

ARTICLE

Well-Being and Meaning in Life

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Abstract

Many philosophers now see meaning in life as a key evaluative category that stands alongside well-being and moral goodness. Our lives are assessed not only by how well they go for us and how morally good they are, but also by their meaningfulness. In this article, I raise a challenge to this view. Theories of meaning in life closely resemble theories of well-being, and there is a suspicion that the former collapse into the latter. I develop this challenge showing that it is formidable. I then answer it by offering a novel account of what meaning in life is and how it differs from well-being. The account I offer is able to resist the strongest form of the challenge while also having much intuitive appeal.

Keywords: Meaning in life; well-being; balance; value theory

Almost everyone wants to live a *good* life. Yet, philosophers point to an ambiguity here. When we refer to a life as “good,” we may be thinking of its *moral* goodness or its *prudential* goodness. Thus, there are two separate questions we can ask about our lives:

- (1) Is my life going well for me?
- (2) Is my life a morally good life?

The first question is about personal welfare or well-being—how well am I faring in life? The second question is about individual moral goodness or virtue. Although well-being and moral goodness often coincide, we recognize that there are circumstances where they come apart. For example, a morally outstanding life could fail to be a great life for the person living it if, despite her virtue, her life is full of pain, suffering, tragedy, and betrayal. Thus, a standard assumption in value theory is that there are two main ways to evaluate a life—by its *moral* quality and by its *prudential* quality.

Recently, a literature on meaning in life has emerged in analytic philosophy which challenges the idea that there are just two main ways to evaluate a life. This literature points to a third question that we can ask about our lives:

- (3) Is my life meaningful?

It takes this question to reflect a third evaluative category that we apply to our lives. In addition to being prudentially better or worse, and morally better or worse, lives can also be more or less meaningful. The meaning that lives possess is distinct from both the well-being and the moral goodness that they contain. Thus, how meaningful a life is need not correspond to how morally good it is, or to how well it goes for the person living it.¹

¹Woodard (2017) calls this “the consensus view” because it is widely held in the literature. Examples include: Wolf (1997, 2010), Metz (2002, 2013), Audi (2005), Goldman (2009), Smuts (2013a, 2013b), and Rowlands (2015).

In the first part of this article, I present a challenge to the idea that meaning is a distinct evaluative category from well-being. I call this the ‘deflationary challenge’ to meaning in life as it undermines the importance of ‘meaning’ as an evaluative concept. It points to the similarities between theories of well-being and theories of meaning and the fact that both categories are concerned with personal goods that are worth having in your life for their own sake. Although advocates of meaning in life have been aware of the need to distinguish it from well-being, I argue that the main reasons they give in favor of there being a difference are inadequate. There is a real threat that talk of “meaning in life” dissolves into talk of “well-being,” in which case the emerging literature on meaning in life rests on a mistake.

In the second part of this article, I offer a solution to the deflationary challenge. The main force of the challenge comes from the fact that any good noninstrumentally contributing to the meaningfulness of your life is also the kind of good that can noninstrumentally contribute to your well-being. Therefore, distinguishing meaning from well-being by the goods that contribute to them seems untenable. A promising alternative, I argue, is to distinguish meaning and well-being by the aggregation principles they use. Perhaps the goods that give our lives meaning also make our lives go well for us, yet, the ways these goods combine to produce meaning in our lives differs from the way they combine to produce well-being. I develop a proposal along these lines that makes use of Thomas Hurka’s (1987) idea that balance between different final goods plays an important role in how they aggregate. The resulting theory of meaning in life fits surprisingly well with our intuitive judgments about the meaning and well-being contained in various lives. It also makes sense of the idea that sometimes we face trade-offs in which we can either opt for a more meaningful life or for a life of greater personal welfare. The result is a radically new way of conceptualizing what meaning in life is and how it relates to well-being.

1. The Deflationary Challenge

Before outlining the deflationary challenge, it is important to clarify the key notion of meaning in life. Recent literature on this topic has tended to focus on the question “What makes a life meaningful?” rather than the question “What is the meaning of life?”. Many regard these questions as distinct even though their answers are potentially linked.² The former question concerns individual lives—what, if anything, makes an individual life meaningful? The latter question concerns the universe as a whole and the place of humans within it—does the universe have a meaning and what cosmic significance do humans have? To see that they are distinct questions, note that it does not appear incoherent for someone to argue that individual lives are made meaningful by being connected in the right way to things of value, yet hold that humans have no cosmic significance and the universe has no ultimate point. I will follow the trend in the literature and discuss meaning in terms of individual lives rather than in terms of the human species or the universe as a whole.

A second important point to note about meaning in life is that there is broad agreement in the literature that it is an evaluative notion describing a kind of noninstrumental personal good that our lives can contain.³ This means that the things (or thing) that constitute meaning are goods that it is worth having in your life for their own sake. All else being equal, the more of these goods we have in our lives the more desirable our lives will be, and the less of them we have the less desirable our lives will be.

The deflationary challenge alleges that meaning in life, understood in these terms, is not a distinct evaluative category from well-being. A promising way to press this challenge is to note

²For example, see Metz (2007, 211), Wong (2008), Metz (2013, 3), and Rowlands (2015, 380). The label ‘meaning in life’ is sometimes used for the former question, and ‘the meaning of life’ for the latter.

