



This is a repository copy of *Can Only Human Lives Be Meaningful?*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/133256/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Thomas, J.L. [orcid.org/0000-0003-0476-9848](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0476-9848) (2018) *Can Only Human Lives Be Meaningful?* *Philosophical Papers*, 47 (2). pp. 265-297. ISSN 0556-8641

<https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2017.1422793>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Philosophical Papers on 29/06/2018, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/RBrp3m2lflqmHz9Vshdb/full>*

## **1. Introduction**

If we are asked to think of lives with great meaning, certain individuals come immediately to mind: Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Florence Nightingale, and so on. Equally, if we are asked to imagine a completely meaningless life, examples are also easy to come up with. For instance, Susan Wolf (2010) describes an individual called ‘The Blob’ who spends their entire life in front of a television drinking beer and doing nothing else.

However, what would we say about the life of Smoky the dog, who was found abandoned in a foxhole in the New Guinea jungle during World War II, and accompanied Corporal William Wynne through twelve combat missions over two years, earning eight battle stars and surviving 150 air raids and even a typhoon. Smoky slept in Wynne’s tent, shared his rations, and served as a therapy animal of sorts, but her greatest achievement came when she helped in the construction of a crucial airfield for allied forces by running a telegraph wire through a 70-foot-long pipe, solving a problem that would have otherwise required a three-day dig that would have put hundreds of men in danger of enemy bombings.

Alternatively, consider the famous case of Laika, who started off life as a stray dog on the streets of Moscow but who was picked up by the Soviet Space Programme, underwent specialist cosmonaut training, and eventually became the first animal ever to orbit the earth. Unfortunately, Laika perished in space, but is now remembered with statues and monuments across Russia. Her journey was not only historically important, but provided important data about the effects of space flight and zero-gravity on living things which paved the way for later human space exploration. If any human being lived a life similar to that of Smoky or Laika, most would consider it rather meaningful, even if we would not necessarily choose it for

ourselves. However, does the fact that Smoky and Laika were dogs, and not humans, affect this evaluation?

The question of whether non-human animals can lead meaningful lives is very rarely touched upon in philosophy and, when it is, the notion is typically dismissed out of hand, with the assumption that animals *can't* live meaningful lives being taken for granted.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Steven Luper holds it as a strength of his theory of meaning that it excludes most animals from having meaningful lives (2014, p.198). Similarly, though he ultimately disagrees, Aaron Smuts treats the fact that his theory of meaning does not exclude animals as a *prima facie* weakness (2013, p.558). Elsewhere, Thaddeus Metz uses this alleged difference between animals and humans to inform his search for the right theory of meaning (2013, p.41), and John Martin Fischer has employed the distinction as a possible explanation of why we see a human death as more of a tragedy than the death of a lower animal (1993, p.69).

Recently, however, two articles have taken a more detailed look at the question. Firstly, Josh Milburn (2017) has argued that Robert Nozick should be viewed as an animal ethicist on the basis that his theory of rights can be seen as grounded in the capacity to live a meaningful life but, according to Nozick's own theory of meaning (2001), meaningfulness seems to be something that both humans and animals are capable of pursuing and securing. Secondly, in an article which will be the main focus of this paper, Duncan Purves and Nicolas Delon (2017) use their own theory of meaning to argue explicitly for the conclusion that animals can have meaningful lives. Moreover, they too suggest this finding might be important for the animal ethics movement in several ways. For instance, the capacity to live a meaningful life could

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting here that even the term 'non-human animals' is vague, encompassing creatures of very different capacities. Unfortunately, to work through this paper taking each animal individually would be an impossible task, so for now I will continue using Smoky and Laika as a case-studies and the umbrella term 'animals' to refer to all non-human creatures.

entail animals deserve a higher moral status than we currently grant them, or reveal an even deeper harm they suffer under certain conditions, such as factory farming.

The question of whether animals can have meaningful lives may be of both theoretical interest and potentially huge practical importance then. Nevertheless, although I agree with the conclusion that some animals are capable of having meaningful lives, I believe the way Purves and Delon reach this conclusion involves at least one misstep which has important consequences for the practical results of this debate. Therefore, the aims of this paper are (1) to provide an independent and accurate justification of the claim that animals can have meaningful lives, so that this assertion is understood correctly, and the right practical lessons can be drawn out, and (2) to outline the key confusions which I think may explain Purves and Delon's mistake, as well as the motivations many theorists could have in denying animals' capacity for meaning in the first place.

In section 2, I briefly survey some existing accounts of what makes a life meaningful, formulated with human beings in mind, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. In line with the insights of many other theorists, including Purves and Delon, I suggest that the concept of meaningfulness appears to be closely tied to that of significance. In section 3, I then outline Purves and Delon's specific proposal that a life will be meaningful if and only if it is significant and that significance is connected in the right way to a kind of effortful intentional action. I call this the 'purposefulness requirement'.

Purves and Delon argue animals can fulfil this purposefulness requirement and thus have the capacity for meaningful lives. However, in section 4, I outline and defend a different proposal: that when we call a life 'meaningful', there are actually (at least) two different features we may be talking about, one constituted solely by significance, the other solely by purposefulness. Therefore, one can have the sort of life we call meaningful if it is either significant or filled with purposeful activity (or both), but neither one is strictly necessary for

the description ‘meaningful’ to be correctly applied. Thus, the purposefulness requirement is wrong and, given animals like Smoky and Laika lived undoubtedly significant lives, we can rightly describe them as meaningful without needing to engage in any further debate about, for instance, their capacity for intentional activity.

In section 5, I move on to deal with an objection to my theory: since it holds that significance alone can be sufficient for meaningfulness, it appears to entail that the class of things which can have meaningful existences extends not just to animals, but to inanimate objects as well. Purves and Delon, amongst others, treat this as absurd. Nevertheless, I argue that this consequence of my theory is not obviously counter-intuitive; describing the existence of some inanimate objects as meaningful could even be quite fitting in some cases.

In sections 6 and 7, I then outline two beliefs which could explain why Purves and Delon, amongst others, might be opposed to my theory and its consequences: (a) that meaningfulness cannot attach to something’s existence without making that thing better off, and (b), that meaningfulness cannot attach to something’s existence without giving that thing reasons for pride. These beliefs, the latter in particular, can be seen as motivating Purves and Delon’s suggestion that inanimate objects could not have meaningful existences (since inanimate objects do not have interests and are incapable of feeling pride), as well their specific inclusion of the purposefulness requirement in their own theory (since, arguably, we cannot feel rightly proud of something unless it is connected to our agency in the right way). Moreover, although Purves and Delon seem to disagree, these beliefs could also be seen as motivating the intuition that non-human animals cannot have meaningful existences on the further assumptions that meaningfulness could not benefit them or that they do not have the right kind of agency to take pride in their actions.

Part of Purves and Delon’s paper can be understood, I believe, as an argument that animals can have the right kind of agency to take pride in their actions. However, I argue that

discussion was unnecessary because (b) should be rejected as confused, as should (a). In each case, the confusion stems from our understanding of meaningfulness in general being too narrowly informed by observations about the features of meaningful human lives. With regard to (a), I think the observation that having a meaningful life is usually good for human beings gives rise to the false assumption that meaningfulness could not attach to something's existence without benefiting that thing. With regard to (b), I think meaningfulness in general is being conflated with a particular kind of meaningfulness which humans find particularly desirable: one which provides us with reasons for pride. Nevertheless, just because meaningfulness (or the kind of meaningfulness we're interested in) usually makes human beings better off and is something they could take pride in, does not mean that meaningfulness cannot exist without these features. Thus, (a) and (b) are mistaken, and we are left with no reason to reject a theory, such as my own, which holds that meaningfulness can result from significance alone, even if the significant thing itself cannot rightly receive credit for its meaning, nor benefit from it in any other way.

