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"Life's Meaning"

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Your life has meaning just if, and to the extent that, you achieve the aims that you devote it to freely and competently. You adopt your goals and achieve them more or less through your own efforts, so meaning is something you bestow upon your own life. These achievements are *the* meaning of your life.

In what follows I develop this view.¹ Then I will discuss how life's meaning is related to its purpose and to an individual's welfare and identity. I also examine reasoning that suggests that life is absurd and show how it can be resisted.

Meaning

The achievementist view I am defending is an elaboration of two assumptions. First, the bearer of meaning is not, strictly speaking, a living subject, but rather that subject's *life*. Second, the meaning of one's life concerns what one devotes it *to*. While these assumptions are plausible, they are also strong; they imply, for example, that the lives of nonhuman animals (with some possible exceptions) lack meaning—which is not to say that they lack value, that they are not worthwhile; for reasons offered below, I reject the *value* account of meaning, which equates the meaning and value of a life. Animals may live well; however, animals cannot survey and take a stance on their lives as wholes, which is requisite for turning them to various ends. Nor are animals the only creatures with meaningless lives. Some people live in the moment, lost in *Alltäglichkeit*, and are oblivious to their existence in its entirety. Such people may set themselves various tasks at various times, such as cooking a tasty meal or having a swim. However, they take no interest in their lives as wholes.

If it is indeed true that lives have meaning by virtue of the accomplishment of the things to which they are devoted, it follows that certain achievements supply the contents of meaning; they are what we are living *for*. They give life direction. Achievements are possible only for those who set themselves tasks, who adopt aims. In aiming, we want to bring about some state of affairs; accomplishing this state of affairs is the object of our aim. For example, if I aim to please you, the object of my aim is *my pleasing you*. To *achieve* is to do something we aim to do. Aims are desires, but not all desires are aims, and meaning cannot be attained through the fulfillment of just any desire. In desiring, we want some state of affairs to obtain, but we may or may not be interested in bringing it about ourselves. Because our survival and the success of our plans depend on it, we all want the sun to keep shining. However, it shines without our assistance; its illumination is no task, hence no aim, of ours. Because I want Seinfeld to amuse me, I might watch his comedy show, but in that case my amusement is the work of Seinfeld. The more passive I am in gaining something I desire, the less it is an achievement of mine. So sunshine and television give no one's life meaning. (Often when we desire something we do so because we think that thing has value: for example, some will say that pleasure's value is what makes us want it, not the other way around—not our wanting it that gives it value. So desire will have instrumental value to the extent that it helps us to acquire a detected good and in proportion to the value of that good. However, an aim is a special kind of desire. If my goal is to write a book, writing the book is prudentially desirable for me precisely because it is my goal. Writing a book has no importance in and of itself, but, for those who set out to do it, it is important to succeed.)

Devoting life to some task or tasks is a rather solemn matter that we undertake only after we are well on in our days. Even before then we probably will have begun to develop a life plan, which is simply a plan, however inchoate and prospective, for how our life is to go. We find ourselves doing various things and planning to do other things. If we are prudent, we begin to think about the shape of our life. Our ideas are initially quite sketchy and incomplete; we revise our plan over time, taking into account our evolving grasp of our nature and place in the world. For a good while we regard the plan as a work under construction, whose components are subject to revision. At some point we may take a further step, and reach some decision about

¹It has its origins in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and, as Andrea Staiti pointed out to me, Edmund Husserl (see Staiti 2013).

what we want our life as a whole to accomplish, about what we are to live for. These are the aims that constitute the meaning of life.

