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Worthy Lives

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Morality places limits on what we can do in pursuit of our goals. In the simplest cases, morality limits what we can do in pursuit of our personal goals that are not themselves morally valuable. In more complex cases, when our personal goals are themselves morally valuable, moral considerations still sometimes take precedence over a moral goal in which we are personally invested. But are there cases in which the precedence goes the other way—does our investment in a personal goal affect what morality can require of us?

In this paper, I argue that it can. When acting on a reason is necessary for meaning, that action can be morally defensible in situations where, in the absence of meaning-conferring reasons, the same action would be wrong. My central thesis is thus broadly in sympathy with Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf, who argue that a tension between meaning and moral requirements can be resolved in favor of meaning, and that this speaks more generally to what we can be morally required to do.¹ Here, however, I argue that resolutions of the tension in favor of meaning obscure what is at issue if we assume that broad limits on morality's reach automatically follow. Both my specific thesis and the considerations I draw on to support it differ from those of both Williams and Wolf, and attempt to bring the conflict between meaning and morality into sharper focus.

In section 1 of this paper I explain and reformulate Williams's version of what I will refer to as the "meaning objection," and argue that the objection survives replies to it by utilitarian, Kantian, and hybrid views. In section 2 I analyze Wolf's theory of meaning and her view on its relation to morality, and argue that her view of meaning must be revised to carry

¹Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-19; Susan Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97 (1997): 299-315, and "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14, no. 1 (1997): 207-25. Wolf's paper "Morality and the View from Here," *Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 203-23 is less directly related to the question of meaning but develops a position on the moral point of view.

the weight of the meaning objection. In section 3 I offer a distinction between finding life worth living and regarding one's life as worthwhile that is necessary to explain the significance to our lives of meaning-conferring reasons to promote categorical desires. In section 3 I also show that with respect to concerns about the demands of impartial morality, leading a worthy life is more important than finding life worth living. Section 4 concludes the paper.

The concern that morality and meaning can conflict requires us to consider two types of meaningfulness. I take Wolf's view to be partly that we find meaning in enjoying or experiencing what we value, and I concede that valuable activities, and how we experience them, can make life worth living. However, I argue that the meaning objection depends upon the way people structure their lives and their character around achieving valuable purposes. The potential conflict with moral considerations arises from the vulnerability of our ability and opportunity to successfully realize and contribute value through our actions. Failure to realize a purpose of this kind threatens meaning because it threatens the worth of our lives.

An overall upshot of the paper is that meaning-based moral defensibility can be limited by serious moral considerations; it can also be limited by meaning itself. A necessary condition for a person's defense of her meaning-conferring reason against certain moral considerations is whether the action is necessary to lead a meaningful life. Acting against some moral considerations can affect the worth of a person's life even when the action would also allow her to successfully realize a meaning-conferring goal.

1.

The strongest version of the meaning objection would be that a person can defensibly pursue a legitimate meaning-conferring reason (that is, a reason that actually gives her life meaning) over any moral reason, including the moral reasons many views claim she is required to act on. Williams's version of the objection is necessarily narrower than this. His version, if it is successful, only shows that meaning-conferring reasons are not necessarily overridden by Kantian and utilitarian moral requirements. The strongest version of the objection is too strong, in any case. What the meaning objection shows, I will argue, is that agents give their meaning-conferring reasons much higher priority than their other reasons, and they can sometimes defensibly give meaning-conferring reasons higher priority than reasons to act on moral considerations that would otherwise generate moral requirements. If meaning-conferring reasons are indeed very strong reasons, this primarily shows that they

have substantial relevance for what agents must do morally. It does not show that meaning-conferring reasons thereby make morality irrelevant. The moral relevance of meaning-conferring reasons may therefore be important to questions about what we are actually morally required to do, or about which moral reasons are overriding. Resolving these questions or considering how the meaning objection fares against every conception of moral requirements is not my ambition. In this section, I show that some of the main Kantian, utilitarian, and hybrid-theory replies to the meaning objection do not adequately account for meaning-conferring reasons.

The meaning objection arises partly from Williams's skepticism that the overall impartial moral verdict on a particular situation always results in an overriding reason for an agent to perform the action that the verdict requires. Although the full extent of Williams's argument is more complex, the objection is clearly directed at these two features of the impartial theories he is concerned with, Kantian and utilitarian theory.

Other arguments from Williams suggest he doubts that an impartial moral verdict gives any person a reason to act.² I set aside questions about what constitutes a reason or whether all of an agent's reasons issue from her existing desires, as this is not Williams's primary concern here or the concern of my paper. I will focus on cases in which there is a genuine conflict between a reason to promote a particular moral consideration and a reason to promote a personal meaning-conferring consideration, and in which the agent has at least a *prima facie* reason to attend to *bona fide* moral considerations.³ When a person has a commitment to morality and a moral consideration is sufficiently weighty, that consideration must play some role in her deliberation about what to do even when it conflicts with meaning-conferring projects.⁴

Although he thinks the objection also applies to utilitarianism, Williams's primary target in this particular argument is Kantian theory. He objects to the idea he finds in Kantianism that there is "too slim a sense in which any projects are mine at all" and also to the view of character and the individual that he thinks Kantianism depends on.⁵

Williams argues that we structure our choices and the lives we lead

²Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck*, pp. 101-14, and "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," in *Making Sense of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 35-46.

³For simplicity, my central focus is on ground projects without moral content. However, many meaning-conferring reasons will be for morally valuable projects.

⁴Williams also thinks the objection will arise when someone has a commitment to morality. He says, "these [ground] projects, in a normally socialized individual, have in good part been formed within, and formed by, dispositions which constitute a commitment to morality. But, on the other hand, the possibility of radical conflict is also there." Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," p. 12.

⁵*Ibid.*

around “ground projects” and “commitments.” He claims that some of these ground projects play a necessary part in giving us an interest in our future. They cannot merely be “set aside” for morality’s sake.⁶ Desires to pursue and realize our ground projects and commitments are categorical desires. These desires are unconditional. They do not arise simply because we continue to live; rather, our reason for going on living is to satisfy them. Our other desires are contingent on whether we choose to live and thus depend on our categorical desires. There will be no point to those reasons unless we have some reason to live:

The point once more involves the idea that my present projects are a condition of my existence in the sense that unless I am propelled forward by a conatus of desire, project and interest, it is unclear why I should go on at all.⁷

Williams’s claim that our character and identity are bound up with categorical desires to realize our projects and to live according to our commitments is a view about how we structure our agency. Both identity and character are broad concepts, and categorical desires are not relevant to everything contained within these concepts. Although Williams does not elaborate extensively, his remarks suggest that categorical desires are necessary elements in a person’s conception of herself. A person who is now a socialist would not have a metaphysically different identity were she to become a conservative corporate banker. However, this type of transformation is disturbing to imagine because permitting such a change would involve failing to be the person she has now chosen to be. Resisting a radical change in her categorical desires, even if the temptations come from within, expresses something basic about a person’s agency. Character depends in part on how a person organizes her choices, and shapes the life that arises out of those choices. We preserve our character by giving priority to categorical desires over other choices. Thus, categorical desires are not just things we happen to want, or even exceptionally strong desires. They determine (although perhaps not exclusively) who we choose to be and how we choose to live.