³For example, see Wolf (1997, 2010), Metz (2002, 2013), Cottingham (2003, 20), Audi (2005), Kauppinen (2012, 2015), Kekes (2013), Rowlands (2015), Landau (2017), and Hammerton (2022).

various strong similarities between standard theories of well-being and standard theories of meaning in life. Here is Ben Bradley articulating this point:

What is it to have a meaningful life? The answers to this question have largely fallen into the same pattern as answers to the question of what it is to be well-off. Some have thought that meaningfulness is subjective—if you enjoy your life, or get what you most want in life, your life is meaningful ... If this is what meaningfulness amounts to, then we have already covered it [under subjective theories of well-being]. More commonly, though, it is thought that there is an objective component to a meaningful life. For example, Susan Wolf has defended the view that to have a meaningful life is to have positive engagement in activities that are themselves objectively worthwhile ... Wolf's view is very similar to the more sophisticated “hybrid” versions of hedonism and desire fulfilment views ... Some have thought that achievement is of particular importance in having a meaningful life—but achievement is also alleged to be an important component of well-being. (Bradley 2015, 66)

Bradley concludes:

So it is not clear whether meaningfulness is really a distinct notion from well-being ... It might be that when someone is concerned about a lack of meaning in her life, she is really just concerned that it lacks some important component of well-being such as the ones we have already discussed. (67)

There are indeed the strong similarities that Bradley notes. Theories of well-being and theories of meaning in life both come in subjective, objective, and hybrid forms. Furthermore, the various goods (objective and subjective) that theories of well-being and theories of meaning appeal to closely correspond. For example, subjectivist theories of well-being have appealed to pleasure, desire fulfilment, life satisfaction, and value fulfilment (Tiberius 2018). Subjectivists about meaning in life have also appealed to pleasure (Goetz 2016), desire fulfilment (Trisel 2002), life satisfaction (Hooker 2008), and value fulfilment (Alexis 2011). On the objectivist side, the same objective goods—knowledge, love, beauty, moral excellence, achievement, creativity, etc.—appear in both objectivist theories of meaning in life and objectivist theories of well-being. Generally, any view put forward about well-being will have some analog among views about meaning, and vice versa.⁴

Bradley suggests that these strong similarities indicate a lack of distinctness.⁵ Why would theories of well-being and theories of meaning in life coincide like this? Perhaps the best explanation is that they are actually theories addressing the same phenomenon. This explanation certainly seems like a leading candidate and its plausibility gives us a *prima facie* case against distinctness. However, to get a strong abduction we need to consider various alternative explanations and examine reasons for and against them, which is something I will address in the next section.

This challenge is further supported by noting that, as discussed above, the things (or thing) that constitute meaning are goods that it is worth having in your life for their own sake. This makes the coincidence between theories of meaning in life and theories of well-being even stronger. For

⁴Two possible exceptions are supernaturalism and consequentialism about meaning in life. However, even here the analogy might be preserved. Supernaturalism about meaning holds that the existence of a God is, in some way, essential for humans to live meaningful lives. However, a similar idea might be held about well-being. For example, perhaps being the creation of a loving God who will reward your love and devotion with eternal bliss is a great good in life and our lives go poorly for us if they lack this good.

Consequentialism about meaning holds that the meaningfulness of our lives corresponds to the amount of good we bring about in the world. If this idea is plausible then presumably that is because bringing about good in the world is a worthwhile achievement that you can have in your life. However, ‘achievementism’ is a theory of well-being that ties well-being to worthwhile achievement (see Keller 2004).

⁵Kershner (2014) and Woodard (2017) make similar suggestions.

example, suppose a theory of meaning in life says that meaning consists of three goods—truth, virtue, and beauty. It follows that the presence of these goods in your life is desirable for its own sake. Now compare this with a theory of well-being that counts these three things as final prudential goods. It also says that having each of these good things in your life is desirable for its own sake. Thus, both theories look very similar and, at first glance, it is hard to see how the theory of meaning in life is saying something different from the theory of well-being. By contrast, consider a moral theory that lists truth, beauty, and virtue as final moral goods. This theory would normally be understood as saying that these three goods are things worth having *in the world* for their own sake, and thus is clearly distinct from a theory of well-being that counts these things as prudential goods.

2. Four Responses to the Challenge

What I have called ‘the deflationary challenge’ is not widely recognized in the literature on meaning in life. The ‘strong similarity’ argument I develop above has received very little engagement.⁶ In general, the possibility that meaning in life might collapse into well-being is not regarded as a serious threat. Nonetheless, it is common for discussions of meaning in life to explain (often only briefly) why it is a distinct category from well-being. From these explanations four potential strategies emerge for answering the deflationary challenge and defending the autonomy of meaning.

The first strategy draws on a defense of welfare hedonism offered by Haslett (1990), Kawall (1999), and Feldman (2012). Most people judge that living a normal human life is preferable to living a more pleasurable life of artificially generated experiences in an ‘experience machine.’ Nozick (1974) influentially argues that by making this judgment we are rejecting hedonism. Haslett, Kawall, and Feldman counter that the judgment is better explained by people valuing things beyond their own well-being. Maybe a life inside the experience machine is a better life for the person living it. Yet perhaps most people are justified in rejecting such a life because, in addition to their own well-being, they also value other things, such as authenticity or achievement, things which they miss out on in the experience machine.