Not everyone will develop a life plan; those who do plan their lives may not decide to devote them to anything. There is nothing inevitable about either sort of planning. I might add that while anyone who sets out to give her life meaning will have some sort of plan for doing so, her planning could end there—it might be more or less limited to achieving the aim that would confer meaning. Chances are, however, that people who care about meaning will not have such a truncated plan; they will have concerns other than the meaning-conferring tasks they set themselves, and much of their planning will concern these other matters. They might, for example, endeavor to spend their days agreeably, and take elaborate steps to preserve their health. They might also fret about advancing their careers, even if their work is devoid of meaning, and undertaken solely for the money they need to survive. Just about all of us do a great many things that do not contribute to the meaning of life, and can partition our plans for life into a component that bears on meaning, and another that does not. No doubt there also will be parts that are difficult to classify. Still, a plan to accomplish meaning-conferring aims is not identical to a plan for how a life is to go.

Because the bearer of meaning is a life, and meaning-conferring aims determine what that life is for, it is best to regard meaning as a global good: a good that, in the fullest sense, only entire lives admit of (Luper 2012b). However, the production of a global good can hinge on things we do at various points in life. Doubtless we will want to accomplish some aims that bear on meaning in accordance with a schedule of sorts. For example, an athlete will want to make his mark during early adulthood. The aims of some of us will be free-floating; we may want to do certain things before life ends, and find ourselves indifferent about when we get them done. In that case, during our middle years, we might find ourselves worried about the trajectory we are on, and whether we will be able to finish what we have taken on.

It may seem plausible to say that meaning is determined only by aims that are *outwardly* directed—not narrowly focused on the person who bears them—on the grounds that meaning relates a life to something outside it, something that transcends it (Nozick 1981, chapter 6). However, I see no compelling reason to take this view. Other things being equal (and with some qualifications), any aim we devote life to suffices, including the narcissistic desire to be a movie star.

I said that meaning concerns one's accomplishments but also what one is living for. These suggestions may appear to clash, since pursuits and accomplishments need not coincide: some people spend a great deal of time pursuing aims which they never achieve. Aims motivate them to accomplish things even if they never succeed. However, there is no conflict here. It is misleading to say that people's *pursuits* are what they are living for, and we should reject the teleological account of meaning (discussed in Quinn 1997) which equates meaning with the pursuit of aims. On the teleological account, it would not matter to people that their aims are unattainable, yet it plainly does. They *pursue* their aims in order to *achieve* them, and attain meaning only when they achieve, not merely pursue, their aims. Nevertheless, it is possible to take on a pursuit *as* an aim: one might opt to devote one's time to looking for a new species, for example, which does not require actually finding one. One's aim might be to learn about horticulture, which might keep one busy for a lifetime, yet does not require reaching any particular level of mastery.

To flesh out the achievementist view of meaning, we can relate meaning to other, closely related, notions. We can begin with the relationship between meaning and purpose.

Purpose

Having meaning entails having and achieving a purpose, but we should be cautious about how we understand such things. It can be tempting to assume that the point (purpose) of something must be another thing that has its own point. In that case having a purpose seems to require being part of an endless chain, each link of which gains its point from the next; otherwise, it ends with something pointless—something that is anchorless and incapable of supporting anything. It is hard to believe that such chains exist, so this reasoning suggests that nothing has a point, and hence nothing has meaning. However, this reasoning goes wrong from the start. One thing can be the point of another without having a point beyond itself (Luper 1992). I do many things because I love my wife; the latter has no point beyond itself.

It is best to say that ends (or aims) just *are* purposes, and that anything else acquires a purpose (possibly more than one) insofar as it is the means to someone's ends. That is true of small items, like pens, and it would also be true of the entire universe. On this view, one's life's meaning gives it a purpose: the accomplishment of the aims one sets oneself.

So we can give our own life a purpose, and do so when we give it meaning. Can we do the same for other lives as well? Can God do so? The answer is not straightforward.