Given what Williams says about reasons to “be around in the world” and given that a person’s other reasons are conditional on her reason to live, an initial breakdown of his argument could be the following:

- (1) If a person S has a reason to ϕ in the future, she must have a general interest in doing things (acting) in the future.
- (2) If S has a general interest in acting in the future, then S has a reason to live in the future.

⁶Ibid., pp. 12-15.

⁷Ibid., p. 12.

- (3) If factor X undermines S's reason to live in the future, then X undermines S's future reasons to ϕ .
- (4) In some cases, acting on a moral reason undermines S's reason to live in the future.
- (5) In those cases, acting on a moral reason undermines S's future reasons to ϕ .

Williams concludes that

impartial morality, if the conflict really does arise, must be required to win; and that cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent. There can come a point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his being around in that world at all.⁸

One way to read this conclusion is that it would be unreasonable to require a person to act on any reason now that would undermine her ability to act in the future. This oversimplifies Williams's argument somewhat because it does not address his claims about the role of the reason to live in a person's character and her identity, but it does lay out one basis for the objection. Also, situations where the person's reason to live is entirely undermined will be rare because each person has a set of categorical desires, and other desires from that set may provide a sufficient reason to live. However, people sometimes have a core categorical desire such that its loss makes the other categorical desires insufficient to generate a reason to live. Further, acting against any categorical desire amounts to acting against a fundamental aspect of the person one has chosen to be.

What does Williams mean by his claim that resolving the conflict in favor of morality "cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent"? One sense of unreasonable is that what is proposed is contrary to reason or objectively irrational. Another sense is that some expectations we have of people, or demands we make upon them, are unreasonable because they are excessive. An absolute expectation of this kind can be excessive without its being irrational or contrary to reason for someone to satisfy it. The expectation is excessive because it assumes that the person to whom it is addressed has an overwhelmingly compelling reason to satisfy it when she does not. For example, it is unreasonable for you to expect or demand of your friend to always pick up the tab, but this does not show that it is contrary to reason for your friend to do so. What Williams appears to mean by "unreasonable" is not that the person will be irrational if she chooses to act on the moral reason, but that our expectation that she will cannot be one that permits no exception. Primarily, this

⁸Ibid., p. 14.

is because she has a compelling reason not to act on the moral reason because it conflicts with her meaning-conferring project.

To say that it is unreasonable to demand of S that she act on reason R in this case is thus to say that S has a defensible reason not to act on R. It is imprecise to conclude that the question raised by the meaning objection here is whether the person's reason to promote her categorical desire is defensible against any moral requirement. The target of Williams's meaning objection is too narrow to show this: it focuses on certain kinds of moral requirements when those requirements directly conflict with what is necessary to preserve meaning. Whatever Williams intends by the objection, it does not show that a person never has a reason to act on any moral requirement whatsoever or that there are never situations where moral considerations generate moral requirements that override meaning-conferring reasons. The answer to these questions depends too much on the way theories construct moral requirements. Rather, the objection shows that in some cases, a person can legitimately regard her categorical desires as constituting reasons that are stronger than the moral requirement some moral theories propose, and that some conceptions of moral requirements are implausible because they fail to take account of this. As Williams puts it, "there can come a point" where it is too much to ask someone to satisfy the requirement. In those cases, reasons to promote categorical desires (meaning-conferring reasons) are defensible and the proposed moral requirement fails to be overriding. Therefore, the objection could be read as showing something about what moral requirements there are, rather than showing that there are no moral requirements or that moral requirements never override meaning-conferring reasons.

The breakdown of Williams's argument that I offer above suggests that there may be fairly serious consequences for an agent who prefers morality, and it may be tempting to argue that no moral theory would actually require a person to jeopardize her reasons to act in the future in order to promote a moral consideration. However, as stated, it is very questionable whether it is always defensible to act on one's categorical desire unless we also assume that egoism is true. This is because Williams provides no account of the content of the categorical desire in question or of the seriousness of the moral consideration at issue. Virtually any view of morality that assumes people should be constrained in some way by the interests, values, well-being, and so on of other people must deny Williams's conclusion. Most accounts of morality must deny that it is unreasonable to expect anyone, whatever his or her particular categorical desire, to be deterred by the effects that satisfying that desire will have on others. Williams's argument, in its bare form, suggests that the categorical desires of cult leaders or totalitarian dictators or con art-

ists are legitimate competitors to any moral consideration, no matter how serious. However, the argument, as stated, is not convincing for such cases. This also does not seem to be the conclusion Williams is aiming at.

Because it is not too much to expect people to avoid pursuing the project of a megalomaniac cult leader, it seems fairly clear that moral considerations are also relevant at the point where the person forms an attachment to her project and invests her identity in it such that it comes to form her reason to live. If we push the question back to the various choices a person makes over time to invest in the projects that structure her life, and interpret Williams as making the claim that morality has no role to play during this process, his conclusion is implausible. It would also make the issue of projects less relevant, because we would have to assume morality plays no role before people become invested in a project (which clearly does not happen instantaneously). Therefore, a better interpretation of the meaning objection is to assume that it applies to projects whose pursuit does not require immorality. Given the implausibility of claiming that any categorical desire is necessarily a competitor to purported moral requirements, the meaning objection requires modification; a person's reason to live must not be contrary to morality, as it is understood broadly and, thus far, untheoretically. The person's project cannot be one that by its very nature involves serious immorality.

Even when the project is not morally wrong, the objection holds. Projects that are not contrary to morality, or even projects that are morally valuable, can still conflict with the overall moral verdict on an action. For example, it would be morally valuable to help the homeless, but it might be impermissible to lie to the police to protect a homeless person accused of a crime. One way to eliminate the issue would be to require that people make adherence to a theory of the right their core categorical desire. This would require not just that people make their actions conform to morality (which is what moral theories require anyway), but that people be so attached to satisfying moral requirements that they want to go on being in the world in order to do so. Few people are psychologically constituted to form such a pure attachment to the satisfaction of moral requirements themselves that any significant conflict with other things they deem valuable (which may also have moral value) would never occur.⁹ Certain kinds of moral requirements are thought to shape how we live our lives, but this will not rule out, ahead of time, the conflicts of the type the meaning objection raises so long as we are also living our lives for things other than morality.

⁹Note that this is not the same as denying that the person must internalize the requirements of the moral theory. A person can do this and still fail to regard the desire to abide by the moral theory as constituting a reason to live.

The meaning objection does not apply to every kind of moral theory or to every conception of moral reasons where moral considerations generate a reason that competes with the agent's projects. For example, the meaning objection would not apply to theories where moral reasons do not arise from an impartial perspective, such as virtue theory. Some moral theories advance no overriding moral requirements and for these, the objection may not apply.¹⁰

If meaning-conferring reasons present extremely strong reasons to act, this issue may still be relevant to nonimpartial or nonoverriding moral theories to which the objection does not apply directly. On the revised version of the meaning objection that I offer, when agents face conflicts between moral considerations and reasons to pursue meaning-conferring projects, they have reasons to pursue both. Therefore, on various nonoverriding or nonimpartial views, the significance of meaning-conferring projects still raises questions about how to balance the weight of moral and meaning-conferring reasons.