Smuts (2013a) appeals to this idea in order to distinguish meaning from well-being.⁷ He suggests that what is especially unappealing about a life lived in the experience machine is that it lacks meaning. The experience of winning a Nobel Prize may feel great, but if it is a “fake” experience not based on any real-life achievement, then having it is not very meaningful. Given this, he suggests that when Haslett, Kawall, and Feldman argue that certain things can be valuable in your life even if they do not contribute to your well-being, the things they are referring to (authenticity, achievement, etc.) are valuable because they give your life meaning.

This position answers the deflationary challenge. Meaning does not collapse into well-being because, although there are various objective and subjective goods, well-being is correctly seen as only concerned with the subjective (or perhaps experiential) goods and meaning is correctly seen as only concerned with the objective (or perhaps nonexperiential) goods.⁸ Theories of well-being that appeal to objective goods and theories of meaning that appeal to subjective goods are simply confused.

This response to the deflationary challenge boldly asserts that many accounts of well-being and meaning in life miss their target by appealing to goods in the wrong value category. However, it suffers from the following serious flaw. Suppose that evil scientists kidnap you in your sleep and plug you into an experience machine without you realizing what has happened. You then live the

⁶ Metz’s (2014) and Woodard (2017) appear to be the only direct responses to this challenge.

⁷ See Schmitz (2001) and Metz (2007) for remarks that suggest this strategy without explicitly advocating it.

⁸ A ‘subjective good’ is a good that depends on facts about the actual or hypothetical mental states of the person who possesses it. An ‘experiential good’ is a good that consists solely in the agent who possesses it having a certain experience.

rest of your life in the machine having the same kinds of experiences that you would have had nonvirtually if you were never kidnapped. Meanwhile, your loved ones are devastated by your mysterious disappearance and never fully recover from their grief. Intuitively, your kidnappers have harmed you by depriving you of things (like a connection to reality) that are of fundamental importance to you. Even though you never realize what has happened, the end result seems bad for you—your life would have gone better if they had left you alone. Yet, Smuts (and Haslett, Kawall, and Feldman) must deny this and argue that even though on their view you are missing out on certain good things in your life, the actions of the kidnappers make no difference to how well your life goes for you. This is implausible.

A second strategy for answering the deflationary challenge is developed in the work of Metz (2007, 2012, 2013). He argues that it is a conceptual truth that hedonic states do *not* directly (i.e., noninstrumentally) contribute meaning to our lives. On the other hand, it is both conceptually possible and highly plausible that hedonic states have noninstrumental prudential value. A simple way to support Metz's thesis is to compare two "wasted lives" with different hedonic qualities. Imagine two solitary couch potatoes, who spend their lives eating junk food and watching reruns of cheesy 90's sitcoms. Now suppose that although neither of their lives is very enjoyable, the person living the first life takes slightly more pleasure in salty snacks and clichéd melodrama than the person living the second life. Thus, the hedonic balance of the first life is slightly better than that of the second life. Intuitively, this makes no difference to the meaningfulness of these lives; both lives seem equally lacking in meaning.⁹ However, it does seem to make a difference to the prudential quality of these lives. If you had to choose between these two lives, you would choose the first life because of its (slightly) better hedonic balance. Even those who reject hedonism typically accept that other things being equal, it is better for you to have more rather than less pleasure in your life.

Metz goes on to suggest that pleasure being conceptually excluded from meaning in life but not excluded from well-being demonstrates that meaning and well-being are distinct normative categories. At face value, this appears to answer the deflationary challenge. If meaning and well-being are distinct then there is no threat of the former collapsing into the latter. However, as Kershnar (2014) points out, a version of the challenge remains. Metz shows how meaning and well-being might fail to overlap because only the latter includes noninstrumental hedonic value. However, even if this is so, meaning might still overlap with the nonhedonic components of well-being and thus might collapse into this aspect of well-being. Thus, a version of the "strong similarity" argument discussed above still applies. There is a strong similarity between theories of meaning in life and the *nonhedonic components* of theories of well-being. This similarity is surprising and calls out for explanation. The best explanation might be that meaning is just another way of talking about the nonhedonic components of well-being. Therefore, if Metz's argument succeeds it only shows that the pertinent deflationary challenge is that of distinguishing meaning from the nonhedonic components of well-being.

A third strategy for answering the deflationary challenge can also be found in the work of Metz. Metz (2012, 2014) argues that some events contribute meaning to your life without enhancing your well-being. He gives two examples. First, he suggests that sacrificing your life for a noble cause plausibly makes it more meaningful but does not enhance your well-being. For example, consider a patriot who heroically dies in an independence struggle. Her sacrifice plausibly adds meaning to her life, yet wouldn't her life have gone better for her if she had instead lived longer and enjoyed more of the good things in life?¹⁰ Second, certain posthumous events plausibly make your life more

⁹Goetz (2016) appears to disagree with Metz on this point. I will assume for the sake of argument that Metz is correct on this point in order to show that other issues undermine this response to the deflationary challenge.

¹⁰'Sacrifice' should be understood here loosely as "giving up something for the sake of other considerations" so that the possibility of the acts we are describing as 'sacrifices' ultimately being in your prudential interest is not ruled out by definition. Metz's claim is that, as a substantive matter of normative fact, giving up your life for a noble cause does not make your life go better for you.

meaningful without enhancing your well-being. For example, Metz suggests that when Vincent van Gogh was posthumously recognized as a great artist this added significant meaning to his life without making it a better life to live for Vincent.