In section 8, I will summarise my discussion and draw conclusions about meaningfulness and the practical consequences of my arguments. In particular, I will note that, while my account does suggest animals and many other things have the capacity for meaningful existences, the implications of this conclusion regarding our ethical treatment of animals is more limited than Purves and Delon suggest.

## **2. Existing theories of meaning**

What do we intend to say when we describe something as meaningful? In everyday language, the term appears to be used in several different ways. For instance, we can talk about the meaningfulness of a sentence in a book, or an utterance, or a gesture. Here, a thing's meaningfulness seems to be a measure of whether it carries a message or not and how

intelligible that message is. Alternatively, one might also talk about the meaningfulness of a birthday present or a family heirloom, and here it appears to be more a measure of how much that person cares about the object or whether they have some special connection to it. What does it mean when we say that a life is meaningful though? This is less clear. Neither is it clear what conditions a life must satisfy in order for this description to be accurate.

It is this latter question which I will be focusing on in the next few sections. My primary goal in this paper is simply to establish whether or not animals can have meaningful lives. Thus, I need only to discover what the sufficient conditions for meaningfulness are, and whether animals can satisfy them; I will not need to say anything about the actual nature of meaningfulness or what that term means in order to do this. I will begin this project by first surveying some existing theories of meaningfulness, outlining their more obvious flaws, and identifying what appear to be the most promising themes or features.

First, we can consider pure subjectivist accounts of meaning. These posit that meaning, in the sense we are discussing, is simply a kind of experience or feeling one can have, and thus a meaningful life is just one characterized by the presence of this feeling. A simple subjectivist theory was defended by an early Richard Taylor, who argued that all it takes for a life to be meaningful is that one feels fulfilled by it in the right way (1970). Even Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll rocks up a hill for eternity to no end, would thus have a meaningful existence if he simply enjoyed rolling rocks (p.21-3).

A theory such as this would appear to suggest that most animals would be capable of possessing meaningful lives, provided we understand ‘fulfilment’ in a fairly simple way.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, subjectivist theories are vulnerable to many objections. The standard critical response to simple subjectivist theories is that they imply, counter intuitively, that even

---

<sup>2</sup> However, Purves and Delon point out that, if fulfilment is seen as requiring some conscious evaluation using propositional attitudes, then this might risk ruling animals out (2017, p.9).

impoverished lives, like that of The Blob, could count as meaningful so long as they merely feel right to the individual. Indeed, one might take the case of Sisyphus itself as a prime counter-example to the theory.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, there seems to be something wrong at the very heart of these subjective theories. As Daan Evers and Gerlinde van Smeden put it, ‘Most philosophers nowadays respond by noting that although Sisyphus’ desire might make his life seem meaningful to him, that does not make it so’ (2016, p.355). In other words, most philosophers draw a distinction between whether a life feels meaningful to the person living it, which may well be closely connected to feelings of fulfilment, and whether the life truly is meaningful. When we complain that our lives are meaningless, the argument goes, we are not complaining (just) about how they feel but about how they objectively are, independently of our experience of them (Smuts, 2013, p.548). As evidence for this, we can see that, if we were presented with a pill that would make us feel a sense of meaningfulness, we would not consider that a solution to our problem (Brogaard and Smith, 2005, p445).

Similarly, when someone claims a person's life is less meaningful than Nelson Mandela's, it seems they are not typically making a claim about how the lives were subjectively experienced, but about how they were actually led (Kauppinen, 2013, p.165). Confirming this, Purves and Delon point out that we would normally be comfortable asserting that the lives of people like Martin Luther King were meaningful, without having to inquire about their levels of fulfilment (2017, p.9). On these grounds, I follow Smuts in recommending that we abandon pure subjectivist theories as ‘radically out of touch with our concept of meaningfulness’ (2013, p.544). They identify perhaps when a life feels meaningful, but not when it really is meaningful, which is the property we’re primarily after.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough list of the examples of dull and occasionally revolting activities given in the literature, see Metz (2013, p.175).



Regardless of how it might feel then, a life such as The Blob's strikes us as obviously meaningless, but what relevant feature is it missing? Susan Wolf's (2010) proposal is that, in order to be meaningful, a life must promote 'objective value', where objective value is understood broadly as encompassing many different kinds of activity and achievement. This would explain what was lacking in the life of The Blob, then; despite the satisfaction they presumably derive from watching television, they fail to bring about any substantial good in the world, and that seems to be enough to ensure their life is without meaning.

Wolf's theory is also open to objections, however; although introducing the objective-value requirement avoids many counter-examples, her theory retains the requirement found in some subjectivist theories that the individual also feel fulfilled by their life in order for it to count as meaningful. Yet, this requirement seems misplaced; someone like Martin Luther King's life would still strike us as meaningful even if we imagined he was constantly stressed or disinterested in his work. The charge against subjectivism was that it confused a life being meaningful with a life feeling meaningful, whereas here the charge against a 'hybrid theory' like Wolf's is not that it confuses the two, but that it erroneously assumes a life cannot be meaningful without also feeling meaningful (Kauppinen, 2012, p.356). This is untrue though; just as a life can patently be important without feeling important, it can be meaningful without feeling meaningful. While it might ultimately be our desire to have a life that both feels and is meaningful then, the latter clearly does not require the former. As a real-world example, Vincent van Gogh's life appears to be meaningful, despite his suffering from serious depression for most of it.

A better theory of meaning, we might think, would thus jettison any subjective requirement, and proceed purely with the requirement that one promote objective value. This is precisely what is proposed in 'consequentialist' theories like those of Ben Bramble (2015) and Aaron Smuts (2013). All that is necessary for a meaningful existence, they argue, is that

one produces something good or makes the world a better place in some respect. Such theories have a great number of strengths. Having no fulfilment-requirement, they avoid the counter-examples which plagued the subjectivist and hybrid accounts. Moreover, they account for our intuition that lives like The Blob's are meaningless, while lives like Martin Luther King's are meaningful to the degree they contributed something of value to the world.

The connection between meaningfulness and the production of value can also be found in many other theories of meaning: for instance, traditional 'supernaturalist' theories, which hold that life is meaningful because God created us for a reason, can be understood as suggesting that our lives are meaningful because there is something we are good for; Gwen Bradford's proposal that the most meaningful lives will be those which are pursuing 'open-ended' activities comes with the acknowledgement that such activities are likely to hold great value (2015); Nozick argues that that meaningfulness is generated through connecting to and promoting objective value, which he understands as 'organic unity' (2001); and Antti Kauppinen's own narrative theory of meaningfulness requires that one's life fit a certain 'coherent' structure involving challenging and successful projects with objectively valuable aims (2013).

