is possible not to satisfy his criteria yet still be a good candidate for extreme meaning. In addition, I hope to show that my account is better suited to accommodate the objections I aim at Levy and provides a better analysis of the superlatively meaningful life as a result.

II. The Sufficient Condition

[97] Levy, 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life,' p186. [*my emphasis*]

Central to Levy's account of superlative meaning is his notion of effortful engagement. Whereas on my analysis, I identified the particular kind of engagement with objectively valuable goods as influential on the amount of meaning available to us, Levy seems not to notice that conceivably many different modes of active and effortful engagement can potentially affect the meaningfulness of our activities. While Levy does not deny that something like meaningful loving could be the appropriate means by which we engage with valuable goods, his failure to identify something like meaningful loving as central to securing superlatively meaningful lives inevitably leads him to unduly accentuate the importance of the structure of our projects. I will begin by showing that Levy's account is not sufficient for superlative meaning.

While meaningful loving allows us to go beyond our limits, it is not the only way to transcend our appropriate limits and effortfully engage in demanding projects. When we allude to 'transcending', 'connecting' and 'engaging' in this context, we usually have in mind something like a positive response to activities that are of considerable intrinsic value.[98] In the first place, it might not be immediately clear why it is necessarily pro-attitudes that connect us to valuable activities rather than their opposites. We might wonder whether we can transcend our animal selves and engage in various activities just as effectively through attitudes such as hate, disrespect, humiliation, scorn, dishonour, and disgust. It certainly seems true that I remain *connected* to someone I hate.

With this in mind, consider the enemy of justice, who responds to justice by actively connecting with a determined intention always to thwart it. Let us imagine that this

[98] see Metz, 'The Concept of the Meaningful Life,' esp. 145-146.

individual is motivated by a simple hatred of all things just. As such, he is in a sense actively connected to justice and his project is such that he can make progress in achieving his goals with the final aim remaining open-ended. We can effectively assume that he requires, "[…] sustained effort, concentration, attention, striving, and, perhaps more often than not, failing at least temporarily."[99] As such, his hatred sees him effortfully engaged in a hard project which would suggest superlative meaning, for Levy. To claim that such an activity is superlatively meaningful, insofar as it seemingly shares a similar structure to work, would be a very odd conclusion to draw. If this is correct, then Levy's account is not sufficient for utmost meaning.

We can gather some idea of what Levy's probable response to the above objection would be by considering his initial sketch of a meaningful life as, "…one devoted to (the promotion of) goods beyond the self."[100] Perhaps all it takes for us to amend Levy's account is to remove the parenthesis and to be more explicit about the role of promoting goods beyond the self. As such, an activity "having some point beyond itself" simply implies achieving something of value rather than disvalue. This seems to me a fair and subtle revision of Levy's account and not one I suspect he would have much objection to.

There is, I think, something right about amending Levy's account in this way, for at least three reasons. Firstly, we might question whether a project dedicated to the opposite of promoting goods and focused on worsening something of value, such as constantly seeking to thwart justice, is not already lacking in intrinsic value. There is seemingly

[99] Levy, 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life,' p186.
[100] Levy, 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life,' 179.

nothing valuable about pursuing injustice and it is therefore not the appropriate activity by which to secure a supremely meaningful existence. Secondly, negative responses – as opposed to positive responses – most naturally seek to destroy or diminish the value of what they are connected to. They therefore disqualify themselves from being suitable attitudes by which to connect with value by seeking to do this value harm. It would be odd to think that we transcend our animal selves by connecting with some value in order to weaken it. Then, thirdly, negative attitudes tend to close us off emotionally and prevent us from really extending ourselves beyond ourselves. Whereas something like meaningful loving metaphorically breaks open our hearts and engages a capacity for emotional involvement, negative engagement, by contrast, tends toward the opposite by shoring up and fortifying our emotional defences thereby turning our metaphorical heart into a heart of stone. These reasons seem to me to be enough to lay aside concerns about negative responses provided we rework Levy's account to be more explicit about achieving something valuable.