The problem with Metz's argument is that contrary to what he claims, several major theories of well-being do attribute prudential value to noble sacrifices and favorable posthumous events. In the case of noble self-sacrifice, suppose your desire to advance your chosen cause is stronger than the various desires you have that can only be realized in a longer life. In that case, the desire fulfilment theory holds that sacrificing your life for this cause is best for you as it better satisfies your desires. Perfectionist and objective list theories are also able to account for noble self-sacrifice if they include moral excellence as an objective good. Sacrificing your life for a noble cause is one of the most morally outstanding acts you can perform and thus significantly boosts your moral excellence, which in turn increases your well-being according to these theories. Of course, the resulting increase in moral excellence might be offset by the loss of various prudential goods you could have realized in a longer life. Thus, all things considered, a morally praiseworthy self-sacrifice will sometimes be prudentially bad for you. However, the same point applies to theories of meaning. Sacrificing your life for a noble cause prevents you from engaging in many of the meaningful activities that a longer life affords. The meaning that your life gains through such sacrifice may well be outweighed by the many meaningful things you would have done had you lived longer. Thus, a clear difference between theories of meaning and theories of well-being has not been established.

Moving on to favorable posthumous events, the desire fulfilment theory explains how such events can have prudential value. It tells us that if these events satisfy desires that you had during your life, they are thereby good for you. For example, if Van Gogh wanted others to appreciate his art, then its posthumous recognition was good for him. Perfectionist and objective list theories are also able to explain posthumous prudential value if they include achievement as an objective good. Although many of our achievements are realized during our own lifetime, some do not fully come to fruition until after our deaths. For example, your life's work having a positive influence on future generations is a significant achievement that only comes after your death. In summary, neither of Metz's examples demonstrate a difference between theories of meaning and theories of well-being (although I will have more to say about this in the next section).

A final strategy for answering the deflationary challenge is to view meaning as one good among many that contribute to well-being yet argue that it nonetheless has an independent status that means it does not collapse into well-being. Because it views meaning as a component of well-being, this approach is able to explain both the strong similarities between theories of well-being and meaning, and the link between noninstrumental contributors to meaning and noninstrumental prudential goods. Kauppinen's (2012) account of meaning in life is the most prominent example of this approach. He holds that the well-being of your life is determined by both its hedonic balance and how meaningful it is. He then argues that a life is meaningful to the degree that it contains objectively valuable achievements with an appealing narrative structure.

When meaning is tied to well-being in this way, there is a serious risk that it loses its independent status. As Cheshire Calhoun observes:

We have a rich evaluative language in the conceptual territory of meaningfulness already on hand for commending lives ... it is not a wholly welcome result if 'meaningful' could be fully cashed out via some alternative evaluative concept ... such that we could drop reference to meaningfulness altogether and say all that we want to say [with the evaluative concepts we already have] ... its value lies in its doing distinctive conceptual work not performed by other closely allied evaluative notions. (2015, 17)

To address this problem, the advocate of this approach must either establish that "meaning" makes a distinctive contribution to theorizing about well-being that wouldn't otherwise be available or

show that “meaning” has some normative significance beyond its role as a component of well-being. There are reasons to doubt that either of these things can be done.

Regarding the first, accounts of meaning that connect it to well-being have so far failed to show how meaning can make a distinctive contribution to theorizing about well-being. For example, Kauppinen’s position ties meaning to worthwhile achievements and an appealing narrative structure. Yet each of these notions was previously developed in the well-being literature without any appeal to the concept of “meaning.”¹¹ When Kauppinen ties them together under the label ‘meaning,’ no new theoretical insights arise that extend the well-being literature.¹² More generally, establishing a distinctive contribution to well-being seems unlikely unless “meaning” already has normative significance beyond well-being.¹³

Regarding the second, there does not appear to be any good candidates for a type of normative significance that meaning has which does not overlap with well-being. The failure of the other strategies we examined above is one piece of evidence for this. For example, if noble self-sacrifices and favorable posthumous events were personal goods without prudential value, then “meaning” might perform the useful role of explaining their personal value. However, as we saw above, the claim that they lack prudential value is unsubstantiated. Further evidence comes from examining the various significant roles given to ‘meaning’ in the literature. For example, Susan Wolf says that meaning is concerned with:

... the sort of questions people ask on their deathbeds, or simply in contemplation of their eventual deaths, about whether their lives have been (or are) worth living, whether they have had any point, and the sort of questions one asks when considering suicide and wondering whether one has any reason to go on. (1997, 208)

However, these questions are typically answered by appeal to the various objective and subjective goods found in theories of well-being (which, as we saw earlier, overlap with those found in theories of meaning). Thus, there doesn’t seem to be any distinctive work that ‘meaning’ performs here. The answers that it might give to these questions are also given by theories of well-being (e.g., your life has a point and is worth continuing because you are realizing objective goods like love, truth, and beauty in it).¹⁴

Likewise, Kauppinen (2012) and Metz (2013) argue that there is an analytic connection between a life being meaningful and it being admirable. This suggests that meaning might play the normatively significant role of characterizing why some lives are more admirable than others. However, again it is not clear here that there is a special role that meaning can play which well-being cannot. For, as Hurka (1993, 39) notes, perfectionist theories of well-being, such as Aristotle’s, can explain the admirability of our lives in terms of the excellences they exhibit. It seems likely that other

¹¹For example, Raz (1986) and Keller (2004) discuss the importance of achievement to well-being, and Brentano (1973) and Velleman (1991) discuss the importance of narrative structure.