The meaning objection is supposed to apply to both the impartial and the overriding features of Kantian theory and utilitarian theory. Does it apply to stronger versions of these theories that have been developed in light of Williams's views about the importance of ground projects? An act-consequentialist reply to the meaning objection would be that the destruction of meaning is of great cost to an agent, and that this cost has moral relevance both because of its own disutility and because it affects her ability to produce good consequences in the future. Thus, in terms of its consequences for a person's reason to live, it may be that losing meaning has greater overall consequences than the impartial value the person could promote by disregarding her reason to live. For example, even a highly demanding act-consequentialist theory would rarely require someone to lose her legs, because that is a bad consequence. A person's losing meaning has at least as much disutility as losing the use of her legs.

However, it is not the case that act-consequentialism never requires losing one's legs (or even one's life). Thus, we can assume, it would sometimes require people to do what would make their lives meaningless. More importantly, there is a disanalogy between losing one's legs and losing meaning.

One reason that the loss of projects is not like other losses is that except in some very peculiar situation, the loss of legs is external to an agent's choices, whereas the loss of projects is internal to her choices.

¹⁰Some egoist theories might conflict with the meaning objection because the objection takes the view that meaning-conferring reasons are stronger than some self-interested reasons that an egoist view may claim a person is rationally required to act upon. (E.g., the meaning objection claims that a person can regard certain purposes as worth dying for.) The relevance of the meaning objection for egoism is beyond the main scope of the paper.

The question that the act-consequentialist must answer is why moral requirements in act-consequentialism do not extend to the agent's decisions about her attachments and what she has chosen to give her life meaning. Act-consequentialism cannot demand that we never decide not to lose our legs, because there will be cases in which we have no choice about that. But if act-consequentialism extends over all choices, then it would seem to require that we either have very weak interests in our projects, which would interfere with the investment required for meaning, or that we simply make act-consequentialism our core and overriding categorical desire. That these options do not seem very feasible is part of the explanation for a waning enthusiasm for act-consequentialism.

The meaning objection is also an objection to the idea that considerations like losing one's legs or losing meaning in life are matters that agents are required to consider from an impartial perspective. According to act-consequentialism, the relevant moral consideration for the agent is that *someone* loses her legs, and to weigh this against the possible good consequences that could be promoted by that loss. Although the agent can permissibly care very deeply that it is *her* legs that will be lost, the fact that her own choice leads to the loss of her own legs is not a morally relevant consideration. If she is simply considering consequences, and her moral reasons are both impartial and overriding, the fact that the legs are hers is not relevant to her moral reason. Williams's objection to this conclusion would doubtless be that it cannot be irrelevant to a person's deliberation about what to do that she is the one who loses her legs. The situation is worse with respect to meaning-conferring projects, if it is true that she structures the activities of her life around her reason to live. How can it be that she has an overriding reason to act that is detached from all her other reasons to act in virtue of its impartiality, when the basis of her interest in acting depends on her interest in her life? Williams suggests, perhaps correctly, that it is absurd to suppose that an agent would have to regard her own legs—or her meaning-conferring projects—as equivalent to anyone's legs or project.

Samuel Scheffler argues for a hybrid view that takes account of issues raised above about how to reflect the moral relevance of ground projects.¹¹ The hybrid view establishes what Scheffler calls an "agent-centered prerogative" that allows an agent "to devote energy and attention to his projects and commitments out of proportion to their weight in the impersonal calculus."¹² According to Scheffler, one failing of pure

¹¹The hybrid view specifically attends to Williams's objection on the grounds of personal integrity, rather than the meaning objection. See J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

¹²Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 15.

forms of consequentialism is that they do not allow the personal point of view to play a role in determining moral requirements. Unlike act-utilitarianism, the hybrid view does not require the agent to regard the cost of relinquishing meaning in her own life in an impersonal way such that the only morally relevant fact is that *someone* is now leading a meaningless life. Instead, she is permitted to give her project greater weight on the grounds that it is *her* project. So the fact that a project (or legs) are mine is morally relevant to my choice. Second, the hybrid view is less demanding because it leaves room for people to pursue their projects. So it would not lead to severe demands on a person's life; it would permit her to write her avant-garde novel even though she would produce better consequences by spending her time and energy helping at the homeless shelter.

Scheffler claims it is implausible for any consequentialist theory to ignore the personal point of view because "concerns and commitments are naturally generated from a person's point of view quite independently of the weight of those concerns in an impersonal ranking of overall states of affairs."¹³ Granting moral independence to the personal point of view is necessary, according to Scheffler, because of

the character of personal agency and motivation: people do not typically view the world from the impersonal perspective, nor do their actions typically flow from the kinds of concerns a being who actually did inhabit the impersonal standpoint could have.¹⁴

Indirectness is one way that consequentialist theories can leave room for the personal point of view, but Scheffler argues that this strategy grants insufficient moral independence to the personal point of view. All consequentialist theories determine the right from an impersonal standpoint, and so they are all potentially subject to the charge of "alienating the agent from his actions and the source of his actions in his own convictions."¹⁵

The room that is left for the person to pursue her projects is not unlimited: an agent is only allowed to promote his projects over morally superior outcomes when

the degree of [his interests'] inferiority to each of the superior outcomes he could instead promote in no case exceeded, by more than the specified proportion, the degree of sacrifice necessary for him to promote the superior outcome.¹⁶

Thus, the "the natural solution" to the claim that morality demands too much of agents, "is to allow agents not to promote [optimal] outcomes

¹³Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 20.

when it would be unduly costly or burdensome for them to do so.”¹⁷

The hybrid view does two critical things: it gives moral independence to the personal point of view so that we are not implausibly required to regard our own lives impersonally when making moral decisions; and it allows us to pursue our projects, but places limits on that pursuit such that not absolutely everything we might do to promote them is morally defensible. The meaning objection alone does not support the claim that *any* moral consideration whatsoever—for example, killing an innocent person—*never* generates a moral requirement when it conflicts with the pursuit of ground projects. Even if reasons arising from categorical desires are exceptionally strong reasons, it has not been shown that they are defensible against any moral concern whatsoever.

However, Scheffler’s hybrid view does not accurately reflect the personal point of view as it arises within the meaning objection. Suppose the person cannot act on her meaning-conferring reason because the effects on her are completely outweighed by a superior outcome, for example, she must lose her life’s work in a fire to save all the children in the elementary school across the street.