However, there is an additional challenge to the sufficiency of Levy's account in that many different *positive* responses to value can also affect the degree of meaning on our lives. In truth, any number of pro-attitudes properly connect with value beyond our basic selves. For example, we commonly respect, honour, admire, revere, advance, study, enjoy, engender, protect, support, and of course, love in response to value. I take it that these are all ways of 'promoting' goods. A child, for instance, often engages with the value of her parents by honouring them. In turn, a scientist often engages the natural world with a deep sense of wonder and curious amazement. Both the child and the

scientist could positively engage in their projects by other means as well. The child might *revere* her parents, just as the scientist might *admire* the natural world. To the degree that they adopt differing positive attitudes towards their objects, the meaning of their activities will be affected, to a lesser or greater degree.

We noted that Levy thinks philosophy involves an effortful engagement with the supreme value of truth, yet he offers nothing to distinguish between someone who actively engages with philosophical truths by seeking to *preserve* it, and someone who actively engages with philosophical truths by seeking to *create* new truths. Both are pro-attitudes which conceivably require "sustained effort, concentration, attention, striving, and, perhaps more often than not, failing at least temporarily."[101] Yet, ordinarily, we might think the latter qualifies for superlative meaning whereas the former qualifies for something closer to ordinary meaning. Levy has no way of marking a difference.

What we might notice about the difference between creating and preserving is that creating moves us closer toward the broader aim of philosophical truth, whereas preserving does not. Perhaps Levy would suggest that even though we do not achieve the goal of philosophy, since it is an open-ended project involving hard work, we achieve more through creativity than through preservation. In fact, he might argue that preserving does not meet his criteria for 'significant progress in achieving the end' at all. To force home the original objection then and counter this possible response, we need an example of two different pro-attitudes, both allowing for significant progress, yet the one yielding greater meaning than the other.

[101] Levy, 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life,' p186.

Consider the difference between someone who enjoys, is fond of, or has a general liking for philosophy and someone who loves philosophy.[102] Any of these attitudes may involve an "effortful engagement in difficult practices" and significant progress in the philosophical project. Or consider someone who has sympathetic concern for social justice issues and someone who is lovingly devoted to social justice issues. Engaging in activities any of the ways here envisioned confers a vast amount of meaning, but it surely makes a difference what type of connection we have with the relevant value. Connecting with something valuable through enjoyment, a fondness for, a really liking, or with a sympathetic concern, and connecting with this same thing with love, involves transcending limits and connecting with objective value, but no other attitude requires as much of us as love does, at least not the love I have been discussing in this paper, and it is this factor that makes meaningful loving uniquely placed to secure superlative meaning. To hammer home this point, imagine the individual who engages in two superlatively meaningful projects and makes significant progress in both. Suppose she enjoys artistic creativity and loves philosophy. Both pursuits bring her meaning but it would be fair to say that in loving the latter, this confers more meaning on her existence.

I must at this stage add an important corollary. I have defined the love most relevant to meaning as not essentially involving an aim, which raises some concern as to how this kind of love can make *progress* toward achieving an end at all. However, when we love something in the way I have suggested, that is, when our emotional defences have

[102] Assuming enjoyment, fondness and liking are distinct from love, which they seemingly are since we can enjoy something without loving it. I enjoy golf (at least most of the time, or when I am on the fairway), but I do not love golf.

dissolved away, the most natural response is to pursue the good of the object that we love. This response is not intrinsic to love, as I have been describing it, but it is the natural response, the logical next step so to speak. When we recognise the value of an object and arrest our emotional defences in response, the sensible next move involves the desire to make significant progress toward its end. It is the prior emotional disarmament that allows us to connect to the value with the intensity that we do and set this type of love apart from the love that is most essentially an aim.

Another way therefore to bring out the objection against Levy, and hopefully satisfy remaining dissenters, is to contrast the meaning involved on the different ways in which we love our projects. Appealing to comments I made above, love which is *not* an aim seems better equipped for meaning than love that is an aim. All other things being equal, superlative meaning is less readily available through what I referred to as love as affective benevolence and more readily available through love as an emotionally arresting awareness of value. Again, Levy has no way of marking a difference in the potential meaning on either kind of engagement.