When we use something, say a sled dog, to one of our ends, irrespective of its own ends if any, it is our tool. We use animals and mere objects, such as shovels, but these are not the only tools. It is possible for others to use *us* as the means to their ends or, in the extreme case, as slaves. However, this affronts us, because we are autonomous beings who set our own ends. We resist if others attempt to set ends for us. These reflections can seem to support the assumption that only self-given purposes are worth having, and consistent with meaning. Reasoning like this appears to have inspired Kurt Baier's (1957) well-known critique of Christianity. According to Baier, Christianity tells us that God gives life its purpose, but in that case Christians aspire to be tools—God's tools, but tools nonetheless.

Of course Baier's conclusion is easily challenged. When we use mere objects such as bananas solely as the means to our ends, we do not care about them for *their* sakes; it would make no sense to do so: only a lunatic cares about a banana for *its* sake. However, we should not overlook the possibility of being used by an agent, even a creator, who *does* care about us for our sake. Someone who is concerned about us might want something of us *for* our sake. This is incompatible with condemning us to spend eternity in an abortive attempt to roll a rock up a hill, as Zeus did to Sisyphus, but it is surely compatible with much that occurs in the context of loving relationships.

Others need not treat us as tools when they involve us in their plans, even though they are, in a sense, using us. It is not demeaning to be used by one who cares about us for our sakes; quite the contrary. Such people will want us to help them only in ways that we want to help. The importance of being valued for our own sake—by others we value for their sake—makes us want to be useful to those who take this same attitude towards us. Such people may plan their lives together, each creating a role for the other, because that is what both want.

What seems important about purposes is this: we create purpose when we set ourselves goals and devote our lives to some of these; the result is meaning. Relative to these goals, our acts take on importance; goals create significance for us. But these things need not be done in solitude. If you care about me for my sake and vice versa, together we can create and adopt plans that give purpose and meaning to the lives of both of us. Each one of us is the gatekeeper to his life's meaning, in that the aims of others will have no bearing on the meaning of his own life unless he so chooses. Nor can anyone else accomplish my aims. But together we can accomplish *our* aims.

Identity

Many say that having meaning gives us an identity; however, this is to speak loosely about identity. As identity is understood by most philosophers, meaning has no bearing on it. Nevertheless, it is worth asking what we might mean by 'identity' to make us think that it is bound up intimately with meaning.

Many things persist over time, yet change in various ways; philosophers who ask about identity are looking for the conditions under which a thing existing at one time is *numerically* identical to a thing existing at another time. The answer presumably will vary depending on the sort of thing at hand. In my case, what is wanted are the conditions under which I, who exist now, am identical to someone existing at some other time.

Instead of associating the term 'identity' with properties that are necessary and sufficient for our continued existence, we might instead associate it with some of the properties that bear on whether we *want* to exist. Some features we want to retain; others we wish to acquire. Let us say that something is a *critical feature* just if the discovery that we have irretrievably lost it, or that we will never acquire it, would leave us indifferent about survival. We might say that a person's critical features constitute her *critical identity*, or *critical self*.

One of the ways in which we shape the critical self is by opting to live for something, assuming that success at this task will be one of our critical features. What individuals live for we might call their *conative* identities, or the *conative self*. To take on a conative self is to pursue meaning; it is in this way that identity is related to meaning. Yet the conative self is only one component of the critical self. Another may be the *moral* self, assuming that it is of critical importance to us that our conduct conform to certain principles. These components of the critical self must be shaped so that they are mutually compatible, or else its integrity may break down.

Critical identities differ greatly from numerical identities. First, I cannot possibly exist for a while then gain my numerical identity. Nothing can. Yet I might well exist for a time before I acquire a critical identity. Second, it is possible not to have a critical identity, or to lose and even replace the one I once had: I might, as it were, live for one thing, then be 'reborn,' and live for something else. Yet I cannot lose my numerical identity and live on; I will exist only as long as I am numerically identical to someone in the future. Third, numerical identities cannot fail to be unique-making; no one else can share my numerical identity. However, while I might regard at least some of the features in my critical identity as unique-making, as setting me off from others, there is no special reason why I should take this view. Indeed, I might be happy in the thought that many people have a critical identity that is like the one I have adopted. Also, others might well be entangled with me, as their continued existence, or the continued existence of my relationship with them, might be implicated in my critical identity.