The hybrid solution, if applied to the meaning objection, ultimately considers this in terms of the cost to, or sacrifice of, the person’s good or her interests. A loss of meaning *is* a cost to a person’s good. But that construal of acting against a meaning-conferring reason does not reflect the agent’s perspective, which is what the personal point of view is claimed to reflect. When I act against a categorical desire, the concern that act raises for me is not primarily the cost to myself of acting against the desire, but instead that I am acting against a reason to which I think it essential to give exceptionally high priority. That is, a categorical desire creates a reason I believe I must not act against. (The reason might not be absolute for every ground project.) In fact, for the agent, the point of the reason cannot be evaluated from the standpoint of her good, because she may think it necessary to sacrifice her good for the reason. Williams thinks ground projects give us reasons to sacrifice our lives. Consequently, I may give up everything else I care about for my ground project. And, I could have a reason to suffer horribly to achieve it. So my *ultimate* concern in acting against my reason is not my good, my interests, or my general ability to carry out a rational plan of life, but the object of the reason. Although some might complain that the agent has a mistaken all-things-considered view of the matter, that takes us outside the personal point of view and pushes Scheffler’s view where he does not want it to go, in a direction where the impersonal point of view must determine the shape we give our lives. A categorical concern for the *rea-*

¹⁷Ibid.

son's objective is exactly the personal point of view of the agent, as the meaning objection construes it. Acting against her categorical desire violates her character and identity because of the importance she places on the purpose she is pursuing. It is necessary that we give certain purposes exceptionally high priority to create the lives we want to live, but they are the lives we want to live because of our view on those purposes. The effects on identity, character, and reason to live are a *result* of a person's acting against her reason, not the basis of her reason.

Thus, a solution that involves weighing actions in terms of costs to the agent or the sacrifice of her interests or the burden on her already moves the agent in a consequentialist direction such that it looks as if it accommodates the personal point of view to grant that the limit on her reason can be defined by the superior outcomes she could instead promote. But, since the agent's point of view cannot be represented in terms of costs, sacrifices, or burdens, the hybrid view does not accommodate what is morally relevant in the agent's personal point of view, but subtly shifts the moral terrain to a more general, impersonal point of view.

Even so, the hybrid view addresses a difficult problem that the meaning objection raises, because it puts a limit on what an agent can do to satisfy her categorical desire and there probably must be such a limit. And the meaning objection may not be a decisive objection in terms of what the hybrid view requires of agents, because cases in which the person's reason is indefensible (e.g., when she has gone much too far in pursuing her ground project) could very well coincide with the cases in which Scheffler's theory puts a limit on her.¹⁸ The hybrid view might therefore never demand that anyone act against her categorical desire in a situation where she could defend doing so. But the meaning objection raises a more general question about the aspect of the personal point of view that concerns an agent's conception of her reasons. In light of its concern to accommodate the personal point of view, the hybrid view does not give the right answer to this question.

On the Kantian view, the significance we ascribe to our own purpose in life is an incomplete justification for acting on that purpose. Kantian restrictions limit the ways we can use others to achieve our purposes, whatever value we may happen to think they have. Thus, it is usually assumed that Kantian theory would not allow someone to lead a life that

¹⁸It is difficult to tell whether this is true, because it is not entirely clear what the hybrid view permits or forbids. For example, Scheffler rejects agent-centered restrictions. But if I am weighing the cost of a meaningless life in which I have no reason to live as a harm to me against the cost of a lesser harm I do to another person (e.g., suppose I intend to swindle a rich person out of money he does not need), does the hybrid view permit me to harm that person? This may in fact be plausible, but, by leaving out agent-centered restrictions, the hybrid view could be more permissive than it initially appears.

involves complete deceit in the service of a just cause—for example, if overthrowing an unjust regime requires working as a secret agent among the oligarchy so that the agent can feed information to her revolutionary cadre.¹⁹ There is some controversy over what the various formulations of the categorical imperative (CI) permit and how the Formula of Humanity should be interpreted. In general though, the Formula of Humanity forbids us from using others as mere means, and this constrains the priority we can give to any kind of meaning-conferring reason. Although the principle may not be absolute in evil circumstances, in general, permitting the weighing of good aims against the treatment of a person as a mere means would distort a fundamental feature of Kant's view that humanity is of absolute value. Nonmoral meaning-conferring reasons will be impermissible when acting on them conflicts with perfect duties.

According to some interpretations of what the CI requires, certain types of actions that ordinarily violate the principle do not do so in certain circumstances. On one reading of the Formula of Humanity, we might be permitted to commit suicide or otherwise sacrifice our lives, lie, break promises, or act in a servile fashion when faced with a particular moral evil.²⁰ However, we treat humanity as a means if we do so to accomplish a purpose that has only price (conditional value). Our contingent goals, including our meaning-conferring projects, are such purposes. Thomas Hill states:

Pleasure and pain and the particular goals one has because of what one desires to achieve, are thought to have only conditional value, or price, and so suicide or the killing of others for the sake of increasing pleasure, diminishing pain, or achieving any contingently desired goal is wrong.²¹

One reason some doubt that the meaning objection is a significant issue for Kantian theory is that Kantian theory is thought not to be demanding in a way that makes the objection stick. Barbara Herman offers two significant replies to the meaning objection. First, she argues that on the Kantian picture, morality is not something that comes from the outside to intervene in a person's choices, but that morality is something to which the person is committed unconditionally: "It is a defining feature of Kantian morality that one basic attachment, one self-defining project,

¹⁹According to the Formula of Humanity, coercion and deception are the most fundamental forms of wrongdoing to others—the roots of all evil. Coercion and deception violate the conditions of possible assent, and all actions which depend for their nature and efficacy on their coercive or deceptive character are ones that others cannot assent to." Christine Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 133-58, at p. 140.

²⁰Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie."

²¹Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Humanity as an End in Itself," in *Dignity and Practical Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 52.

is morality itself.”²² Herman argues that such a project may confer meaning on a person’s life and constitute her reason to live such that “living a moral life can be partially constitutive of character.”²³ According to Herman, Kantian morality is the only unconditional project a person can permissibly have.

Second, Herman argues that Kantian moral requirements are not so demanding that all of a person’s reasons are required to be impartially justified. Instead, Kantian morality offers “a regulative ideal ... Those actions that are judged permissible are not distanced from the agent’s primary interest in them by that fact.”²⁴ Kantian morality is a “limiting condition” that does not dictate the content of all permissible reasons to act, but instead determines which reasons are permissible. Although imperfect duties, such as the duty of beneficence, do require us to act beneficently, Herman argues that the agent herself has significant latitude in deciding when and how to satisfy this duty. This is thought to leave the right amount of room for us to act on any meaning-conferring reason that is morally defensible.

Herman’s view is that it is implausible to claim that meaning-conferring pursuits are unconditional such that ignoring moral considerations for them is *always* defensible. She is correct both for the content of our projects and the way we pursue them. There is no compelling defense of the categorical desire to be a megalomaniac dictator in the face of reasons not to deprive others of their freedom. And, perhaps, it may not be defensible for me to fund the homeless shelter through fraud and theft as I can seek other ways to acquire these funds. It is also true that Kantian theory is not as demanding as act-consequentialist theory, because its reach does not extend over all projects.

A central question that the meaning objection raises is whether meaning-conferring projects carry significant weight in the face of considerations that generate moral requirements in the absence of such reasons. If a person derives meaning from something other than her desire to conform to Kantian morality, then preserving meaning may require her to negotiate with less serious moral requirements if she wants to carry out her meaning-conferring project. Is there any reason to suppose that some cases of treating a person as a mere means are less serious than others? One explanation for a distinction people often make between permissible and impermissible acts of this type is the level of harm that will be done to others. On this commonsense view, it is possible to treat ourselves and others as mere means without doing lasting (or, for certain

²²Barbara Herman, “Integrity and Impartiality,” in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 23-44, at p. 38.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., p. 39.

kinds of successful lies, apparent) damage to ourselves and others.