Indeed, we could quite conceivably take great effort to enjoy, sympathise with, respect, tolerate, admire, endorse, support, etc., a whole range of difficult projects, but it is not clear to me that this is enough to count as conditions for superlative meaning. It is no doubt enough for some meaning, and perhaps even deep meaning, but not enough for the most meaning. If we are looking for the most meaningful activity, then we cannot ignore the role of meaningful loving that I have advanced. The earlier observation of Nozick is

particularly relevant, recall, "The more intensely you are involved, the more you transcend your limits."[103] I maintain that it is love, as an awareness of value that involves an easing of our emotional defences, that is a particularly intensive, potent and expressive form of care that takes us beyond our animal selves more than any other pro-attitude. It is love of a particular kind, for objects of a particular kind, that provide the necessary conditions for the most meaningful existence.

III. The Necessary Condition

The greatest consequence of Levy's failure to recognise the various ways in which we engage in superlatively meaningful activities and their ability to impact on the potential meaningfulness of that activity is his failure to recognise that the engagement itself can be open-ended. This is precisely what I have been arguing for with meaningful loving. Love, of the arresting awareness kind, is a *process*, not necessary an engagement involving a particular end. Contrary to Levy, it seems to me that we *can* succeed in achieving the ends of some superlatively meaningful activities and we can do so without compromising its meaningfulness. I have tried to show in the previous section that Levy's account is not sufficient for meaning, in this section I will try to show that it is not necessary for meaning either.

I wish to propose that there are some superlatively meaningful activities whose ends *can* be achieved. For example, the doctor who works tirelessly on a cure for a particular type of cancer has a very definite aim in mind. Are we to say that this is not very meaningful

[103] Nozick, *Philosophical Investigations*, p595

because she can envisage, not just progress, but actually succeeding in this aim? There is no need to entertain such ideas however if the engagement itself is open-ended. That is, even if the doctor succeeds in realising her aim, on my analysis, the activity is still meaningful so long as she remains aware and emotionally responsive to its (completed) value. The trouble for Levy is that he is not even able to describe this activity as ordinarily meaningful, or if he can, it will have to be within the context of some wider superlatively valuable 'project'. Surely though, the specific activity of seeking a cure for cancer confers meaning on the doctor's life, not because of her involvement in some vague, open-ended project.

Consider the young black lawyer inspired by the oppression of his people to rise up and fight the evils of Apartheid. Of course his fight falls within the scope of the broader open-ended project of 'justice' but he takes as the particular aim of his activities the end of the Apartheid system. This alone seems to me to be a superlatively meaningful activity, without necessitating an appeal to the broader ideal. Success in his aim, the fall of Apartheid, does not compromise the superlatively meaningfulness of the activity insofar as he is arrestingly aware of the value of anti-apartheid activities.

On a smaller scale, consider the rural woman from an impoverished village in the Transkei. Suppose she has little education, little opportunity and little prospects. Suppose too that she realises the value of her children's education and so, every morning, at 4am, she walks 20km to a busy taxi rank to set up a little tuck-shop with very basic amenities. She saves as much as she can every month to pay for her children to go to school and

eventually university and eventually to a good job. She really is, it seems to me at least, living very meaningfully. Perhaps even the most meaningful life she could hope to live given her circumstances.

Levy acknowledges that his description of superlative meaning is somewhat elitist. He notes that 'elitism' will probably attract criticism and he imagines John Cottingham[104] would raise questions about his theory's overwhelming exclusivity. On Levy's account, superlative meaning is the preserve of the fortunate few who are appropriately educated and in sufficiently good health and circumstance. He attempts to cushion this aspect of his theory by showing that just about everyone can live meaningfully, to some degree, insofar as they connect with the goods of family, friendships, culture, etc. As such, the downshifters all have a shot at meaning and generally succeed in attaining *some* meaning but the amount of meaning is necessarily restricted because downshifters are not involved in difficult open-ended projects. The upshot however, is that, our rural villager's life is limited in meaning as well, she is not a candidate for a life that is *very* meaningful.