I said that we can survive the loss of our critical identity. However, this loss will *present* itself, phenomenologically, as tantamount to nonexistence. Consider conative identity in particular. If we devote life to some aim, we may survive failure but the remaining person and her life will be of no concern to us. What is at stake is whether we continue to have a stake in life. Indeed, what I have said probably puts things too mildly; the catastrophic failure I have in mind ~~probably~~ may not leave us merely indifferent about life, it may lead us to deplore life, given the great evil that a failed quest for meaning constitutes. Something similar might result if we are unable to satisfy the demands we make on ourselves as moral beings.

Welfare

Meaning is not the same thing as welfare (that is, well-being), and neither is the same thing as happiness as it is typically understood. Let us see whether we can clarify the relationship between the three.

What constitutes happiness is itself a disputed matter; instead of delving into that controversy, let us adopt a view that a great many theorists would accept, namely, that how happy we are, at a time or over a period of time, is determined by the amount of pleasure (or positive states of mind) we have then, which is a positive quantity, added to the amount of pain (or negative mental states) we have then, a negative quantity. Our *lifetime* happiness level is that sum over the entirety of life. By contrast, let us say that our lifetime *success* level is determined by the degree to which we achieve the aims to which we have devoted life. Achieving these aims boosts our success level while our failures lower it.

Happiness is one element of welfare: other things being equal, the happier the better off we are. However, there is more to welfare than this. How well off we are is determined by our portion of *all* of the things which are intrinsically good or bad for us. While pleasure is one of the things that we value for its own sake, it is not the only thing. It is also plausible to count certain achievements among these goods, and certain failures among the evils. If that is so, then presumably the achievement of our meaning-conferring aims will count among the goods, and failure among the evils. Hence both happiness and success boost welfare. And there may well be other goods as well, such as loving relationships. How well off we are (over some time) is determined roughly by summing all of the goods and evils we incur (during that time).

So meaning is success, which is itself a species of welfare. But while meaning is an element of welfare, it is not the whole of it.

Meaning differs from other elements of welfare in an important respect: it is not summative. Contrast pleasure. Other things being equal, the more days a person spends pleasantly, the more pleasant her life is as a whole. Each boost in pleasure is a boost in her overall level of happiness. Meaning does not behave this way. It is true that meaning consists in achieving the aims we take on and these achievements are summative after a

fashion: other things equal, it is better to achieve all of our aims than it is to achieve only some of them. However, we establish the entirety of what constitutes life's meaning by taking on the relevant aims; if we adopt only one aim, achieving only one aim gives life its full component of meaning. From the standpoint of life's meaning, achieving more things is not in itself better than achieving fewer things; if we take on only five tasks, only five achievements bear on life's meaning.

According to achievementism, meaning and well-being can easily diverge. At least in theory, a life might be good for us yet devoid of meaning, and a life might have meaning yet be, on the whole, quite bad.

The first point—a life may be good yet devoid of meaning—is in part a consequence of the fact that we might never feel the void that prompts people such as Tolstoy to yearn for meaning. We might instead focus on happiness—or on nothing. It is possible to accrue goods such as happiness even without seeking them out. The acquisition might be the result of dumb luck, or a benefactor's benign manipulation.

However, while it is conceivable for the lives of human beings to be good yet devoid of meaning, this possibility seems remote, because meaning is more important to us than other things that make for well-being, such as happiness, so we prioritize the quest for meaning, and because a fruitful source of happiness is meaning. Or at least this is true of most people, most of the time.