¹²A referee helpfully suggests that understanding these features of well-being in terms of meaning could improve our understanding of them by, for example, helping us identify which achievements contribute to well-being (those that are meaningful). I agree that this proposal has potential. But, until it is developed in detail and shown to yield genuine insights, doubts about whether meaning plays any useful theoretical role in well-being will remain.

¹³The contrast with moral goodness is instructive. When certain theories of well-being appeal to moral goodness, this appeal adds something distinctive to them that cannot be plausibly captured in nonmoral language. This is presumably because moral goodness has normative significance beyond the role some take it to play in well-being—mainly the key role it plays in moral theory.

¹⁴Also note that, insofar as the notion of “life having a point” raises considerations of cosmic significance that go beyond the various subjective and objective goods, it also seems to go beyond the question “What makes a life meaningful?” and instead be about the question “What is the meaning of life?”. Yet, as we clarified at the beginning of section 1, we are following the contemporary literature and focusing on the former question rather than the latter.

attempts to find a distinctive normative role for meaning will suffer from some version of this problem.

Our review of the four strategies in this section strengthens the argument for the deflationary challenge outlined in the previous section. That argument pointed to strong similarities between theories of well-being and theories of meaning and suggested that they are best explained by meaning not being an independent category. The apparent failure of the four strategies considered in this section supports this abduction. This does not mean that a *decisive* case has been made for the deflationary challenge. However, a strong *prima facie* case has been made for it. Evidently, the strength of the challenge has been underestimated and the standard responses to it are inadequately developed. More work is needed to justify the claim that meaning and well-being are distinct.

3. Answering the Deflationary Challenge

The deflationary challenge is formidable. Yet, there are several promising responses to it that deserve further development. Rather than exploring these responses and systematically assessing their various strengths and weakness, I will instead focus in this article on one particular response that I find especially promising. This response comes from a novel account I develop of what meaning in life is and how it differs from well-being.

Before proceeding, it is important for me to note that the response I develop relies on a couple of key assumptions that are not universally shared. First, it assumes value pluralism—the thesis that there are multiple final goods that contribute to the meaning and well-being of our lives. Second, the arguments that motivate my account do not fit well with subjectivist accounts of meaning or well-being (which typically endorse value monism). Thus, to accept my account, one must assume that there are multiple final goods and that at least some of those goods are objective goods. Those who reject these assumptions will have to look elsewhere for an answer to the deflationary challenge.

The starting point of my account is an idea about well-being developed by Thomas Hurka (1987, 1993).¹⁵ We standardly assume that the goods that contribute to well-being do so by being summed together. However, Hurka suggests that in addition to the quantity of these goods, their balance also contributes to the level of well-being in our lives. As he puts it:

We think the best lives contain a certain balance between the perfections, and do not concentrate too much on one. To talk only of Leonardo would pitch the ideal too high, for what I intend is possible in all lives. We all can spread our activities between different goods, aiming at a well-rounded achievement rather than any narrow specialization. Even if our specific achievements are not great, their proportion can mirror that of Renaissance lives, and for many of us this proportion is, other things being equal, a good. At however modest a level, it gives our lives an intrinsically desirable shape. (1987, 732)

One way to motivate Hurka's idea is to consider two lives containing the same total quantity of goods in balanced and unbalanced distributions. For example, consider someone who becomes an exceptional moral leader in her community, yet as a result, has limited time to develop her theoretical knowledge, aesthetic sensibilities, and loving personal relationships. Contrast this with an unexceptional, yet well-rounded, life of moderate achievement in all of these domains. Suppose that each of these lives ends up with the same total quantity of goods in it. Which would be the best life for the person living it? If all that matters is the total sum of goods in our lives, then these are equally good lives to live. However, intuitively, the well-rounded life is a better life for the person living it. When all else is equal, having a reasonable amount of each prudential good is preferable to having a lot of one and only a little of the others.

¹⁵See also Kauppinen (2008), who develops a similar idea.

Hurka pushes this idea further and argues that a life containing a smaller total quantity of prudential goods can be preferable to one with a greater total quantity of goods, if the former life is well-rounded and the latter is lopsided. Of course, in each particular case, whether this does in fact hold will depend on both the difference in total quantity of goods between each life and how well-rounded or lopsided the distribution of goods is in each life. But the key point is that, at least sometimes, trading off some quantity of goods in your life for a greater balance of goods is best for you.¹⁶

Indeed, one natural way to develop this idea is to suppose that the more imbalanced a life becomes in its distribution of goods the more detrimental to well-being each additional increment of imbalance is. Thus, imagine adding a small amount of imbalance to a life where the goods were previously perfectly balanced. This hardly seems to effect its overall level of well-being. By contrast, imagine adding the same small amount of imbalance to a life that is already significantly imbalanced. This seems to have a greater negative effect on the total level of well-being in that life.