Suppose that Alice writes a novel that revolves around a fictional representation of a secret her cousin Suzanne made her promise never to reveal. Suzanne is upset and forbids Alice from publishing the novel. Alice publishes it anyway. She is not unconcerned about Suzanne's feelings; however, she spent many years on this novel, this is the story she had to tell, and any chance she has of leading a life as a writer depends on her publishing soon. Suppose Alice is correct that Suzanne will not be harmed by the publication. For example, Alice correctly believes that Suzanne's fears of public shaming are unfounded and that Suzanne is the type of person who gets very upset about certain things but recovers fairly quickly.

Alice uses Suzanne as a mere means and is also "taking attitudes toward [Suzanne] which involve regarding her as not in control of herself, which is to say, as not using her reason."²⁵ In other words, she regards a Kantian moral prohibition as less serious than her contingent purposes, and decides in favor of her meaning-conferring purposes. To do this does not require her to entirely disregard moral considerations. Instead, she weighs the seriousness of a set of moral considerations against a loss of meaning if she ends up as a lawyer, or a schoolteacher, rather than a novelist. If Suzanne's life is ruined, then this may be another story. But taking the relevance of this into account again requires that we balance moral considerations against a person's meaning-conferring reason that does not make sense within Kantian theory, because a meaning-conferring reason is, morally speaking, simply one of a person's contingent ends. With respect to its moral relevance against Kantian moral requirements, there is nothing special about a meaning-conferring reason when compared to any other contingent reasons. This may be the basis of Williams's complaint that Kantian theory does not take character and identity seriously. Although this complaint is overdrawn, it is true that with respect to the view we should have of our reasons, Kantian theory does not take into account the disruption to character and identity that is involved in acting against one's meaning-conferring projects or the moral relevance of this for agents. If Kantian morality requires a person to regard Kantian morality as her only unconditional project, it seems that the agent should also take this view on her reasons.

Herman intimates that the real issue only arises for serious moral requirements:

The moral agent knows in advance that neither his identification of himself with a project nor the (true) fact that if he is unable to act as he wants his life will be emptied of meaning for him is sufficient to justify his acting against (serious) moral requirements. Indeed,

²⁵Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie," p. 141.

given the possibility of grossly immoral projects or vile actions taken for the sake of morally neutral projects, it does not seem rational to want it otherwise.²⁶

If we assume, as Herman suggests, that a person is permitted to negotiate between meaning-conferring pursuits and less serious moral considerations, does Kantian morality allow us to balance meaning-conferring pursuits against Kantian moral requirements? Some meaning-conferring pursuits have *moral relevance* in the sense that they affect the overall moral verdict on a particular situation. For example, the importance of meaning to a person does seem to affect whether a consideration such as treating a person as a mere means in a way that does him no serious harm actually generates an overriding moral requirement. The strength of Alice's meaning-conferring reason will be quite different from the strength of another reason she may have. It would not be defensible for her to break her promise and tell Suzanne's story simply to impress a person she admires. However, the agent's perspective that her meaning-conferring reason carries a weight that affects whether treating someone as a means is serious enough to require her to act on that consideration is entirely illegitimate on the Kantian view. If we take up Herman's suggestion that Kantian morality must be a moral person's unconditional project, and she is required to expect that she is always unjustified in any attempt to balance considerations that (on Kantian theory) always generate requirements and meaning-conferring considerations, then we better understand Williams's claim that morality has a very extensive reach over the person's life, her self, and her character, on the Kantian view.

This argument does not show that there is no defense of Kantian moral requirements against these claims. It only shows that the meaning objection is still a live objection in two ways. First, the fact that Kantian requirements are limiting conditions does not show that Kantian requirements are undemanding in terms of what they mean for a person's life and her character. Second, since the Kantian conception of what a moral person is does not exhaust all options of what it means to be a moral person, Herman's reply to Williams has not shown that a person who acts on her meaning-conferring reason against a Kantian requirement has also failed to satisfy every plausible moral defense of the priority she gives to her meaning-conferring reason.

Williams's claims are broad enough to warrant Herman's concern about grossly immoral projects and vile actions. But the meaning objection can also be modified to accommodate this concern by assuming, as Williams tacitly seems to, that the person in question is not an egoist or amoral and refrained from structuring her life around the type of project that by its nature requires immorality to pursue. The problem the mean-

²⁶Herman, "Integrity and Impartiality," p. 39.

ing objection raises still occurs for people who are committed to being morally decent and who have a categorical desire to lead a moral life (if this desire, so far, is left open to other, non-Kantian, views of what that amounts to). If Herman's earlier claim that the commitment to comply with Kantian moral requirements is an unconditional commitment, however, there is not sufficient warrant to suppose that an agent's meaning-conferring projects will only conflict with serious moral requirements. In fact, there is nothing that permits the agent to negotiate with morality here, in defense of his contingent meaning-conferring commitments, when pursuit of the project conflicts with a perfect duty or requires ignoring imperfect duties to an extent that is impermissible.

It makes sense to suppose, as Herman seems to, that there is some morally respectable path to determining when a moral consideration is not sufficiently strong to outweigh a meaning-conferring commitment. In Kantian theory there is no such path for actions that violate the categorical imperative in any way. If meaning is not morally relevant to the overall moral verdict, then a person cannot regard her meaning-conferring pursuits as having a stronger weight than an unserious moral requirement even if she could act in a non-vile way. It is not clear where Kantian theory leaves room for a negotiation between an action necessary to continue with, or pursue, or achieve, a meaning-conferring goal and trivial violations of the categorical imperative. Any conflict a moral agent would have about such matters seems to be a result of her inability to understand what her reasons really are. However, it is arguable that even people who regard living a moral life as partially constitutive of their character could have a meaning-conferring reason to engage in negotiation with the type of moral considerations that generate moral requirements when various less serious reasons are at stake. And it is possible that doing so may be morally defensible.

2.

Susan Wolf offers a view of the relationship between our reason to live and those activities, relationships, interests, projects, and experiences that give our lives meaning that is not explained in Williams's view.²⁷ First, Wolf claims that it is the importance of meaning to our lives that gives Williams's meaning objection its force. One problem with losing mean-

²⁷It is clear that given Wolf's view that objective value is a necessary condition for meaningfulness, meaning and the reason to live cannot be coextensive. For example, my reason to live might be to wreak vengeance on the person who destroyed my father's farm (as in the film *Manon of the Spring*), but, if Wolf is correct about objective value, this reason does not make my life meaningful.

ing may be a loss of happiness, but meaning is valuable independently of its importance to personal happiness.²⁸ Wolf agrees with Williams that a reason to live is a condition of an interest in one's life, but she adds that being able to pursue meaning in the form of one's reason to live "is an important element of a good life."²⁹

Second, Wolf claims that what a person finds meaningful is often subject to a limited choice. Many different kinds of valuable activities—art, travel, philanthropic work, political activism, civic engagement—might give our lives meaning. However, we cannot simply choose to find one of these things meaningful, as we may not have a subjective attraction to it. We cannot necessarily find an objectively valuable pursuit meaningful by an act of will.³⁰

The third fact about meaning is critical to Wolf's argument, although she does not think that Williams would necessarily endorse it: meaning depends on a relationship between our activities and that which is objectively valuable. Although our lives are made meaningful by our attachments and interests, Wolf argues that not every desired object or activity lends meaning to a life. We can recognize the difference between, for example, the meaninglessness of watching TV or doing crossword puzzles, and the meaningfulness of engaging in loving relationships or "a life dedicated to music."³¹ The difference, Wolf claims, lies in our belief that the latter is objectively valuable while the former is not:

Meaningfulness in life, in other words, arises out of people 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 as bound up with things, people, activities or projects of worth in a deep and positive way.³²

To find our lives meaningful, we must believe that our involvements have objective worth. However, we may be wrong about this, according to Wolf. Thus, it is possible that some of the involvements we think are meaningful actually are so (when they are bound up with things of objective value) and some might not be (when what we believe is valuable turns out not to be).