Consider the relative importance of meaning. To restate J. S. Mill's famous remark about pleasures, some goods are higher than others. To see that this is the case, consider Robert Nozick's (1974, pp. 42–45) thought experiment in which we are offered the chance to spend our lives hooked up to an experience machine that will give us all the pleasure we can handle. It will also give us a high welfare level, because great happiness makes for high welfare. Yet no one (or very few) would accept the offer. This is best explained by two facts. First, life in the machine has (little or) no meaning, as we *accomplish* none or vanishingly few of the goals we have set ourselves. Of course, on one version of Nozick's fantasy we do not really even set goals for ourselves: even goal setting is part of the manipulation performed upon us, which makes meaning entirely impossible. Second, meaning is far and away more important to us than the happiness which the machine provides.

The experience machine suggests that happiness matters very little as compared to meaning. In fact, it suggests that except perhaps in extreme cases, meaning trumps happiness, in this sense: normally, if we must choose between the two, we will sacrifice happiness in order to give meaning to our lives, and it is best for us to do so. Unless we attain *some* minimal amount of enjoyment from time to time we might well fall into depression, and lose our interest in life altogether (Metz 2009, p. 5); that said, we will endure hardship indefinitely when meaning is at stake, and rightly so. The integrity of the conative self requires it. (One might argue that, from the moral point of view, it is the conative self, and its defining commitments, that matters, or matters most, but I will not pursue the matter here.)

Indeed, as Mill (1873) discovered, striving for happiness is largely self-defeating, while striving to accomplish things we regard as worth doing leads to happiness as a side effect. (*Pace* Aristotle, it is best not to strive for *all* of the things that are worth having.) So it is impractical to plan life exclusively around achieving happiness or well-being via happiness. The better course is to put happiness aside and focus on the tasks to which we have devoted life. Typically, accomplishing these is a highly productive source of happiness.

Because meaning is usually a fertile source of happiness, it is unlikely that a life of meaning will be bad for us on the whole. Nevertheless, competent people can seriously neglect their own welfare. Suppose that, in laying out our aspirations for life, we do not seek loving relationships, so that, for us, the achievement of meaning does not require love. If loving relationships are good for us, missing out on them probably will mean that our welfare level will be lower than it might have been. The same goes for any good: a life that lacks goods is worse than it might have been but its meaning is not affected unless those goods are sought out. Similarly for evils: we worsen life by adding to the evils within it but its meaning is not affected thereby unless we seek to avoid them.

Apparently, then, a plan that is capable of conferring meaning may nevertheless have serious defects. If I devote myself largely to dull or repetitious tasks, such as pushing rocks or counting blades of grass, I might well achieve meaning, yet live a greatly impoverished existence, and forego goods which I would have attained as the result of a more ambitious, or better designed, plan. At a minimum I will be less happy, assuming that

success with richer and more robust aims brings greater happiness. I might also end up loveless. Consider, too, that if I ignore my obligations I will be immoral. Conceivably, even a morally neutral project, such as moving to Tahiti to paint, as Paul Gauguin did, can put me at odds with morality—by leading me to neglect my responsibilities (Williams 1979). So a life could have its full measure of meaning yet be barren and incomplete, even evil (compare Edwards 1967, p. 125). To build a life with any of these defects—knowingly, and with full access to richer alternatives—would be madness.

Absurdity

The view that lives can have meaning is subject to grave challenges. If these cannot be met, we will have to conclude that life is meaningless or absurd. At that point we might attempt to make a virtue of life's absurdity, as Camus suggested (1955; compare Thomas Nagel 1970), or reconcile ourselves to it, as Qoheleth advised. But I do not think we should accept such counsel, as the challenges can be met. Or so I will argue.

One concern confronts those of us who are struck by how precarious, how prone to failure, our plans are. If we live in a dangerous place and cannot escape we might conclude that setting ourselves aims is futile, and that happiness is an unrealistic expectation, as we cannot be confident that death or some other peril will not destroy the things we care about, and abort our efforts to achieve our ends. Carried to an extreme, this line of thought may lead us to despair of giving life meaning. This, the problem of precariousness, is exacerbated by the problem of evil: the fact that, at some point in life, we almost certainly will face dire adversity that we simply do not deserve.