### **3. Purves and Delon's Intentional Theory of Meaning**

Granting the above, it seems reasonable to conclude that, if we are looking for a feature or quality of a life which is relevant to determining its meaningfulness, the amount of value the life produces will be a prime candidate. Purves and Delon agree, and point out that consequentialist theories like Bramble's and Smuts would clearly allow for animals to have meaningful lives, granting that:

‘It’s not hard to imagine possible or actual cases where animals contribute value to the world—for example, dogs or dolphins have rescued humans or conspecifics, companion animals provide comfort to those in emotional distress, and animals of all varieties prevent harm to their young as they rear them until adulthood.’ (Purves and Delon 2017, p.4)<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Purves and Delon are not entirely satisfied with consequentialist theories because those theories do not give enough consideration to the role that intentionality or agency played in the life (p.4). For instance, Bramble’s theory does not require the good that is produced by one’s life to be the result of long-term, challenging projects (like King’s, for instance); according to Bramble, even something as easy as writing a cheque can confer meaning on one’s life (2015, p.449-451). Smuts goes even further, explicitly arguing that the good our existences cause can count towards the meaningfulness of our lives even if it was entirely unintentional (2012, p.26). Thus, whether some objective value was deliberately promoted through long-term efforts, or a complete accident, is not something these consequentialist theories appear to take into account, and Purves and Delon think this is a mistake. They argue that there is a difference in meaningfulness between the lives of someone who worked hard to promote good, and someone who did it inadvertently.

In fact, Purves and Delon go as far as to say that, even if a person’s life results in substantial value coming about, it would not confer any meaning on the life unless the agent’s intentional actions were involved in the right way (2017, p.7). Thus, their formula for a meaningful life, which they call the Intentional Theory of Meaning, is as follows:

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Smuts himself is open to this eventuality, stating that he sees ‘no reason to be speciesist about meaning’ (2013, p.558).

‘A subject S’s life L is meaningful in some way if and only if (1) L involves S’s contributing to a finally valuable state of affairs O either causally or constitutively; and (2) one of S’s intentional actions A is either a cause of O or constitutive of O.’ (p.7)

A few things are worth noting here. First of all, this theory does not require one to be aware of the value one produces for it to confer meaning upon one’s life, neither is it necessary that one’s intentions were actually aimed at the value one ultimately produced. For instance, say a scientist worked for their whole life to cure a disease but failed, then years after they died, someone else discovered the cure for a different disease already hidden within the scientist’s notes. According to Purves and Delon, this life would count as meaningful because it did produce some value, and the individual’s intentional activity was causally involved in producing that value, even though the intentions and the actual value never matched. Additionally, though it might not be apparent from the wording of their theory alone, Purves and Delon require that the intentional activity which contributes to some value coming about must involve some substantial amount of effort if it is to count towards the meaningfulness of the life (p.14).

Purves and Delon’s theory can be seen as hinging on two core concepts: purposefulness (the deliberate exertion of effort in pursuit of some goal) and significance (either constituting some substantial value or contributing to it coming about). Specifically, they propose that a life will be meaningful to the extent it is both significant and that significance is at least partly constituted by, or a result of, the individual’s purposeful activity. I will refer to this latter condition as the ‘purposefulness requirement’. Such a requirement is not unusual; along with significance, the theme of purposefulness also seems to be a common element in many theories of meaning. For instance, Evers and van Smeden argue that it is natural to connect meaning to the concept of purpose, and that it seems to be enhanced by ‘conscious goal-setting’ (2016, p.368). Similarly, Steven Luper’s theory of meaning requires that we pursue (and achieve) our

self-determined purposes (2014), Bradford (2015) and Neil Levy (2005) connect meaningfulness to pursuing open-ended goals, and even Wolf in her hybrid theory includes the requirement that, alongside being subjectively attracted to something of objective value, one must also ‘actively engage’ with that object (e.g. ‘create it, protect it, promote it...’ etc.) in order for true meaningfulness to be generated (2010, p.9-10).

Having set out their preferred theory, Purves and Delon then defend the claim that animals can possess the right kind of intentionality or agency that they think meaningfulness requires. In a straightforward sense, they argue that ‘the thesis that animals are intentional agents is well supported by cognitive ethology’ (2017, p.10). Although it may be that animals lack more complex types of agency such as the ability to plan and execute a life-plan (p.15), or deliberate on their aims in a higher-order or propositional fashion (p.12), Purves and Delon do not believe this makes it impossible for their lives to be meaningful. This is simply because they doubt such advanced forms of agency could be necessary for meaningfulness. For instance, they point out that if King stumbled upon his calling in a moment of inspiration, rather than through following through on a life-plan (p.15), or if a person saved a baby from drowning in a moment of instinctual action, rather than conscious deliberation (p.13), we would not think these actions were absent of meaning.

Purves and Delon conclude that, whatever kind of agency or purposefulness is required for meaning, it seems reasonable to assume that some animals, at least, can possess it. Thus, animals like Smoky, who contributed to valuable states of affairs directly through their intentional actions, will count as having meaningful lives. On the other hand, they might think that an animal like Laika, who contributed to valuable states of affairs, but not in a way that was connected to any substantial intentional effort of her own, would fail to have a meaningful life. Their own example used to illustrate this point is taken from Victor Frankl, who describes an ape that is subject to painful medical experiments which result in the production of a

valuable vaccine (1946, p.120). Frankl himself indicates that there is a meaning to this ape's life, just one it can't understand. Nevertheless, Purves and Delon argue that, because the value that results from its existence is not related to any purposeful activity on the ape's own part, there actually is no meaning to be found.

Purves and Delon then flag up three possible consequences that might arise from the recognition that most animals do, in fact, have the capacity to live meaningful lives (p.17-18). First, we might think this capacity grants animals a higher moral status than we have so far afforded them. Second, regardless of their formal status, we may choose to treat them differently, now we no longer see a capacity for meaningfulness as a dividing line between humans and other animals. Third, if we think it is bad for an animal's life to lack meaning given they have the capacity for it, we might recognise that certain practices like factory farming, which surely enforce a meaningless existence on animals, do even more harm to them than we previously thought.

#### **4. An alternative disjunctive theory of meaning**

I agree with Purves and Delon's conclusion that animals do have the capacity for meaningful lives. I also agree with the notion that both significance (contributing to or constituting great value) and purposefulness (intentionally pursuing some goal) are relevant concepts when determining the meaningfulness of a life, which is indicated by Purves and Delon's Intentional Theory, as well as many other existing theories defended elsewhere. Nevertheless, I do not agree with two important claims Purves and Delon make: first, I do not think that purposeful activity is necessary for one's life to have (at least one kind of) genuine meaningfulness. Second, I do not think the conclusion that animals can have meaningful lives will affect our ethical treatment of them in all of the ways they suggest. I will explain the latter thought in more detail in the final section of the paper. For now, I will address the former by laying out

an alternative approach to meaningfulness which I think captures the truth more accurately than the Intentional Theory.

My proposal here boils down to one key claim: that meaningfulness is not a single feature of a life but (at least) two different features which are usually run together. Where Purves and Delon believe that meaningfulness is a unified property that arises when both purposefulness and significance are present in a life, and connected in the right way, I believe that purposefulness and significance each constitute distinct varieties of meaningfulness. In other words, if one's life is adequately significant, then that feature is necessary and sufficient for it to have one kind of meaningfulness, which I'll call S-Meaning, and if one's life is adequately purposeful, then that is necessary and sufficient for it to have a different kind of meaningfulness, which I'll call P-Meaning.