Wolf's claim here requires some defense. If the issue raised by the meaning objection is whether a person is motivationally rooted or cares about anything, her *belief* that her attachments have value should be suf-

²⁸Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," p. 303.

²⁹Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," p. 207.

³⁰The converse does not seem true, however. Presumably, we could prevent ourselves from pursuing immoral projects in order to avoid the (subjective, and on Wolf's view, illegitimate) sense of meaning they might provide.

³¹Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," p. 304.

³²Ibid.

ficient. People can believe that worthless or even immoral pursuits are objectively valuable, or they can fail to reflect on what they value and choose valueless projects. A hit man could regard his service to the mafia boss as valuable and gain a sense that his life is meaningful, frequently revisiting with pride his skill at assassination. Wolf does not think that our lives must have ultimate meaning, from the point of view of the universe, to be meaningful. Why must our aims be objectively valuable?

In defense of Wolf's claim, it seems a reasonable assumption that meaningfulness requires some secure grounding in the facts about one's life. That is, there may be a counterfactual condition on meaningfulness. For a person's life to be actually meaningful, she must be able to retain her subjective sense of meaning were she to know the relevant facts about her projects, including their value. While our sense of meaningfulness depends upon what we believe about our lives, we can suppose that for our lives to be actually meaningful, what we believe about them must be roughly true.

Wolf's argument relies on a plausible assumption about the tie between our subjective sense of meaning and our beliefs about the value of what we do. If I believe both that X matters to me and that X does not objectively matter (that is, if I believe my interest in X is a mere idiosyncrasy since X isn't actually valuable), then it is unlikely that X will make my life meaningful to me. I may enjoy X, and this enjoyment may make my life more pleasant, but it doesn't make my life meaningful, even to me. Thus Wolf's claim about objective meaning requires that one's belief in the objective value of the thing one is pursuing must be true, to a large extent. Some people may find fulfillment in valueless pursuits such as counting blades of grass but, Wolf argues, although fulfillment is associated with meaning, it is insufficient for it. She defends this claim, in part, by arguing that our fulfillment is usually dependent on our belief that it is caused by what is actually valuable. Discovering that the cause of our fulfillment is not valuable makes the fulfillment irrelevant to meaning. When a woman discovers that she was being used, rather than loved, in a romantic relationship, her prior fulfillment does not make the relationship meaningful in retrospect.³³

Wolf offers a slogan to explain meaning: it "arises in a person's life when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."³⁴ The contribution a thing makes to meaning in our lives is dependent not only on its value but also on our attraction to it. Meaning, when understood as a form of response to things of objective value, is partly involuntary. And meaningfulness is vulnerable to disruption because, although there may

³³Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," pp. 216-19.

³⁴Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," p. 305.

be a wide variety of objectively valuable pursuits, we will not be attracted to all those pursuits.

Wolf claims that a wide variety of pursuits, activities, and experiences will be meaning-conferring:

One can get meaning from creating, promoting, protecting (worthwhile) things, from helping people one loves and people in need, from achieving levels of skill and excellence, from overcoming obstacles, from gaining understanding, and even from just communing with or actively appreciating what is there to be appreciated.³⁵

What gives life meaning, according to Wolf, are less the particular “well-defined and goal-oriented tasks” than the “larger involvements” that are made up of these tasks.³⁶ What she seems to mean by this is that the larger involvements are the point of these smaller tasks. If a person’s life is to be meaningful, she must be engaged in what she does, and the larger involvements in the overall pattern of her life must be worthwhile. The second criterion, that of attachment, depends not only on our belief that what we do matters, but also on how we experience what we do. Meaning “consists in active engagement in projects and activities of worth.”³⁷ If a person is involved in an objectively valuable activity but finds her life meaningless because she is not deeply engaged, she is lacking in a categorical desire that gives her a reason to live.

Conversely, a person might be actively engaged by things that are objectively worthless, either because they are trivial (e.g., “memorizing the dictionary”) or because they are of questionable value:

Controversial cases will include the corporate lawyer who sacrifices her private life and health for success along the professional ladder, the devotee of a religious cult, or ... the pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs.³⁸

This suggests an omission in Wolf’s argument, however. To explain why building a pig empire and sacrificing personal choices for corporate law are questionable as sources of meaning, we must consider more than the absence of objective value. There is (potentially) *some* objective value in these projects. Even the religious cultist might experience moments of religious transcendence or a meaningful sense of community with other cultists. Setting aside the issue of the ethical treatment of animals, the pig farmer is providing food to others (although his focus may lie primarily in expanding his pig empire). We see more clearly why it is questionable that such projects could provide meaning by considering (1) whether

³⁵Wolf, “Happiness and Meaning,” p. 212.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 213.

³⁸Ibid., p. 211.

they are projects of significant value, and (2) whether the person's engagement connects to her overall view about the role the projects have in shaping her life. That is, even if a person experiences objective value to which she is subjectively attached, this may be insufficient to create meaning. This would suggest that it is not just subjective attachment to objective value that creates meaning, but the significance of the valued pursuits and the person's view that the pursuit would make her *life* meaningful.

Therefore, the significance of what we pursue seems to be an additional condition for projects to be meaningful. Quite a few things we do engage with objective value in a (sometimes minuscule) way. Many trivial activities, such as enjoying an art reproduction on the back of a postcard or stocking the birdfeeder through the winter, engage with some objective value. Video games can have aesthetic value and demand levels of skill that are arguably comparable to athletic activities or playing chess, in terms of the value they add to someone's life. Williams emphasizes that reasons to live play a central role in our identity and character. Many activities that we are attracted to, particularly activities of appreciation and enjoyment of value, are insufficient to pull us forward into the future or form the basis of identity and character.

3.

On Wolf's view, various objectively valuable activities that engage and enliven us give our lives meaning. Although it is a controversial aspect of her argument, I will not challenge Wolf's pluralist view about value or her claim that the value must be objective.³⁹ The question I raise is whether this picture of an engaged active person, one who is doing what she has reason to value, captures the conflict between meaning-conferring reasons and moral reasons that the meaning objection raises.