It is true that sufficiently grave misfortune will preclude our attaining happiness or meaning. The point is illustrated by the fate of the infants who were caught up in and entombed by the lava flowing from Mt. Vesuvius in 79AD. However, as many theorists in the ancient world pointed out (Gautama, Epicurus, and Stoics, among others), even when confronted with adversity we are free to set ourselves tasks that fit the span of time we can expect and the powers nature has allotted us. Such plans will be modest as compared to what we might take on in more favorable times. If we are nomads roaming a desert wasteland, it may take all of our energy just to keep ourselves and our loved ones nourished and protected from the elements. Somewhat like Stoics, we may have to retreat to the inner citadel. Yet success, even at modest goals, gives life meaning, and happiness is likely to follow. Because meaning turns on the aims we actually set ourselves, the brevity of life and the paucity of our undertakings need not detract from the meaning we give to life.

So accepting achievementism helps us to respond to the problem of precariousness, as lower, more reasonable ambitions are consistent with meaning. But a worrisome question arises at this point: how low can we go before we miss out on meaning altogether? In his well-known essay "The Meaning of Life" Richard Taylor argued that triviality is consistent with meaning even though triviality features large in paradigm cases of absurdity or meaninglessness, such as that of Sisyphus (1970, Chapter 18; but contrast 1987, p. 679, where Taylor said meaning results only from novel creations). What Sisyphus did amounted to nothing; it had no lasting value; in Taylor's version of the myth, what Sisyphus did was not even voluntary; nevertheless, Taylor said that if Zeus had made Sisyphus *want* to push his rock, he might have accrued meaning. Achievementists would reject that claim, but they would say that, in theory, a life may attain meaning by being *freely* devoted to something, even something as insignificant as rock pushing. But is that plausible? Or does meaning accrue only to those whose achievements are, by some independent measure, important? Plenty of people take the latter view; for example, John Cottingham (2003, p. 21) claims that accomplishments that suffice for meaning must be weighty, and Susan Wolf (2010) says that meaning-conferring accomplishments must have objective value, not the mere subjective value we bestow upon the things that we want (according to her).

I suggest that the achievementist claim—theoretically, people may achieve meaning by devoting life to trivial tasks—is plausible. Those who deny it may have various grounds for doing so, but I suspect that the main source of doubt is the idea that something that is entirely independent of people's choices determines what their lives are for, what their purpose is. Assuming that a life's meaning is bound up with its purpose, this externalist picture implies that meaning is attained only by lives that serve their *actual*, independently-given, purpose. Since serving this purpose is the one and only way lives can attain meaning, it sets the standard, including the standard for how important an achievement must be to confer meaning. However, externalism is

difficult to defend, and if we reject it, it is hard to see why we should think that, to confer meaning, achievements must score well as assessed by some independent measure of importance. Certainly no such thing is true if one's life has just that purpose and meaning which one gives to it, as achievementism implies. The value to be had in meaning is prudential; accomplishing what we have devoted life to is good for us, good in and of itself, regardless of the contents of the goals we have set, and their value by any independent measure.

Nevertheless, meaning-conferring aims partly constitute the critical self. They are adopted as the very point of life, and not just any aims are fitting given the gravity of the role they are to play. While not impossible, it would be odd in the extreme to select something patently silly to fill this role. People who take themselves seriously enough to decide what to live for will not devote themselves to endeavors they consider to be ridiculous, any more than they would wear a clown suit to the funeral of a cherished parent, or construct marriage vows in the form of a bawdy limerick.