It is possible to envision someone taking a person's levels of P-Meaning and S-Meaning together to find out that life's 'overall' level of meaningfulness; however, I am not defending this suggestion. All I am claiming here is that when we usually talk about the meaningfulness of a human life, it may legitimately be either or both kinds of meaningfulness we're talking about.<sup>5</sup> In other words, when someone says they want a more meaningful life, they might be saying they want it to involve more purposeful activity, or produce more value, or both. Whether a life has just P-Meaningfulness or S-Meaningfulness then, it can be considered to be genuinely meaningful life, according to the principles which I believe guide our use of the term 'meaningful' as it is applied to human lives. Alternatively, to put it another way, one's life can hold a genuine variety of meaningfulness even if it is only significant and not at all purposeful or only purposeful and not at all significant.

---

<sup>5</sup> In fact, I think there may be other kinds of meaningfulness that are invoked by discussions of *life's* meaningfulness as well, but for simplicity here I will only talk about the kinds of meaningfulness constituted by significance and purposefulness.

Granting the above, it seems Purves and Delon's lengthy discussion of the type of intentional action which animals are capable of would be only be relevant to the question of whether they can possess P-Meaning. However, to answer the question of whether animals' lives can be meaningful at all (or in any way), it is simply not necessary to pursue this discussion. Animals' lives can be significant because they can be causally involved in producing value, and that alone means they can possess the kind of meaningfulness which is constituted by significance, S-Meaning. Moreover, since S-Meaning, like P-Meaning, constitutes a genuine kind of meaningfulness, that means that animal lives can be genuinely meaningful regardless of whether they held any purposeful activity.

Acknowledging that meaningfulness is not a single concept, even just as it is applied to individual's lives, makes sense. First of all, it fits with the observation I made at the start of section 2, that 'meaningfulness' is used in many different ways. One of the ways it's used measures the intelligibility of a message, another way measures the value of something to a particular person, and two more ways measure distinctly the purposefulness and significance of actions or events. Consider the phrase 'Did you mean to do that?' Here the meaning of an action is clearly its purpose or intention, and an action will be meaningful only if it was deliberate. Asking if a life was meaningful in this sense, can therefore be understood as asking to what degree it was filled with deliberate, purposeful activity. Equally, if we consider the phrase 'The discovery of penicillin was a meaningful moment in history', we can see that here the meaningfulness of the event is constituted by its significance.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, we could also ask about the meaningfulness, meaning significance, of a human life.

---

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, as Purves and Delon themselves note, Fleming's discovery of penicillin itself was actually 'entirely unintended' (2017, p.14), and so any informed description of this event as meaningful is likely to be referring specifically to the magnitude or value of its consequences, rather than its purposefulness (since it involved very little).



The important thing to notice here, however, is that it is possible for each kind of meaningfulness to exist independently; no one would claim a significant event wasn't significant because it didn't involve intentional actions, nor that an intentional action wasn't purposeful because it had only produced a small amount of value. The same is true with regard to the meaningfulness of human lives. Consider a person who worked incredibly hard throughout their life to defeat some injustice but failed. Then, after they had died, it was coincidentally discovered that their blood held the cure to some terrible disease, millions of lives are saved, and the person's name goes down in history. What should we say was the meaning of this person's life? What should we say made it meaningful? I think there are two distinct but equally appropriate answers we could give: the failed fight for justice or their miraculous blood, i.e. the purpose the individual was devoted to, or the significant value that resulted from their life. This highlights the two varieties of meaningfulness which I am trying to establish.

I should also note here that my disjunctive theory can accommodate, but does not necessarily require, the inclusion of some value condition within each kind of meaning. For instance, one might argue that someone's life only has P-Meaning if the goals they were pursuing were sufficiently valuable, and not trivial or destructive. Similarly, one might argue, as I have been assuming so far, that someone's life could only have S-Meaning if it gained its significance through producing a positively valuable impact rather than a negative one. In each case, the specifics of the value conditions are also open, so the theory is not committed to any particular understanding of value. Nevertheless, the fact that it is compatible with various value conditions means that, if it is necessary, the theory can rule out certain controversial lives as having any meaningfulness, such as that of Sisyphus – who clearly acted very purposefully,

but towards a trivial goal – and Hitler – whose life made a large but unquestionably negative impact on the world.<sup>7</sup>

So far, I have argued that both purposefulness and significance seem to stand as two distinct kinds of meaning, P-Meaning and S-Meaning. However, to make it even clearer that both kinds of meaningfulness can independently count as genuine meaningfulness, we can return to the example given above, but imagine that the individual described is in fact two individuals, A and B, where A was the failed warrior for justice and B was a Blob-like person with miracle blood. Now some theorists might be ready to claim that A still had a meaningful life, even though all their purposeful activity (and their life as a whole) came to nothing.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, some theorists, notably the consequentialists, Smuts and Bramble, would be ready to claim that B has a meaningful life, even though they did nothing to earn it. However, Purves and Delon will not accept that B has a meaningful life because they are mistakenly holding on to the purposefulness requirement: the claim that a certain kind of purposeful action is necessary for a life to have any meaning at all. In fact, they provide a case which is very much analogous to B in order to try and demonstrate their point which they call *The Sleeping Philanthropist*:

---

<sup>7</sup> I am not arguing that any particular value condition should necessarily be included, however, since there are also some reasons for thinking that, at least in the case of S-Meaning, a life could be meaningful through producing substantial but objectively negative effects. For example, Bradford points out, that common suggestions of meaningful historical events include World War II and 9/11 (2015, p.5). These are clearly significant but for doing harm, indicating, perhaps, that meaningfulness of the S-Meaning variety does not necessarily require something's impact to be objectively valuable. This question has little bearing on the remainder of my arguments, however, so I will put it aside.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, Purves and Delon would presumably agree here (2017, p.8), though because they propose that such a seemingly wasted life would in fact constitute some value, even if it didn't make any impact.

‘The heir to a great fortune has spent his entire life in a persistent vegetative state. Because he is unable to make decisions about his fortune, the lawyers of his estate have invested a great deal of money in charitable ventures and have saved many millions of lives. However, if he were to die, the flow of money to charity would immediately cease, as the fortune would be passed to the heir’s miserly (and, unfortunately, quite conscious) brother.’ (p.6)

Despite contributing to a very valuable state of affairs, they assert that the life of The Sleeping Philanthropist is not meaningful on the basis that it is empty of purposeful activity. However, if I am right, this life is actually very meaningful; although it doesn’t have any P-Meaning, due to the vegetative state of the individual, it does have a huge amount of S-Meaning, and we have seen no reason (yet) to deny that S-Meaning alone could not render one’s life straightforwardly meaningful in a sense perfectly at-ease with our normal usage of the word. To deny that S-Meaning alone counts as real meaningfulness is to say that there is effectively no difference in meaning between the life of The Sleeping Philanthropist and The Blob, whose life produces essentially no value for anyone beyond themselves. Yet, there clearly is a difference between the lives of the two individuals, and that difference is in their respective levels of meaningfulness (specifically, their S-Meaning). We should reject Purves and Delon’s Intentional Theory then, and instead acknowledge that the meaningfulness of a life can come in multiple forms, one of which is constituted by significance alone.