One question about Wolf's view of meaning as it applies to this issue has already been mentioned: many activities that are sufficiently similar to the activities Wolf regards as objectively valuable and meaning-conferring—for example, watching ballet, or an interest in chess—are insignificant or trivial and primarily sought after as enjoyable personal experiences.⁴⁰ This is not to say they are not worth doing. Rather, many

³⁹Wolf does not intend to defend her idea of what is objectively valuable with a theory of worth. She grounds her view primarily in beliefs people have about their own and others' pursuits. Cf. "Happiness and Meaning," pp. 212-13. It is not clear that she needs a view of objective value for the argument to work, however. What seems necessary for her argument is primarily the claim that some things are valuable and others are not and this is true independently of whatever view the person doing the valuing has on the matter.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 212.

activities we are attracted to that engage with objective value are not likely candidates for a reason to live. This is because, although we can be strongly attached to them, they are insufficient to give us an interest in the future. A good reason for pursuing such activities is that they enhance our lives. Their value is not independent of our existence and they would not give us a reason to go on if we otherwise saw no point to that.

The meaning objection suggests three main problems with the expectation that we must always act on certain kinds of moral requirements. First, acting on certain moral requirements can require us to act against a reason that grounds our interest in our future. Second, when we act against our reason to live, we may act against an organizing element in our character, that is, a categorical desire we believe we must (frequently, if not always) give normative priority to when it competes with other things we could do. Finally, our conception of ourselves is bound up in categorical desires. They determine, perhaps not wholly, the kind of person we decide to be. If a desire to pursue something constitutes a categorical desire and hence a person's reason to live, that desire is central to her life and agency. Many of our valued activities—and even the larger valuable involvements of which they are a part, as Wolf puts it—do not have this kind of centrality.

However, Wolf's view is that a life engaged in worthwhile activity is not irrelevant to meaning. Rather, two kinds of meaning matter to us. Meaning as *contribution* depends on pursuits that make our lives worthy or estimable to us because, if successful, we will achieve a valuable purpose with our lives. When we seek a purpose for our lives, we look to contribute something of value and significance to the world. Meaning as *engagement* makes life worth living when we regularly experience or appreciate what is valuable.

Questions about meaning and meaningfulness in life break down into a number of related, but conceptually separable, questions. Thus, questions about the meaning of life can be: Does life have an ultimate purpose? Is our life significant in some way over and above our interest in it? Is life worth living? Is our life itself worthwhile? The latter two questions, because they concern how we structure our lives, are relevant to the issue here. They are also the questions we are most likely to ask ourselves.

Meaning as engagement depends on whether a person's life is worth living. Life is more worth living if we are able to appreciate, engage with, and experience that which is valuable. The experience of living is enriched when we listen to music, travel to interesting places, or revel in nature. I take the term "engagement" from Wolf. She claims that

[a] person is actively engaged by something if she is gripped, excited, involved by it. Most obviously, we are actively engaged by the things and people about which and

whom we are passionate ... To be actively engaged in something is not always pleasant ... (consider, for example: writing a book, climbing a mountain, training for a marathon, caring for an ailing friend). However, there is something good about the feeling of engagement: one feels (typically without thinking about it) especially alive.⁴¹

Meaning as contribution depends on activities that reflect our agency, closely shape our deliberative choices and satisfy our desire to be effective actors in the world. Realizing certain purposes can make our life worthwhile. Purposive reasons provide the meaningfulness of contributing to or creating value in the world through our actions. For these to play a central role in shaping our lives and character, we must regard what they are for as significant. Our desire to lead a worthy life shapes many of the projects we choose, including moral projects. This explains why the failure of a central project threatens a life's meaningfulness. We might value the courage or perseverance we show in pursuing our life's purpose, but we ultimately want something to result from our efforts. Our evaluation on the worth of our lives, both retrospective and prospective, can depend on our project's success.

People often seek both kinds of meaning. We can find life worth living because we value activities that enliven our existence. Further, we value living because of our desire to do something worthwhile *with* our lives. Both of these are vulnerable to alterations in our capacity to pursue what we value. If playing the piano is a hobby that enriches my life, then anything that permanently interferes with my ability to play the piano (e.g., arthritis) would be a blow that could make my life less worth living to me. One reason that severe illness or disability has the potential to make life less meaningful is that these curtail our ability to commune with or actively appreciate "what there is to be appreciated" or achieve "levels of skill and excellence."⁴² Our ability to be fully engaged in activities that make life worth living is vulnerable to circumstance because such experiences can depend on sufficient wealth, opportunity, and mental or physical health.

However, meaning as engagement is much less vulnerable to disruption by acting on moral reasons rather than meaning-conferring reasons. The pursuits that ground meaning as engagement most plausibly conflict only with very demanding and pervasive versions of morality, for example, versions of act-consequentialism, whose scope extends to most of our actions. Our ability to have experiences of the type Wolf regards as meaning-conferring, such as appreciation of the arts, requires time and resources. On some act-utilitarian views, there may be an overriding reason to use some of these resources to decrease suffering or promote other

⁴¹Ibid., p. 209.

⁴²Ibid., p. 212.

good consequences. Less pervasive forms of consequentialism, such as indirect consequentialism or rule-consequentialism usually leave sufficient room for people to pursue many projects of this kind.

Reasons that promote meaning as engagement are not persuasive competitors to the limiting conditions that Kantian requirements place on action. Satisfying Kantian moral requirements may interfere with particular instances where I might have more of this kind of meaning of my life. I might not be able to afford tickets to the opera unless I steal or borrow money I cannot repay. We can also imagine highly specific projects of engagement that conflict with moral requirements. For example, my aesthetic appreciation of indigenous art may tempt me to acquire rare archeological artifacts when doing so conflicts with the patrimony rights of other cultures and is against their consent. However, I do not have an especially strong *meaning-based* reason to prefer my projects of engagement in specific instances when this interest conflicts with important moral considerations, like others' rights. It may add meaning to my life to ignore morality in these instances, but this is not necessary for me to retain meaning in my life, as long as I have other opportunities to experience similar kinds of activities. Thus, my reason to pursue this kind of meaning is not especially defensible here against a putative moral requirement.

Likewise, my identity and character are not significantly threatened if I promote a moral consideration over my projects of engagement in a specific instance. Less pervasive views, such as Kant's view, will only constrain me in very limited ways. Projects of engagement do have some relevance to our understanding of our identity and our character. If they are connected to our aesthetic outlook on the world, for example, they can affect important life choices (e.g., about where we live or whom we marry). But in situations where they conflict with other things we have a reason to do, we do not threaten our reason to live or our character if we assign them a fairly low normative priority. This is not similarly true of reasons to act on categorical desires whose purpose is to contribute value. If a person is unable to be a novelist or fight for the revolution, or if she utterly fails at these pursuits, important aspects of her character and her self-concept will fundamentally change. But even an ardent cinephile or classical music lover could accept alteration in these projects without regarding them as a betrayal of what her life is about.

Successfully promoting our categorical desires for valuable aims is meaningful because it gives worth to our lives. Whether our life is meaningful in terms of the contribution we intend to make does not primarily depend on our being enlivened by pursuing the project, although we may be. Meaning depends instead on the project's successful realization and our contribution to that. The relevant sense of meaning here arises from

how we utilize our agency and the evaluation that our life will amount to something worthwhile. The main issue, with respect to morality, is that acting on certain kinds of overriding moral requirements could make it impossible to realize these projects. This will be true for both pervasive and demanding conceptions of impartial requirements, like act-utilitarianism, and for views where morality is a limiting condition on action, such as Kantian theory.