Hurka's idea that a balanced distribution of goods in your life matters for well-being has much intuitive appeal. Your life does seem to go better for you if it is more well-rounded. To further explore this idea, we should think about cases where people choose to live lopsided lives that excessively focus on one good to the detriment of others. For example, think of an artist prioritizing her art above all else. According to Hurka's theory, in at least some of these cases it would have been better for the individual if, instead of narrow specialization, she had accepted a lower quantity of total goods in exchange for a more well-rounded life.

This might be right as far as well-being goes. However, there is something intelligible in someone seeing the prudential appeal of the well-rounded life and yet deciding that living a life containing a greater quantity of overall good is more important to her. This choice is understandable because among the things that matter to people is "making a mark" on the world through the goods they possess in their lives. Many of us want our lives to be significant through the presence of goods like love, theoretical knowledge, aesthetic excellence, moral virtue, and achievement, which allow us to have a positive impact on the world. The sheer quantity of such goods in your life determines how much of a "mark" your life makes. By contrast, whether your life is lopsided or well-rounded does not directly affect this. *Same quantity equals same significance and impact* regardless of whether it comes from one type of good or several. Therefore, when someone opts for a lopsided life containing more goods over a prudentially superior well-rounded life, we might understand them as prioritizing their life's significance and impact (through the prudential goods it contains) above its overall prudential quality.

This suggests that there are two normative considerations that sometimes pull us in opposite directions. On the one hand, we want to live lives that go well for us. On the other hand, we want our lives to contain goods that make them more significant and impactful. When these two things clash we often experience them, phenomenologically, as two different sources of normative authority tugging us in different directions.

The first source of normative authority is well-being, but how should we understand the second? My proposal is that it is best understood as what we are talking about when we evaluate lives in terms of their meaning. In other words, the meaningfulness of your life is the degree to which it contains personal goods that make it significant and positively impactful.¹⁷ On this basis, I advance

¹⁶These tradeoffs are most plausible when they are not anti-Pareto. For example, given two goods, A and B, preferring (A = 5 units and B = 5 units) over the less balanced but greater quantity of (A = 3 units and B = 8 units). They are more controversial if the unbalanced distribution of goods that is dispreferred is a Pareto improvement on the balanced distribution. For example, preferring (A = 5 and B = 5) over (A = 5 and B = 10). I am grateful to an anonymous referee from this journal for altering me to this. I will not take a stand here on whether anti-Pareto tradeoffs can be justified. None of the examples I examine below require such tradeoffs.

¹⁷Note that the personal goods are the key here. Having a positive impact on the world in a way that does not involve you exercising one or more personal goods (e.g., through dumb luck) does not seem to make your life meaningful.

the following theory. Meaning and well-being both arise from the same set of personal goods. Yet, they come apart when it comes to how those goods aggregate. An aggregation function combining quantity of goods and balance has much appeal when thinking about how well our lives go for us. However, when it comes to the meaning in our lives, balance seems unimportant. What matters is sheer quantity. The greater the quantity of goods in your life, the more significance and meaning it has.¹⁸

This account of meaning in life, and its relation to well-being, has several attractive features. First, it answers the deflationary challenge. The challenge arises because meaning and well-being appeal to the same basic personal goods. As we saw in [section 2](#), this undermines standard ways of distinguishing them. However, my account shows how they can be distinct even if they share a common pool of goods. Their difference lies not in the goods they accept, but in how they aggregate these goods. None of the arguments used to support the deflationary challenge apply to principles of aggregation—thus locating the difference in this axiological feature circumvents the challenge.

Second, my account of meaning makes sense of paradigmatically highly meaningful lives. Theories of meaning in life are often tested by how well they accommodate such paradigms. The lives of Confucius, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Pablo Picasso, and Mother Teresa are held up in the literature as some of the most meaningful lives that humans have ever lived.¹⁹ It's notable that all these figures lived lopsided lives focused on only one, or a small number, of final goods rather than spread evenly among many goods. This fits well with the idea that meaning is determined by the quantity of goods in your life, and is insensitive to whether those goods are balanced or unbalanced. Sheer quantity of good alone is plausibly what made these lives highly meaningful. For example, Einstein's life was highly meaningful because it contained extraordinary amounts of goods like theoretical knowledge, creativity, and achievement.

The life of Leonardo Da Vinci provides a helpful comparison here. Leonardo's total level of achievement is of the same calibre as those listed above, and he could certainly be added to the list. Yet, in contrast to their lives, his life was exceptionally well-rounded, involving achievements across several different domains. Although we might admire this aspect of his life, it does not seem to directly enhance its meaning. When we compare Leonardo's life to lopsided lives of a similar calibre, we do not think of his life as more meaningful because it contained an exquisite balance that they lacked.

Third, my account gives a plausible picture of trade-offs in which you can opt for either a more meaningful life or a life that goes better for you. In certain circumstances, such trade-offs do not arise. For example, sometimes you can gain more good by spreading your talents wide instead of specializing, allowing you to maximize quantity and balance at the same time. Alternatively, sometimes the extra goods that come from specialization are so great that they override any resulting imbalance, meaning that a specialized life is better for you despite its imbalance.²⁰ In these circumstances, we can pursue a life that is both meaningful and good for us without conflict. However, often we are not so lucky and find that we must choose between either having a greater quantity of goods in our life (and thus greater impact) or having a lesser quantity of goods that is compensated for by a higher degree of balance between them. According to my account, our choice in such circumstances is between a life of greater meaning and a life that goes better for us.