Another reason for thinking that significance alone can constitute one genuine kind of meaningfulness, or that ‘significance’ can be seen as a synonym of ‘meaningfulness’ as Metz puts it (2012, p.436), can be found when we imagine what the universe will be like a million years from now. As Iddo Landau describes:

‘Perhaps if the effects of our actions were to last for millions of years... we would consider our lives to be meaningful. But upon recognizing that our effect is as limited as it is, we cannot but see our lives as meaningless.’ (2014, p.457-458)

Similarly, Timothy Chappell explains how:

‘We can get a sense of the meaninglessness of life by looking at the vastness of the universe and time and the shortness and littleness of us and our projects...’ (2007, p.33)

The worry is clear: if we imagine a universe which no longer contains any trace of our lives, such that our impact has completely disappeared, it appears to indicate to us that our lives would have lost their meaning.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, however, if we imagine that, even in a million years, some existing society of humans will still read books about us and build statues of us, and otherwise celebrate the effects of our lives, that seems to be sufficient to dispel this sense of meaninglessness entirely. Here, I do not mean to endorse the claim that a life must have a legacy that lasts a million years to have S-Meaning; the upshot of my point is simply that, regardless of how purposeful we actually were when alive, the thought that our life would still be significant even in the vastly distant future appears to be enough by itself to reassure us of its meaningfulness. Again, then, significance appears to be sufficient for meaningfulness, at least according to our intuitions, and hence we have good reason to reject Purves and Delon’s purposefulness-requirement.

---

9 For more examples of this thought being expressed, see Blackburn (2001, p.79), Seachris (2011, p.151), Kolers (2016, p.12), and Vohanka and Vohanka (2011, p.4).

## 5. Inanimate objects

Given the plausibility of the disjunctive theory above, why has it been overlooked? What motivates Purves and Delon to stick with the assumption that meaningfulness is a singular feature of a life, requiring both purposefulness and significance, in the face of counter-intuitive implications, such as the notion that *The Blob* and *The Sleeping Philanthropist* have identically meaningless lives despite their obvious differences? One explanation could be that, because both P-Meaning and S-Meaning can be labelled ‘meaningfulness’, it simply did not occur to these theorists that there could be more than one distinct thing at stake when we talk about the meaningfulness of our lives. Indeed, most contemporary writers seem to take it as given that the term ‘meaningfulness’, in this context, refers to just one thing.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as I’ve argued above, there is reason to think meaningfulness is not so straightforward, and that a pluralistic conception of meaning is actually the right way to go.

Nevertheless, even the rejection of pluralism in general here still wouldn’t justify why writers like Purves and Delon hold onto the purposefulness requirement and refuse to admit that significance alone can be sufficient for genuine meaningfulness, however we understand it. To explain this decision, we must first examine an objection which both they, and Evers and van Smeden, make with regards to pure consequentialist theories:

‘it seems implausible that valuable, but unintended, consequences could suffice for a meaningful life. If they did, grasses could have meaningful existences, as well as forces and dimensions...’ (Evers and van Smeden, 2016, p.366, 368).

---

<sup>10</sup> Not all theorists do this, however; some, such as Timothy Mawson (2010), acknowledge that what we call ‘meaningfulness’ can actually be a host of different concepts bundled together under one name. Then there are others, such as Joshua Seachris (2009), who try to wrestle these different ideas back together, grounded by a single underlying concept of what meaning really is, deep down.

‘On objective theories, there is nothing special about lives, or the way we choose to live them: a shovel or rock can stand in the same relation to valuable outcomes that our lives must stand in. If we are in search of an account of meaning that explains why lives, but not rocks, are the proper loci of meaning then we cannot accept an objective theory.’ (Purves and Delon, 2017, p.7)

The implication in these passages is clear: the very idea that inanimate objects could have meaningful existences is intuitively absurd, and that gives us a reason to reject any theory of meaning which would suggest that they could. Evers and van Smeden, for instance, assert that it is a desideratum of any plausible theory of meaning that it explains ‘why it seems natural to apply the concept to lives instead of inanimate objects’ (2016, p.368).

My first response to this challenge is to point out that objects themselves would not be the appropriate bearers of meaning anyway because only events and actions have the kind of meaningfulness we are currently discussing. This is evidenced by the fact that we always talk about a person’s actions or achievements being meaningful, or their life or existence as a whole, but we never say that the person themselves was meaningful. For instance, we describe Martin Luther King’s life and work as meaningful, but we would never say ‘Martin Luther King was meaningful’. Having established this, we can see that the proper wording this objection should take, as it did in the above passages, is that it is absurd to suggest that the existence of inanimate objects could be meaningful, or that events the objects were involved in were meaningful. Nevertheless, would this actually be absurd?

It is perhaps not common to talk about the existence of a particular shovel or rock being meaningful, but what if the rock was a fossil that revealed some massively valuable piece of information about the evolution of humanity? Or what if the shovel was the only weapon to hand when a psychopathic murderer broke into a person’s house and was successfully used to

save their family's life? In each case here, the existence of the inanimate object, or perhaps rather the presence of the object in the place it was found or needed, played a causal role in some significantly valuable state of affairs coming about. In such a case, it may not actually be so bizarre to say that this rock and this shovel are, in fact, a significant rock and a significant shovel and, moreover, that their existence or presence in the world was meaningful. Similarly, the fact that the force of gravity keeps us from floating off into space, and the force of magnetism protects life on Earth from dangerous solar radiation, seems to suggest quite naturally that these forces have a meaningful effect on our existence.

Indeed, real-world examples of this kind of meaningfulness being ascribed to non-living things are not too difficult to find. Consider, for instance, the following text found on a museum website: 'Meaningful Objects: ...celebrates the contributions of our university museums to intellectual, cultural, and social life at the University of Michigan' ('Meaningful Objects', 2010). Here it is clear the meaningfulness being credited to the objects appears to specifically refer to their impact on the University community, rather than whether they carry an intelligible message or have any special connection to the community, which I noted in section 2 are two other ways we routinely ascribe meaningfulness to inanimate things. The same is true of the following claims: 'Aside from the Sun, no star is close enough to our Solar System to have a meaningful effect on our lives' (O'Callaghan, 2016), and 'Quantitatively, G [Gravity] is extremely small; its existence is meaningful only when the mass is large enough' (Barthakur, 2005). In both cases, the meaningfulness that the object or force is described as having is clearly a measure of something like its significance or impact.

The objection presented above was that theories such as mine would allow even inanimate objects and forces to count as having meaningful existences, which was alleged to be intuitively absurd. Yet, we have seen that things are not so clear; at the very least, it is not obviously counter-intuitive to ascribe meaning to the existence of certain inanimate objects

(and may even be quite natural). To show that this consequence is truly absurd then, some kind of theoretical argument or reasons are required. However, I don't think any plausible ones can be found. In the following sections I will examine and reject two beliefs which I believe may motivate the intuition that inanimate objects cannot have meaningful existences: (a) that meaningfulness cannot attach to something's existence without making that thing better off, and (b), that meaningfulness cannot attach to something's existence without giving that thing reasons for pride. Interestingly, I think these beliefs could also be responsible for the intuition amongst some writers (though, notably, not Purves and Delon), that animals cannot have meaningful existences either. Nevertheless, I will demonstrate that these beliefs are based on confusions, and thus should be discarded.