This seems to me to be overly critical. As I see it, this woman *is* involved in an activity that is superlatively meaningful. It is an activity with a well-defined end and even if she achieves her goal (of educating her children enough to get good jobs), and admittedly the odds are stacked against her, success does not compromise the maximal meaning. The reason meaning is not compromised is because her meaningful loving is open-ended. We may wonder whether our villager's life would be even more meaningful if she didn't have to work so hard for her kids. That is, suppose providing for her kids is easy and she has

[104] see Cottingham, John. *On the Meaning of Life*. (London, New York: Routledge, 2003).

time left over to pursue other things. Levy places very meaningful activities out of reach of the majority of individuals. Surely a more reasonable account would take into account the social conditions of various people such that more is expected of those who have more.[105] I see no reason why the standard for ideally meaningful lives should not increase or decrease depending on one's social circumstances. So, supposing our rural mother finds it easier to provide for her kids and she has more opportunity for other things, more is then expected of her if she is to live the most meaningful life.

I think one way to explain this idea would be as follows. Insofar as downshifters fail to meet their individual potential to engage in supremely meaningful activities, they fail to access a higher level of meaning, even if they do achieve a degree of increase in meaning. If downshifting entails a shift towards a life of leisure, then I agree with Levy, only restricted amounts of meaning is available. The downshifter who sacrifices time at work for time on the golf course may experience a rise in meaning, but she is still short of very meaningful activity. As I understand it, maximal meaning is as such relative to our abilities.

Levy is unable to even consider such an option because of his insistence on the type open-ended projects, putting them out of reach of the majority of the world's population. In contrast, by emphasising the importance of meaningful loving, and thereby admitting superlatively meaningful activities that are more accessible and may or may not involve a

[105] Although sport is not valuable enough to be an appropriate activity for superlative meaning (it is suitable to confer some meaning), the following example shares the spirit of what I have in mind. Eric Moussambani, from Equatorial Guinea entered the Olympic 100m freestyle in Sydney 2000. He completed the swim over a minute slower than any other competitor. At one stage there were even fears that he might drown half way. Arguably though, his achievements are as meaningful as Ian Thorpe's gold medal achievements (who, interestingly enough, swam the 200m faster than Moussambani swam the 100m).

predefined aim, superlatively meaningful lives are available to a far greater number of individuals. Even if meaning is outcome-related or goal directed, as suggested by Levy, I see no reason the outcome concerned must be the same for everyone.

If meaningful loving makes superlatively meaningful lives more accessible to the general population, it does not make superlatively meaningful activities any easier. Cottingham suggests that superlatively meaningful endeavours must be neither too arduous nor too exclusive if they are to be the proper source of meaning in our lives.[106] I hope to have gone some way to easing Cottingham's concerns about the elitist nature of meaningful loving as a proper account of superlative meaning. However, I tend to agree with a point made by Levy that the arduous nature of the conditions necessary for superlative meaning are warranted. The difficulty involved in meaning-conferring activities should not be thought of as surprising or gratuitous because many things that are worthwhile require significant effort. Superlatively meaningful loving is without doubt difficult; it is distinctly risky and not possible without becoming acutely emotionally vulnerable. As we have noted, love, in this sense, breaks us open and in so doing expands our world. It is only through a 'really looking' of this sort that we meet the necessary condition for our lives to be very meaningful. I take it that just because it may often be difficult and even arduous to love in this way, this ought not to count against meaningful loving.

IV. Where Meaning and Morality Meet

[106] Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, p69.

Some theorists about life's meaning hold that certain ethical requirements are necessary for the meaningful life. That is, some philosophers maintain that morality confers meaning on life and immorality does not. In contrast, other theorists hold that life is meaningful because of a particular structure to our activities, regardless of whether they are moral or immoral. In this regard, it can be a decidedly immoral activity, such as torture, murder, genocide that confers meaning.[107] Furthermore, there are theorists who submit that a life is still meaningful even though it is immoral.[108] I hope to show in this section that my analysis fits well with our most widely held intuitions about meaning and morality.