The view that life is absurd can arise in another, related way: like Socrates did, we might wish to live on endlessly, engaging ourselves in matters of eternal significance. We may also want to *have* lived forever—to exist without a beginning. We may not be satisfied unless nonexistence is *impossible* for us. With limitless time at our disposal, our accomplishments might span eons. By contrast, the existence and deeds of a contingent, merely mortal being will seem ephemeral and inconsequential, perhaps even entirely devoid of meaning or any other sort of value. If we then come to have doubts about living forever, there is a good chance that we will retain some residue of our contempt for the all-too-brief lives of ordinary mortals. As William Craig (1994) wrote (paraphrasing Sartre's "The Wall"), "several hours or several years make no difference once you have lost eternity." This is the problem of finitude. Some who find themselves in this predicament will attempt escape by cultivating the conviction that they will live forever. However, many will end up as Tolstoy (1884) and Unamuno (1954) did, vacillating between hope and despair: hope for a place in eternity, and despair at the thought that, since nothing transient has meaning, life is absurd.

It is true that immortals can do much, much more than mortals, and their lives can be immeasurably better (and also incalculably worse) than the lives of mortals. However, despair is unjustified, even for those who yearn for an endless life they do not expect to have. The brilliant vision of eternity should not blind us to the poignant beauty and charm of the transient things that make up the lives of mortals, and in one profound respect immortals may be no better off than mortals: the lives of both may have meaning in the fullest sense of the word. Because meaning consists in achieving what we are living for, and mortals and immortals alike can be fully successful with the plans they lay out for themselves, assuming that these are not overreaching, then mortality is no bar to meaning.

In this respect meaning is unlike happiness and well-being itself. If life is too brief, no plan can be conceived and achieved, but once that minimal lifespan is exceeded, we can accommodate a life of any duration without loss of meaning. Long or short, one's life can have meaning in the fullest sense (just as, large or small, one's house can be fully yellow). However, length of life greatly affects how much happiness one attains. Other things being equal, under favorable circumstances one will achieve far more happiness over the course of a very long life than one will during a brief life; the same goes for welfare, of which happiness is one component.

Mortality can foster despair for another reason: we might believe that the perspective we expect to end up with is authoritative in the assessment of life as a whole, and also that, looking back, our assessment will not be favorable. Once we have reached our final hours, when the indignities of aging have taken their toll, and death is no longer a distant abstraction, there is an excellent chance that we will be consumed by grief, and that we will be unable to affirm life, no matter how good it once seemed to us. But to think that our lives have precisely the meaning and value which we will attribute to them in *that* state of mind is a mistake. We are encouraged to make this error by the familiar fact that usually our most accurate assessments are done with the benefit of hindsight, which might lead us to think that life's most important features are those that will be important to us at its end; that, in turn, will shift our center of gravity, and degrade life into "being-towards-death," to use Martin Heidegger's morose expression. (Worse: we might come to think, absurdly, that life's meaning and value just is the value *of* the brief segment of life which we spend on our deathbed—that no matter what life was like, it is no better than it is at its end.) It is true that hindsight often helps us to assess an

accomplishment. Yet so does foresight, especially the ability to anticipate how things will strike us in the future. With time, our perspective on life will shift; we must use the best judgment we have at *each* stage, both to assess and to learn from what we have done in the past, to apply what we have learned when looking ahead, and to anticipate how we will see life when we are older, so that we do not have to alter our plans later. We defer to our future judgment, but we do so on the assumption that we will still be fully competent to assess life as a whole, and will heed what was important to us now.

If one wishes, one may choose for one's life a meaning that transcends its temporal limits. One might live, wholly or in part, for things that one leaves incomplete at death, such as the garden one is cultivating, or the research project one is advancing. This is possible because we can fulfill, while we are alive, aims whose achievement depend on events that occur only after we are dead (Luper 2012a). While alive, I can take on, achieve, and benefit from an aim whose fulfillment requires many things to happen after I am gone. But of course there is a tradeoff to consider: if we devote ourselves to something that transcends life, we have even less control over life's meaning, and that is something we might resist, given that meaning is more important to us than happiness, and perhaps even life, itself.

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