## 6. Benefit

What explains the intuition, held so strongly by Purves, Delon, Evers and van Smeden, that inanimate objects cannot have meaningful existences? I think the answer here may rest on a faulty assumption they might be making about meaningfulness: that meaningfulness must benefit the object whose existence it attaches to in some way.<sup>11</sup> This idea is found in a large proportion of philosophical writings on the subject. For instance, Wolf characterises meaningfulness as 'a significant way in which life can be good' (2010, p.8), Metz argues that it is a kind of 'non-instrumental value' that our life can possess (2013, p.6), and even Smuts claims that to describe a life as meaningful is to attribute to it 'a certain kind of value' (2013, p.538). In other words, the general presumption is that meaningfulness is always good for the

---

<sup>11</sup> This first assumption is perhaps more salient in the case of Evers and van Smeden, since Purves and Delon explicitly *don't* commit themselves to it (2017, p.18). Nevertheless, they do remark upon the plausibility of the claim that the meaningfulness of one's life could be directly and positively related to their interests (p.19) and, even if they do not explicitly support it, the assumption may still be influencing their intuitions behind the scenes.



person who it belongs to, at least in some sense. However, in the case of inanimate forces and objects, it would therefore seem that evaluations of meaningfulness are completely out of place; since these things have no welfare, nothing can be good or bad for them. Thus, since meaningfulness must be good for the things whose existence it attaches to, the existence of inanimate objects cannot possibly possess any meaningfulness.

The argument is fairly clear, but it rests, as I've noted, on the premise that meaningfulness could not attach to something's existence unless it could make that thing better off in some way. Yet, why should we accept this premise? One suggestion might be that meaningfulness is just a kind of objective good – that according to some objective list theory of wellbeing, having a meaningful life is something that is simply, in itself, good for you regardless of your desires or circumstances. However, even granting this claim would not entail that only beings with their own levels of wellbeing could have meaningful existences. After all, one could argue that it objectively benefits a person if they are loved, but it does not follow from the fact that inanimate objects could not benefit from being loved that they could not actually be loved. The notion that meaningfulness is an objective good for those who have interests is thus compatible with a theory such as mine which nevertheless holds that meaningfulness can attach to other things as well.

Moreover, I think the suggestion that meaningfulness is simply an objective good is a little implausible. Even aside from the controversial metaphysical commitments it might entail, it just doesn't seem to track our intuitions in every case. For instance, consider the individual B I described above: the blob-like person with miracle blood. Let's assume that this person is entirely self-involved and cares only about their own pleasure, which comes from watching TV and drinking beer. B has no desire for a meaningful life whatsoever, neither do they specifically desire to have lived purposefully or been in any way significant. As it happens, they do end up with a meaningful life, because their blood is discovered to be very valuable and results in their

being a hugely significant individual. However, does this meaningfulness make B better off? It does not seem so. If B turned around and said that they would not desire or appreciate this meaningfulness and did not think it benefited them in any way, there is nothing obvious that could be said to convince them they were wrong. Thus, a more plausible explanation of the benefit meaningfulness can grant us might be that it is good for us only to the extent it is something we actually desire or would appreciate.

On this view, it may be true that, for most people, having a meaningful life would make them better off, but only because most people do in fact desire a meaningful life (whether that is interpreted as P-Meaning, S-Meaning, or both). Therefore, again there would be no problem in admitting that meaningfulness (in the form of S-Meaning) can be attached to inanimate objects and forces; although it cannot improve their wellbeing (they have none), improving something's wellbeing is not a necessary feature of meaningfulness; rather it is a contingent matter determined by whether or not meaningfulness is desired or appreciated by the thing whose existence it attaches to. Both humans, animals, and inanimate objects could have meaningful existences then, simply by being significant, regardless of whether it does or can make them better off.

Nevertheless, as I have suggested, some theorists seem to mistake the fact that meaningfulness is often beneficial for humans whose lives possess it, for the notion that something's existence cannot be meaningful unless it is beneficial to those existents; and this, I think, is one reason they reject that meaning can come from significance alone. As evidence that Purves and Delon themselves make this mistake (at least, behind the scenes), consider their response to the consequentialist approaches to meaning, and my own, which suggest that the medical-experiment ape described earlier would have a meaningful life because of the value that resulted from it. Here, Purves and Delon claim that this description of the ape's life is 'implausible' because 'it is not meaningful for the ape' (2017, p.6). Now, I agree that the ape

would not experience its own life as meaningful, nor appreciate that fact; however, the observation that the life is not meaningful ‘for the ape’ cannot be read as the claim that the life would not feel meaningful from the inside, since Purves and Delon, like me, reject the claim that our feelings are at all relevant in determining how meaningful our lives actually are.<sup>12</sup>

What else could Purves and Delon mean by the claim that the ape’s life is not meaningful ‘for the ape’ then? I think the only answer is that the meaningfulness of the life is not itself beneficial for the ape, because it requires the ape to suffer for reasons it does not understand and presumably would not consent to if it could. In other words, the meaningfulness of the ape’s life is not something it would desire nor appreciate. Nevertheless, it does not follow from the fact that the ape does not benefit from the meaningfulness of its life in this way that its life is not in fact meaningful. The ape may not have perceived its life as meaningful, nor enjoyed this fact – and, to that extent, one might say it was not meaningful for the ape – but the life itself was still meaningful.

To summarise this last section, certain theorists have suggested that it is counter-intuitive to suggest inanimate objects could have meaningful existences; however, I have argued that it is not obviously the case and that the attribution of meaningfulness to the existence of inanimate objects might, in some cases, actually be quite natural and appropriate. Moreover, I think the reason these theorists hold the opposing intuition to mine could be because they mistakenly think that meaningfulness cannot attach to something’s existence without benefiting that thing, and they assume this because, in the majority of human cases, having a meaningful life does seem to benefit us, whether this is simply because we appreciate it or because they think, less plausibly, that meaningfulness is an objective good.

---

<sup>12</sup> For instance, they note that ‘The distinction between “internal” and “external” meaning helps to capture the sense in which a subject’s (externally) meaningful life need not be meaningful to her (i.e. internally)’ (p.15).

As well as explaining the rejection of certain significance-is-sufficient theories of meaning, this faulty assumption – that meaningfulness does not exist or does not count unless it makes the holder better off – can also be seen as part-motivation for the subjectivist and hybrid theories discussed earlier. For instance, Evers and van Smeden, during the defence of their own hybrid theory, claim that any plausible theory of meaning should be able to explain why the prospect of a meaningful life ‘should appeal to the person living it’ (2016, p.364). This thought inspires Wolf to include a fulfilment requirement in her theory of meaning, and Evers and van Smeden to include a similar requirement in their own theory. However, in both cases we can guess what is really be going on: the deeper assumption these theorists are inspired by is the notion that meaningfulness has to be good for the person whose life has it, and their subjective requirements are simply ways to ensure that the individual appreciates or desires the meaningfulness in their life and is thereby made better off from it.

## **7. Pride**

I have now provided one explanation as to why some theorists might draw the conclusion that ‘being alive is an enabler of meaning’ (Evers and van Smeden, 2016, p.357), and why this line of reasoning is mistaken. Therefore, though my disjunctive account of meaningfulness would allow even inanimate objects to count as having meaningful existences (specifically, with S-Meaning), we have seen no reason to think this consequence is actually problematic. Furthermore, if I am right that these theorists’ claims about inanimate objects are inspired by the assumption that only things who can be benefited from meaningfulness can truly have meaningful existences, this might also provide one reason why so many theorists have also implicitly rejected the notion that animals can have meaningful lives. In brief: one might doubt that any animal could desire or find fulfilment in living a meaningful life, hence (providing one rejects the notion that meaningfulness is an objective-good), one might conclude that having a

meaningful life is not something that could ever make an animal better off. If I am right though, even if it were true that animals could never benefit from the meaningfulness of their lives, this should not entail that they cannot actually have meaningful lives.