If meaningful loving of persons involves an emotionally arresting response to dignity, as the value of persons, there is a more commonly defended ethical theory also concerned with an appropriate response to the value of persons. The response called for is not one of love, but one of respect. Following Kant, many theorists hold that dignity is properly assigned to rational beings and as such, one way of expressing our own rational autonomy is to treat other persons as having dignity themselves. Essentially meaning we treat persons with respect, as ends in themselves, and never as mere means to ends. Thereby, we respect their dignity (which includes respecting their potential for respect themselves). Respect, like love, is also an arresting awareness of value but whereas love arrests our emotional defences, respect arrests our self-seeking interests and concerns.[109]

[107] Kekes, 'The Meaning of Life,' p30.
[108] For an overview of the recent discussion about morality and meaning, see Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,' esp. pp797-800.
[109] Kant argues that respect arrests our "self-love", which Velleman interprets as "self-interest", 'Beyond Price,' p13.

As such, meaningful love and respect are essentially different reactions to the same value. Meaningful love and respect differ, however, in that love is a voluntary response to the rational autonomy of another, whereas respect is a morally obligatory response. As Velleman maintains, "[…] respect and love [are] the *required* minimum and *optional* maximum responses to one and the same value."[110] Thus, on my analysis, the moral response to dignity is respect and the meaningful response to dignity is love.

The current conception does a good job of explaining how some lives that seem immoral can also be full of meaning. Think of the artist Gauguin, who left France for Tahiti – completely abandoning his wife and children in the process – to pursue meaning in his artistic projects. His life is conceivably very meaningful, yet also very morally objectionable. Or consider Ghandi, whom Martha Nussbaum advises us to describe as a moral monster for his patriarchal and demeaning attitude towards women in India. Consider finally, King David, prolific poet and great man of God but also adulterer and murderer. Perhaps we must resign ourselves to the disappointing realisation that immoral lives are often deeply meaningful.

The trouble with this view however is most evident on extreme cases. If we are to separate love and respect and thereby meaning and morality, some very despicable people are good candidates for lives with deep meaning. To see what I mean, consider again the contrasting state of affairs of love and respect, as expressed by David Velleman,

[110] Velleman, 'Love as a Moral Emotion,' p350. [my emphasis]

> Because respect for a person checks our self-interested motives toward him, its motivational force tends toward restraint, abstinence, and non-interference. Because love for a person checks our emotional defences against him, its motivational force favours involvement and engagement.[111]

There is seemingly nothing preventing us from loving someone in the right way, thereby conferring meaning on our lives, but instead of then treating them with a kind of *benevolent* affection, we treat them instead with a particularly *malevolent* kind of affection. Thus, the child-molester is conceivably deemed to be living a deeply meaningful life, so long as he recognises the value of his victims, as rational autonomous beings, and responds by relaxing his emotional defences. The trouble is that love without an aim means there is no response that is logically contradictory to love. No doubt, malevolence would not be appropriate, but it would not be contradictory to the kind of love here cited. The child-molester may fulfil all the requirements of meaningful loving.

However, this seems like a tough bullet to bite. That a child-molester's life is deeply meaningful seems wholly counterintuitive and deeply offensive.[112] In truth, at least as it seems to me, it is an error to separate meaning and morality in the first place. Whereas the moral life is not necessarily meaningful (the Blob for instance is not necessarily immoral), the meaningful life however does seem to require a minimal moral component of respect and refusing to treat another as a mere means. To ground this response, I appeal to Velleman's notion that love (of the meaningful kind) requires respect.

[111] Velleman. 'Beyond Price,' pp13-14.
[112] Kekes, 'The Meaning of Life,' p30. Kekes bites the bullet, arguing that we only resist because it regales against our internalized moral sensitivities.

To put it simply, we cannot obtain meaning from love in the way we have been discussing without respect. To put it less simply, for Kant, we respect those whom we recognise as possessing the capacity to respect us in return. That is, we respect others on the basis of their rational autonomy. It is incumbent upon them to recognise our own capacity for rational autonomy and treat us with respect in return. However, when we treat someone disrespectfully, we relinquish our own personhood by failing to properly recognise the personhood of this other individual. In turn, when we love someone, we are aware of the value of the object of our love. That is, we are aware of the dignity of this person. We recognise the dignity and with it, the capacity of this individual to mutually respond to us by arresting her own self-interested concern, and treat us as rationally autonomous persons, i.e. with respect. This provides the space for us to open up emotionally to this person. In doing so, we also recognise the capacity in the other to peel away her own layers of emotional self-protection which provides the potential for a mutually loving response. We can only love someone when we ourselves are rationally autonomous and this entails respecting the other's personhood, and only then can we respond with love.[113]