¹⁸As we saw in [section 2](#), some have argued that pleasure is a final good of well-being but not of meaning. On this view, my thesis can be restated as follows. Well-being is based on both the *quantity* and the *balance* of the hedonic and nonhedonic goods. Meaning is based solely on the *quantity* of the nonhedonic goods. Therefore, although meaning consists of the same nonhedonic goods as well-being, meaning and well-being differ by the aggregation function they apply to these goods.

¹⁹For example, see Wolf (2010, 11), Kauppinen (2012, 346), and Metz (2013, 2–5),

²⁰Hurka (1987, 1993) discusses these possibilities at length, contrasting the “dilettante’s disadvantage” with the “costs of concentration.”

Two case studies are instructive here. The first is drawn from Hastings Rashdall's reflections on the life of Charles Darwin (as quoted in Hurka 1987):

Charles Darwin found that the cultivation of reasoning power and observation had extinguished his once keen imagination and sensibility. And yet who would wish—whether in the interests of the world or in the interests of what was best in Charles Darwin's own nature—that his work should have been spoiled in order that one of the three hours which was the maximum working day his health allowed should have been absorbed by politics or philanthropy? Who would decide that the origin of species should have been undiscovered, in order that the man who might have discovered it should retain the power of enjoying Wordsworth? (Rashdall 1907, 64)

Rashdall's sober assessment may seem incontrovertible. However, Hurka points out that Darwin saw things differently, reportedly lamenting to one of his daughters that:

[I]f he had his life to live over again he would make it a rule to let no day pass without reading a few lines of poetry. Then he quietly added that he wished he had not 'let his mind go to rot so'. (Darwin 1929, 119–20)

Who has better captured the value of Darwin's life, the man himself or Rashdall judging from afar? I suggest that each perspective is right in its own way. If our concern is meaningfulness, then Rashdall's assessment is compelling. If Darwin had allotted more of his time to nonscientific pursuits, he likely would have achieved less, making his life as a whole less significant. However, Rashdall exaggerates the potential drop in achievement. Darwin discovered natural selection early in his adult life and was a systematic thinker who spent years sketching out ideas in notebooks before publishing them. If Darwin spent a little less time on scientific work then his output may have lessened, but there is no doubt that his scientific contributions would still have been substantial. This in turn makes it likely that, if Darwin had lived a more well-rounded life, then the greater balance in goods would outweigh their diminished total quantity. Therefore, if our concern is well-being then Darwin's self-assessment has merit. Thinking of his own welfare, there were good reasons for him to lament that he neglected poetry and other nonscientific pursuits.

The second case study concerns the life of the renowned philosopher Derek Parfit. Early on in his life, Parfit showed outstanding promise in several different areas. In a biography of Parfit, Simon Beard writes:

[He] was, by all accounts, one of the most brilliant history students of his generation. Having won a scholarship to Eton in 1955, he sailed through the school at the top of every class (except, perhaps, mathematics) before winning another scholarship to Balliol College Oxford. Not only did he excel academically, but he would edit *Isis*, the leading Oxford student magazine, play Jazz trumpet, write poetry, get involved in student politics and generally be everything a 1960's Oxford student was supposed to be. (Beard n.d.)

Given such broad talents, a well-rounded life of high achievement was one direction that Parfit's life could have taken. However, Parfit instead chose to live a highly specialized life, devoting himself to the pursuit of philosophical excellence. Indeed, he was notorious for the fanatical way in which he pursued this goal. At an Oxford memorial following his death, his sister Theodora Ooms recalled:

Since his first book had taken 20 years to write roughly, it is no wonder to me that Derek became acutely aware of the diminishing amount of time he had left to accomplish his daunting agenda. He became even more focused on his work and, in Jeff's terms, 'quite monomaniacal,' and increasingly eccentric in his eating, clothing, and other behaviours, many of which were designed to save thinking time. He no longer went on his annual

photographic visit to Venice and Saint Petersburg, and he and Janet took only two vacations in 35 years ... spending time with family was simply not a priority for Derek. (Ooms 2017)

On one way of looking at Parfit's life, his decision to monomaniacally pursue a single good was wise. After all, he was arguably the most important and influential moral philosopher of his era, and will probably influence generations to come. If he had spread his talents widely, he may have lived a rich and varied life with several notable achievements. However, it is unlikely that the total quantity of goods in such a life could match what Parfit achieved by his singular focus on philosophy.

On another way of looking at his life, Parfit chose unwisely because the additional good he was able to realize in his life could not compensate for its extreme lopsidedness. This judgment is supported by the fact that many of us, if asked to contemplate living an extremely lopsided life as Parfit did, would find something repulsive about it, even if we knew that it would allow us to make a much greater mark on the world.

On my account, these different perspectives arise from the contrast between evaluating a life in terms of its meaning and evaluating it in terms of its well-being. By choosing to live as he did, Parfit was able to live an exceptionally meaningful life. Yet, doing so came at a cost, causing his life to go less well than it might have gone for him. Given his views about personal identity and egoism, it is unsurprising that Parfit chose as he did. However, others facing the same trade-off would choose differently.²¹

Both Darwin and Parfit lived lives of outstanding achievement, whereas most of us live unexceptional lives. Yet versions of the trade-off that they faced occur in our lives. Their lives are useful to study because the choices they faced were especially stark. In our lives, such trade-offs have lower stakes and are often less clear-cut. However, being aware of these trade-offs and conceptualizing them as pitting meaning against well-being can enable us to more effectively steer and navigate through our lives.