Nevertheless, I think that some theorists' reluctance to grant animals the capacity for meaning may also be motivated by another (perhaps connected) confusion – a confusion that may also motivate theorists not just to reject significance-is-sufficient theories like my own, but to specifically stipulate that something like the purposefulness requirement must be included. In the above case, the mistake was moving from the observation that meaningfulness was usually good for humans, to the assumption that it cannot exist without being good for the thing whose existence bears it. In this case, I think the mistake involves us confusing meaningfulness in general with a particular type of meaningfulness which we see as eminently worth having, and thereby denying that other less-desirable (or undesirable) kinds of meaningfulness count as meaningfulness at all. Specifically, I think one of the main reasons humans desire meaningfulness (in the form of significance or S-Meaning) is that we think it would give us a fitting reason to feel proud of ourselves, and this is something we want quite dearly. However, in order for a particular instance of S-Meaning to give reasons for pride, we must be able to see ourselves as responsible for producing this significant, valuable impact, in at least some minimal way.

The mistake then arises when we become so fixated on this particular kind of prideworthy S-Meaning that we begin to ignore and discount all other sorts of meaningfulness as genuine meaningfulness at all, simply because they are not the sort of meaningfulness we are most interested in. Then, building on this mistake, some theorists are drawn to incorporate the above condition (that one be responsible for the value one produces) into their theories of what is required not just for prideworthy meaning, but meaning full stop. This is perhaps why Purves and Delon include the requirement that a meaningful life must not only contribute to

valuable states of affairs and involve intentional actions, but that this value must result from the intentional actions in a causal or constitutive sense. In support of this hypothesis, consider the following passages from Purves and Delon:

‘Those who desire meaningful lives want to be able to say, not just that their existence was necessary to bring about value in the world, but that the way they lived their lives made the world better. ... Meaning is desirable insofar as it stems from our own agency. While it may be true that the good-making features of a person’s existence can be unrelated to their agency, this is not true of the meaning-making features.’ (2017, p.7)

Their motivations are clearly in line with my hypothesis; one kind of meaningfulness which we desire most is specifically meaningfulness which stems from our own agency and would give us reasons to feel proud of ourselves, and to isolate just this kind of meaningfulness we must indeed employ something like the purposefulness requirement (as well as the condition that our lives be significant for causing or constituting some substantial value). Nevertheless, Purves and Delon are wrong to suggest that the meaningfulness constituted by significance alone is not genuine meaningfulness. Describing lives that are hugely significant but for reasons unconnected to the individuals’ own agency, Purves and Delon assert that ‘these lives have little or no meaning, at least not of the sort a typical person finds desirable’ (p.6), but the crucial point they are missing is that there can exist other kinds of genuine meaning besides those which we humans happen to find desirable. Just as there are unappealing ways of being famous, there are unappealing, or simply not-appealing, ways to possess meaning.

Granting this, we have no reason to deny that meaning can be constituted by significance alone, regardless of whether it is connected to any intentional activity. Moreover, this claim appears even more plausible when we consider, for instance, the meaningfulness of the existence of certain inanimate objects, and of the Sleeping Philanthropist’s life compared

to that of The Blob. It seems reasonable to claim that significance can be sufficient for genuine meaningfulness then, whether it arises from the agency of a conscious being or not, and any reluctance to admit this might be explained by two mistaken beliefs: first, that real meaningfulness must be something that makes the bearer better off, and second, that it must involve the production of some value for which the bearer can take partial credit. With these intuitions, in turn, being motivated respectively by our mistaken assumption that just because meaning is usually good for us, it can't exist without being good for its bearer, and by our confusing a particularly desirable sort of meaning (prideworthy S-Meaning) with meaningfulness in general.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, both faulty lines of reasoning can be seen as contributing to the implicit assumption I aimed to challenge here: that animals cannot have meaningful lives. In the first case, I have suggested this is because we may rightly or wrongly assume that animals cannot benefit from or take an interest in having a meaningful life. While, in the second case, it is because we may believe that animals do not possess the right kind of agency necessary to receive credit for their actions in the right way. As I understand it, a large part of Purves and Delon's paper is aimed at proving animals can have this relevant kind of agency. Nevertheless, as I have argued, this debate is only relevant to the question of whether animals could have a particular kind of prideworthy S-Meaning that we prize; it does not need to be settled to establish that animals can have meaningful lives at all.

---

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, these confusions can be seen as connected, as I noted above, if we assume that meaningfulness giving us reasons for pride is something that would ensure it benefited us. That way Purves and Delon's purposefulness requirement would serve to both eliminate inanimate objects and ensure that meaningfulness was always good for us by ruling out all non-prideworthy sorts of meaningfulness, which may not be good for us, from counting as meaningfulness at all.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that non-human animals are capable of having meaningful lives. This is because I believe that meaningfulness, in the sense in which it is usually applied to human lives, is actually (at least) two distinct properties, one constituted by purposefulness (which I called P-Meaning) and the other constituted by significance (which I called S-Meaning). If we grant this disjunctive analysis, it follows that many animals will have the capacity for meaningful lives of either variety because they can both act purposefully and be causally involved in producing valuable effects. For example, Smoky would presumably have both S-Meaning and P-Meaning, while Laika would perhaps only have S-Meaning (since her life was primarily controlled by the Russian scientists who trained her).

The conclusion that animals can have meaningful lives is shared by Purves and Delon. However, their theory of meaningfulness conflicts with the one I have proposed in that it posits only one kind of meaningfulness which is only secured when a life possesses both a significance and a kind of purposefulness which are suitably connected. Thus, they would deny that Laika had a meaningful life at all. Nevertheless, I have argued that, while purposefulness may constitute one kind of P-Meaning, it is not a requirement for a life to hold any meaningfulness, because significance alone can constitute a genuine kind of meaning: S-Meaning. Their insistence otherwise, I suggested, may stem from the conflation of meaningfulness in general with a particularly desirable (for us) kind of pridedeworthy S-Meaning, for which purposefulness-caused-significance is in fact necessary.

Furthermore, their objection that allowing significance to constitute a kind of genuine meaningfulness by itself would allow inanimate objects' existences to count as meaningful, was a consequence I demonstrated was not as counter-intuitive as it might have first appeared. The intuition that it would be absurd, I suggested, is likely explained by another piece of mistaken reasoning: the unwarranted inference from the observation that meaningfulness is



usually good for human beings to have in their lives, to the assumption that it cannot attach to the existence of something without being good for that thing.

Perhaps it could be argued that the concept of meaningfulness under discussion is only rightly applicable as an evaluation of the goodness of human lives, and so it is quite correct to tie our general characterisation of meaningfulness narrowly to the kind of meaningfulness which is desirable or good for humans. However, aside from the fact that this claim would beg the question against animals having meaningful lives (perhaps unfairly), I also see no positive reason to accept it. It is true that, when we discuss the meaningfulness of a human life, we are usually intending to evaluate how good it was in some sense, but that does not mean that meaningfulness could not be ascribed elsewhere in non-evaluative ways. Analogously, to describe a life as being lived beautifully or justly is presumably to evaluate it positively, but that does not mean that beauty and justice may only be understood, narrowly, as evaluations of the goodness of a human life. They can be applied in other spheres as well, even to inanimate objects, and the same goes equally for the concept of meaningfulness.