Meaning as contribution is more vulnerable than meaning as engagement to competition from moral considerations. Forgoing opportunities to promote projects where we create or contribute something of value to the world can cause us to fail at our purpose. These projects are not easily replaced by other meaningful projects. This is not just because our attraction to projects cannot be willed, but also because our contingent inclinations, abilities, and limited time and opportunity limit our chances to do something worthwhile with our lives. Acting on competing reasons can make it impossible for us to go on with that project and to achieve what our categorical desire requires. As Williams points out, certain categorical desires are exceedingly difficult to act against without also failing to live the life one has chosen. If I fail to protect my child, my nation, my honor, or my work, I may betray what I believe my life is about. The inability to realize a project can leave a person with nothing to live for. A moral requirement that forbids me from lying to fake a disability may also prevent me from finishing my novel. Scientific work or similarly all-consuming projects may require a life that excludes beneficence for a morally unacceptable length of time. Unless I leave the injured person by the roadside, I will not make my crucial audition. Success at getting a rich and arrogant person to support my documentary may require a morally unacceptable amount of servility, flattery, and deceit. If my failure to make the documentary means that I have to move in with my sister and become a waitress, the life that results from acting on moral reasons may not be the life I have chosen to lead. Nor will it necessarily be a life I desire to lead.

The strength of a meaning-conferring reason for an agent does not depend entirely on the costs to her happiness, her psychology, or her other interests if she fails to satisfy it. A person's intention to live the life she has chosen for herself is one of her interests, but it is also more fundamental than self-interest. Categorical desires will structure the priority she gives even to other self-interested reasons. Further, the weight the agent believes it is necessary to give to her reason to choose the person she is and lead the life she intends depends on the reason's status as categorical, and this is not fully explicable in terms of self-interest. Williams claims, for example, that if death is necessary for our ground project,

then we have a reason to die for it.⁴³ Such reasons are necessarily stronger than those we have for other things that would benefit us, such as a desire to be rich or better-looking. To lead a life that is consistent with her character and identity requires a person to weigh these reasons very heavily against competing considerations—for example, against things that might benefit her in other ways or that she desperately wants.

However, there are still issues with how defensible these reasons are when weighed against competing moral considerations. These reasons surely do not defeat moral restrictions on people's desire to take the quickest and easiest path to successfully achieving their meaning-conferring projects when doing so requires immorality. There are also cases in which people conceive of their projects as deeply valuable, even morally valuable—for example, defending the nation—and that conception seems to distort what it is actually defensible for them to do. Reasons to promote justice or loyalty to country often cause people to be disturbingly favorable to their own goals against very strong moral considerations, like not killing innocent people. One thing that rules out many of these actions is the very clear limit on the defensibility of pursuing meaning-conferring reasons: whether the success of my project actually depends on rejecting these moral considerations. In many cases, it probably does not. Yet, if there is already a moral burden on an agent to consider alternative actions when the success of her projects is not at stake, this indicates that moral considerations *could* generate requirements that override meaning-conferring reasons when meaning is not threatened.

More importantly, it is questionable whether meaning-conferring reasons ever outweigh reasons to respect serious moral considerations, such as the prohibition against severely harming others. If it is not plausible to assume that they do, this does not mean that the issue Williams's argument raises can be ignored by theories where moral requirements are overriding. There remains the question of how we structure moral requirements to accommodate these reasons within a conception of moral requirements. This is a difficult question that I cannot answer here.

However, meaning itself limits what a person can do in the pursuit of her projects. Our concern to lead a worthwhile life can be defeated by ignoring certain moral considerations. Our estimation of the worth of our life is potentially affected by everything we have done, or failed to do, with our lives. Thus, more than the success of our projects is relevant to whether our life is meaningful. If worth is a measure of meaning, then serious acts of immorality affect whether our lives turn out to be meaningful. I have argued that the meaning objection is not plausible when it

⁴³Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," p. 13.

is so widely construed that it includes people who do not take moral considerations as reason-giving at all. The relevant person for the meaning objection is someone who gives morality a role in the projects she chooses to structure her life around. As Williams puts it, we are considering a normally socialized individual. A person like this will be unable to avoid giving considerable weight to serious moral considerations. For example, certain moral constraints are very difficult to ignore for anyone reliably responsive to moral considerations; she will not feel free to murder or torture others to accomplish her personal goals.⁴⁴

On the view that meaning depends on the worth of your life, seriously harming another person in pursuit of a project is unavoidably relevant to the worth of the project itself. It can matter not just whether your project is successful but what you did to make your project successful. If the path to your success is littered with bodies (or maybe just with swindled retirees), then your life is less worthwhile. In fact, it may be close to worthless. It is also true that the actions we perform necessarily affect an accurate conception of our character and identity. Although acting or failing to act on categorical desires necessarily affects our character and self-concept, our character and the person we are is also reflected in the life we lead.

4.

I have argued in this paper for a number of limits on the meaning objection. I have argued that the meaning objection is not plausible unless we assume that the person's ground projects are already limited by morality. I have also followed Wolf in making a claim about ground projects: they must realize some form of objective value if they are to be defensible against considerations that would make an action wrong, in the absence of the meaning-conferring reason. I do not think Wolf's account of meaning is strong enough to carry the weight of the meaning objection, however, because some projects that satisfy the criteria of being attractive to a person and objectively valuable are not significant enough or central enough in a person's character to form the basis of a plausible reason to live. Instead, I have argued that a person's reason to live is tied to her effort to make her life worthy, and that whether or not her life is meaningful can depend on whether she manages to achieve something

⁴⁴Scheffler argues that there is no principled defense of agent-centered restrictions, e.g., on harming, that constrain agents from actions that directly harm whose purpose is to prevent greater harms. One reason people regard constraints as particularly relevant to the worth of their lives is that directly harming someone is different in terms of its effects on character and how one regards one's life. Being the cause or agent of harm is something that one has done whereas failing to prevent someone else from harming is not.

worthwhile with her life whose value is independent of her desire for it.

My argument explains why agents are required to regard their meaning-conferring reasons as exceptionally strong reasons. The main part of this explanation is not that meaning is part of a person's good (and thus the loss of meaning is costly to her). More importantly, our ability to shape our lives, our character and our identity, understood as our concept of the kind of person we are, requires us to give meaning-conferring reasons greater weight than many other reasons we could potentially act upon. To lead the life we have chosen and be the person we intend to be, we must give reasons for categorical desires significantly greater priority than what are typically considered to be our self-interested reasons to satisfy other desires and preferences. We may also give meaning-conferring reasons greater priority than many aspects of our good and sometimes regard them as worth dying for.

I doubt that meaning-conferring reasons outweigh all moral requirements. That is, the meaning objection may not show that morality is never overriding, under any circumstances. One reason it does not show this is that many things we do are potentially relevant to whether our lives are worthy and acting immorally can sometimes make a person's life unworthy. Another reason the meaning objection does not solve the question of overridingness is that we can clearly require a person to attend to moral requirements when doing so does not threaten meaning but only makes her projects more difficult to realize. It is more plausible to conclude that rather than showing that moral requirements never override meaning-conferring reasons, the meaning objection raises a question about what we are actually morally required to do.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS??]