If this is correct, then a person's life contains meaning when she loves something; when the something she loves is worth loving; and when she loves this thing in the right kind of way (including, when the beloved is a person, respectfully). However, the appeal to morality potentially comes at a price. How can we still maintain that the lives of Gauguin, Ghandi, and King David contain meaning in spite of their immorality? We can

[113] See Velleman, 'Beyond Price,' esp. pp14-15.

only do so by finding some way to differentiate between these seemingly meaning-filled lives and the seemingly meaning-empty life of the child-molester. If we do not succeed, then the price we pay is in terms of the plurality of lives that are meaningful. This too would be a tough bullet to bite.

I think there *is* a way to draw these two types of cases apart. Although the child-molester claims to love children, in the non-aim kind sense, such that he is emotionally responsive to their value, his actions thoroughly disqualify him from securing any semblance of meaning. The meaning the child-molester claims on his life as a result of his child-molesting activities comes directly at the expense of the objects of his love, the children. Such obvious ill-treatment means the child-molester is in no way even a candidate for meaning whatsoever.

In contrast, the meaning we commonly claim on the lives of Gauguin, Ghandi and King David, is not at the expense of any individual. Ghandi's life is not meaningful because of his abuse of women; it is meaningful because of his meaningful loving of social justice issues. King David's life is not meaningful because of his affair with Bethsheba and the murder of her husband; it is meaningful because of his meaningful loving of his nation and his God. Finally, Gauguin might appear to be a more tricky case, but his artistic creativity does not stem from his woeful neglect of his family. To some extent these three individuals reflect the paradoxical nature of much of our lives as human beings. Ghandi's life is very meaningful but his attitude towards younger girls is not. King David's life is also very meaningful although the matter surrounding his affair is not. Gauguin's life is

deeply meaningful insofar as he connects with artistic creativity, but his family life contains very little meaning. We might worry about the kind of psychic discontinuity that this entails, that some aspects our lives might be deeply meaningful and others less so or not at all. I admit this is a worry but it seems to be a fair reflection of human life. The line between the meaningful life and meaningless life seems to run through people rather than between them. On the whole though, there is, I think, much to be said for treating one another with love and respect.

V. In Conclusion

In conclusion, David Schmidtz makes the point about meaning that not only does it tend to track active engagement, but it tends to track external reality as well. He recites the story of his sister's disillusionment on discovering that the 'natural' beauty of a desert cave she had been marvelling at turned out to be made by humans and was not natural at all. Schmidtz recalls her disappointment on realising that the walls of this cave were only plasted concrete. He notes, "Somehow, there is more meaning, more reality, in the wild – in experiences that have not been scripted, especially by someone else."[114] I take it my analysis of love as an emotionally arresting awareness of the value of our beloved is distinctively advantaged in tracking reality. Iris Murdoch writes of the love that is a case of 'really looking', that, "love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is *real*."[115] To this extent, love is recognising the true value of its object and it is a perceiving that arrests our emotional defences, never failing to leave us deeply

[114] Schmidtz, David. 'The Meaning of Life,' http://web.arizona.edu/%7Ephil/faculty/extra/dschmidtz/deschmidtz_meanings_of_life.htm, (2001), p9.
[115] Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*. (London: Routledge, 1991). [my emphasis].

affected as a result. What love of this type does is it connect us to reality. It is the kind of loving that infuses meaning into marriages, that moves revolutionaries to action, that sees scientists engaging with the natural world and philosophers captivated by the wonder of it all.

I have argued in this report that superlative meaning depends on loving something worth loving in the right kind of way. There is no doubt that those individuals moved by the value of the object of their love, in ways I have been describing, are deeply compelling individuals. In the first chapter, I wrote that a precondition of meaning is that our lives must be in some way our own. In meaningful loving, we transcend our purely animal selves and connect with something objectively valuable beyond ourselves and as we engage with something bigger than ourselves, our lives are no longer solely our own. I have suggested that superlative meaning depends on meaningful loving.

Perhaps Barry White knows more than we give him credit for.