Granting all I've argued, my theory of meaning can therefore account for four desiderata that Evers and van Smeden (2016) lay out, which state that any plausible theory should be able to explain why meaning: (1) is applicable to lives but not inanimate objects, (2) seems to be enhanced by conscious goal-setting and achieving, (3) seems to be related to engagement in some purpose, and (4) seems to be something that appeals to us. If I am correct, then 1 is wrong and meaning is applicable to both lives and inanimate objects; 2 and 3 are correct and explained by the fact that purposefulness and significance each constitute a distinct variety of meaning; and 4 is explained by the fact that, while not all kinds of meaning are

appealing to us, at least one certain sub-category is, because it would give us a reason to feel proud of our efforts and choices.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, what practical lessons can we draw from this discussion? As noted, Purves and Delon suggest the recognition that animals can have meaningful lives could affect our ethical treatment of them in three ways (2017, p.17-18): First, we might think this capacity grants animals a higher moral status than we have so far afforded them. Second, regardless of their formal status, we may choose to treat them differently, now we no longer see the capacity for meaningfulness as a dividing line between humans and other animals. Third, if we think it is bad for an animal to lack meaning given they have this capacity, we might recognise that certain practices like factory farming, which surely enforce a fairly meaningless existence on animals, do even more harm to them than we previously thought.

Nevertheless, if I am correct, then the first two of these suggestions won't make much sense. Granting that animals have the capacity to possess meaningful existences should not in itself elevate their moral status and neither should it erase any relevant divisions between us, for the simple reason that inanimate objects like rocks and shovels, on my theory, also have this capacity. As for Purves and Delon's third suggestion, it may be correct that factory farms do additional harm to animals on grounds related to the meaningfulness of their lives, but only if we assume either that meaningfulness is objectively tied to the wellbeing of creatures with the capacity for it (which I have doubted, but is compatible with my theory), or if we assume that factory farmed animals have a desire for meaningfulness in their lives or would appreciate it if they got it.

With regard to the latter suggestion, I am not certain how to establish this, but to a certain extent it seems plausible; granting meaningfulness can be constituted both by

---

<sup>14</sup> Or, alternatively, that it is simply objectively good for human beings to have lives filled with purposefulness and significance.

purposeful behaviour and by making an impact on one's environment, it is possible to imagine animals desiring and appreciating such meaningfulness to at least a minimal extent, and being psychologically harmed by the constraints which factory farming certainly imposes on these activities. Nevertheless, I doubt the moral permissibility of factory farming will rest on this question, given the immense physical suffering it undoubtedly inflicts upon animals appears to be a considerably more pressing reason to discontinue this practice by itself.<sup>15</sup>

## Bibliography

- Arpaly, Noam, (2010), 'Comment', in Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, Princeton University Press, pp. 85-91
- Barthakur, Jitendra Kumar, (2005), 'Gravitation and Universal Rhythm', URL = [http://www.general-theory-of-time.org/essay\\_gravitation\\_and\\_universal\\_rhythm.php](http://www.general-theory-of-time.org/essay_gravitation_and_universal_rhythm.php), [Accessed 08/11/2017]
- Blackburn, Simon, (2001), *Being Good*, Oxford University Press, New York
- Bradford, Gwen, (2015), 'Achievement and the Meaning of Life', URL= <http://bradford.rice.edu/research/>
- Bramble, B, (2015), 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life', *Utilitas*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 445-459
- Brogaard, B. and Smith, B., (2005), 'On Luck, Responsibility, and the Meaning of Life', *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 34: pp. 443–58.
- Chappell Timothy (2007) *Infinity Goes Up on Trial: Must Immortality be Meaningless?*, *European Journal of Philosophy*, published online
- Dahl, N., (1987), 'Morality and the Meaning of Life', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 17, pp. 1–22.
- Evers, Daan and Gerlinde Emma van Smeden, (2016), 'Meaning in Life: In Defense of the Hybrid View', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 54, Issue 3, pp.355-371

---

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to the attendees of the University of Leeds' 2016 'Animals and Death' conference, several anonymous reviewers, and many members of the University of Sheffield's Department of Philosophy, for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper, Christopher Bennett in particular.

- Fischer, John, Martin, (1993), 'Recent Work on Death and the Meaning of Life', *Philosophical Books*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 65-75
- Frankl, Victor E., (1946), *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, Translated by Ilse Lasch, 1964, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.
- Haidt, Jonathan, (2010), 'Comment', in Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, Princeton University Press, pp. 92-101
- Kauppinen, Antti, (2012), 'Meaningfulness and Time', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 82, pp. 345–77
- Kauppinen, Antti, (2013), 'Meaning and Happiness', *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 161-185
- Kolers, Avery, (2016), 'The Grasshopper's Error: Or, On How Life is a Game', *Dialogue*, Available on CJO, pp. 1-20
- Landau Iddo (2014) Standards, Perspectives, and the Meaning of Life: A Reply to Seachris. *Ethic Theory Moral Prac*, Vol. 17, pp. 457–468
- Levy, N., (2005), 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life', *Ratio*, Vol. 18, pp. 176–89
- Luper, Steven, (2014), 'Life's Meaning', in: *Life and Death*, ed. Steven Luper, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 198-212
- Nozick, Robert, (2001), *Philosophical Explanations*, Harvard University Press
- Mawson, Timothy J, (2010), 'Sources of Dissatisfaction with Answers to the Question of the Meaning of Life', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 19-41
- 'Meaningful Objects: Museums in the Academy', (2010), URL = <https://www.lsa.umich.edu/museumstheme/welcome/index.asp>, [Accessed 08/11/2017]
- Metz, T., (2012), 'The Meaningful and the Worthwhile: Clarifying the Relationships', *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 43, pp. 435–48
- Metz, T., (2013), *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*, Oxford University Press
- Milburn, Josh, (2017), 'Robert Nozick on Nonhuman Animals: Rights, Value and the Meaning of Life', in Andrew Woodhall and Gabriel Garmendia da Trindade (eds.), *Ethical and Political Approaches to Nonhuman Animal Issues*, pp.97-120
- O'Callaghan, Jonathan, (2016), 'NASA Is Not Changing The Signs Of The Zodiac (But Your Horoscope Is Still Meaningless)', URL = <http://www.iflscience.com/space/nasa-is-not-changing-the-signs-of-the-zodiac-but-your-horoscope-is-still-meaningless>, [Accessed 08/11/2017]

- Purves, Duncan, and Nicolas Delon, (2017), 'Meaning in the lives of humans and other animals', *Philosophical Studies*, pp. 1-22
- Seachris, Joshua, (2009), 'The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New Proposal for Interpreting Philosophy's 'Primary' Question', *Philo*, Vol. 12. No. 1, p.5-23
- Seachris, Joshua, (2011), 'Death, futility, and the proleptic power of narrative ending', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 47, pp. 141–163
- Smuts, Aaron, (2012), 'It's a Wonderful Life': Pottersville and the Meaning of Life', *Film and Philosophy*, Vol. 16, pp. 15-33
- Smuts, Aaron, (2013), 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 51, No. 4, pp. 536-562
- Taylor, Richard, (1970), 'The Meaning of Life', in David Benatar (ed.), *Life Death and Meaning*, (2004), Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, pp. 19-28
- Taylor, Richard, (1987), 'Time and Life's Meaning', *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 675-686
- Vohanka, Vlastimil, and Vohankova, Pavla, (2011), 'On Nihilism Driven by the Magnitude of the Universe', *Czech and Slovak Journal of Humanities, (Philosophica)*, Vol. 1, pp. 60-73
- Wolf, Susan, (2010), *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, Princeton University Press