A final interesting feature of my account is what it tells us about noble self-sacrifices. Recall from [section 2](#) that Metz takes these sacrifices to contribute meaning to your life without enhancing your well-being. There I dismissed his view because several major theories of well-being attribute prudential value to noble self-sacrifices. Nonetheless, despite this flaw in his argument, I think Metz is onto something. Intuitively, acts of self-sacrifice contribute more to meaning than they do to well-being. The freedom fighter who dies for her cause may realize certain prudential goods through her act, yet the meaning that her life gains does seem greater. My account of meaning in life can explain this. It tells us that in the case of meaning, a self-sacrifice is justified if the goods gained by the sacrifice (such as moral virtue or love) are greater than the goods lost by prematurely ending your life. However, in the case of well-being, it is not enough to simply compare the quantity of goods; we must also factor in how balanced their distribution is. The goods that come from a self-sacrifice, although they may be great, are typically just one or two. By contrast, the goods that you might have obtained had you continued living are typically more varied. Therefore, in some circumstances, even though you could gain a greater quantity of prudential goods by sacrificing yourself for a noble cause, it is better for you to continue living because the superior balance of goods this will give you outweighs the loss in total quantity. In such circumstances, meaning speaks in favor of self-sacrifice whereas well-being speaks against it. Thus, the intuition that noble self-sacrifices do more for meaning than well-being is vindicated. Because the good that your self-

²¹A referee notes that we might explain the intuition that Parfit's lopsided life was highly meaningful yet wasn't good for him by the assumption that it must have contained less pleasure than a more well-rounded life. Therefore, Metz's argument (see [section 2](#)) that pleasure noninstrumentally contributes to well-being but not meaning, could explain our intuitions in this case without any appeal to the evaluative significance of balance. However, Parfit clearly derived a lot of pleasure from doing philosophy, and so it is not implausible to suppose that the lopsided life and the well-rounded life could be equally pleasurable to him. Yet, even when we suppose this, there still seems to be something prudentially unattractive about the lopsided life he lived. Indeed, this verdict was supported by the hypothetical examples we initially discussed in order to motivate Hurka's thesis that balance has evaluative significance.

sacrifice adds to your life is typically lopsided, the value it adds to well-being (where balance matters) is generally less than the value it adds to meaning.²²

I end this section with an important clarification. The discussion so far has operated under the simplifying assumption that in a pluralistic theory of personal goods, there are two main options for aggregating—aggregate by quantity alone or combine quantity with balance. However, a much richer range of options are on the table. First, hybrid theories of well-being and meaning in life are possible (see Parfit 1984; Kagan 2009; and Wolf 2010). These theories require that you subjectively endorse the objective goods in your life before they can contribute to its meaning or well-being. Second, some have argued that, in addition to the total quantity of goods in your life, the distribution of those goods in an upwards trajectory, or an attractive narrative pattern is relevant to the level of meaning or well-being in your life.

The account of meaning and well-being that I defend can be expanded to accommodate such views. For example, if you favor the hybrid theory you can interpret meaning as being about the quantity of goods in your life that you subjectively endorse and well-being as being about a well-balanced distribution of subjectively endorsed goods in your life. And if you hold that narrative structure is relevant to both meaning and well-being, you can build it into the relevant aggregation principles and yet still follow my account and use balance to separate meaning from well-being.

Of course, it is possible for someone to argue that well-being and meaning are separated not by balance but by another aggregation principle like narrative structure. Such a theory is in the same spirit as my proposal (by appealing to aggregation principles) yet differs in the details. However, I think that there is a strong intuitive case supporting “balance” that does not apply to other aggregation principles. Other aggregation principles, like narrative structure, have been independently proposed in both the well-being literature (see Velleman 1991) and the meaning literature (see Kauppinen 2012) and are not exclusively associated with either.²³ Yet balance has, so far, only been applied to well-being and (as I argue above) is intuitively implausible as a factor in meaning.

4. Conclusion

Thaddeus Metz (2016, 294) has described meaning in life as “the black sheep of the normative family” because it has been maligned and neglected while well-being and moral goodness have taken the limelight. My arguments in sections 1 and 2 show that this “black sheep” status is not entirely unearned. There is a serious challenge to the independent status of meaning in life that has not been adequately addressed. This was my “negative” thesis. I then answered it with a “positive” thesis. Meaning and well-being differ not by the goods they appeal to, but by the aggregation principles they apply to those goods. Meaning is concerned with quantity alone whereas well-being is concerned with both quantity and balance. In a slogan: if you want a meaningful life, pursue the good; if you want your life to go well for you, pursue a nice balance of goods.

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²²As I have done throughout this section, I assume that meaning and well-being share the same goods. However, if pleasure only has final *prudential* value and does not directly contribute to meaning, then this is a further ground for noble self-sacrifice to contribute more to meaning than well-being. This is because the goods gained by such sacrifices are generally nonhedonic, whereas at least some of the good lost by prematurely ending your life are hedonic goods.

²³To be fair, the fact that it has been independently proposed in both literatures does not preclude someone from arguing that this aggregation principle correctly applies to only one of these two concepts and hence marks the difference between them. However, until that argument is successfully made there does *not* appear to be grounds in favor of using narrative structure to distinguish meaning from well-being.

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