

Meaning and Morality: Some Considerations on a Difficult Relation

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Abstract: The debate on how an individual human life can be understood as being more or less meaningful has been pursued for a considerable time now. Despite extensive discussion some important aspects remain under-explored, namely the relation between meaningfulness and morality—even though many authors implicitly assume a connection between these two value dimensions. But how does morality contribute to a meaningful life? Is it a necessary condition? Or is it not necessary but sufficient or contributive? Or is there, when explored further, no connection at all? This article discusses the relation between morality and meaning by outlining the central positions in the debate, explains the main arguments for and against, and offers some indications for future work in the field.

Keywords: meaningful life, meaningfulness, morality

1. Introduction

For a long time, the meaningfulness of life was not really an issue for academic philosophy. It was ignored or derided, and for many was a subject that could not be significantly commented on from a secular philosophical perspective.¹ At best it was a niche topic, referred to once in a while in individual works but barely discussed. This has now changed, at least in the English-speaking world. For roughly fifteen to twenty years there has been an ongoing discussion on the topic.

In this context, the question of meaning is mainly understood not as an overall, “cosmic,” or God-given meaning of human life in general, but rather in terms of how an *individual human’s* life might be considered more or less meaningful. Contributors to the subject explore not, as some have coined it, the meaning *of* life, but rather the meaning *in* life, understood as a special dimension of a good life characterized by activities that we particularly praise and admire. Classic examples of meaningful activities are the creation of art, the development of scientific theories, the selfless love for our children, or the act of helping people in need.²

Up until now, the philosophical debate about meaning focused particularly on the questions what the term “meaningful life” stands for (“which life, and

1. Cf. Metz 2013b.

2. Cf. Wolf 2010 and Metz 2013a.

which meaning?”), how the bearers of meaning can be ontologically constituted, what the substantial features of a meaningful life are, and whether its constituent elements can be summarized in one normative principle.³ And of course, we have seen significant philosophical progress with regard to these questions.

Nevertheless, there are some shortcomings in the current discourse. One of them is that explicit considerations regarding the relation between meaningfulness and morality are quite under-represented.⁴ This is a surprising fact for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the dimension of meaning is for the most part treated as an independent dimension of value that separates it from the sphere of morality. Therefore, one might expect some erudite studies concerning their differences. This is, however, not the case. On the other hand, for many authors meaning is, despite its differences from morality, somehow connected to it. This already appears in the talk of “the good, the true and the beautiful”⁵ as the three sources of meaning, whereby the “good” refers to morality as well as to examples of morally outstanding personalities used to verify intuitions regarding meaningfulness. Given this theoretical setup, the question arises as to which relation between meaning and morality one might accept. Is morality a necessary condition for a meaningful life? Or is it not necessary but sufficient or contributive? Or perhaps morality is not relevant for a meaningful life at all? And which kind of moral conduct did the authors have in mind? Doubtless all these questions should play a role in the theoretical meaning-debate. But it is also obvious that many perspectives on the relation between meaning and morality have not been subject to explicit, systematic investigation but are implicitly presupposed.

Given this position, we pursue three interconnected aims with this article. *First*, we see it as our task to unpack the implicit nature of the discourse by mapping the field and making the different options as well as their main challenges explicit. *Second*, we will give some tentative hints as to which options we find reasonable in their general structure. Of course, the arguments for this cannot be exhaustive and detailed, yet, they may shed light on options that we find worth considering in future work. *Third*, we will mention several shortcomings of the discourse, which will appear throughout the mapping process. As a result, it will become clear that some of the differentiations, positions, and arguments are unsuitable, fairly under-developed or even unnoticed.

3. Cf. Metz 2013b.

4. Exceptions are, e.g., Wolf 1997b, Landau 2011, and Loudon 2013.

5. The common phrase “the good, the true and the beautiful” (see Metz 2013a for an example) is not to be understood as an esoteric aestheticization. Rather, it shows the diversification of the dimension of meaning—namely in the dimensions of good behavior, the search for truth, and the creation and reception of art.

Methodologically, the article starts by clarifying the central terms that will be taken as a basis for the following argumentation: “meaning” and “morality” (2). The actual investigation begins with the introduction of five essential options for how the relation of meaning and morality can be thought of (3), and goes on to present a detailed analysis of these options (3a–3e). Finally, we summarize the results of this analysis, briefly assess the different theoretical accounts (4), identify several desiderata of the discussion, and make further suggestions that might serve as guidelines for future developments in the field (5).

2. Defining the Central Terms

We have already mentioned that the meaning debate is an essential part of the philosophical discussion of the good life. Important starting points can be seen in the works of Bernard Williams, Robert Nozick, Richard Taylor, and Harry Frankfurt, who, while not developing a consistent terminology, all focused on topics that can be summarized under the umbrella of meaning.⁶

The systematic “spark” for the new controversy about meaning-in-life was lit by the works of Susan Wolf, who drew attention to the existence of an independent dimension of meaning within the dimension of the good life—for instance, in her articles about the relation between happiness, morality, and meaning. Further important impetus has come from the numerous articles of Thaddeus Metz, which have found their climax to date in his widely acknowledged book *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (2013).⁷

But what exactly do the protagonists of this debate mean by “meaningfulness?” The lowest common denominator describes a life that is notable, valuable, or laudable. Often, examples of outstanding lives are mentioned to shed light on this vague description. These include, for instance, the lives of Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa.⁸ All these (and many more) are widely regarded as paradigms of people who have lived their lives in a particularly meaningful way. They created admirable artwork, developed momentous scientific theories or assisted other humans to an extraordinary level. In other words, they are paradigms of people who have dedicated their lives to the beautiful (Picasso, Gauguin), the truth (Einstein, Newton), or the good (Mandela, Mother Teresa).⁹

6. See exemplarily, Taylor 1970, Nozick 1981, Frankfurt 1988, and Williams 1995.

7. See exemplarily, his overviews article concerning the debate in Metz 2013a.

8. The fact that those lives are considered to be significant examples of a meaningful life of course does not mean that “normal” people cannot live a meaningful life. This selection has been made rather for methodical reasons, demonstrating clear examples of meaningfulness to participants in the discourse that can easily be probed for the necessary elements constituting the term of meaning.

9. To be more precise, the question is whether these and other people lived a meaningful

The second key term is morality. There are even more disparate interpretations of morality than of meaning, which also affects the terminology. Many authors do not use the terms “moral” and “morality” in their texts on the theory of meaning. Instead they use related terms such as “the good,” “doing good,” “virtue,” “the ethical life,” etc. When we are talking about “moral” and “morality” in the following, this is meant to include the meanings of these alternative terms.¹⁰

Furthermore, we do not wish to state the necessary conditions that values, virtues, and actions must fulfill in order to be related to the realm of morality. That seems to be impossible, as every suggestion is either too trivial or too exclusive. The range of represented beliefs is too wide to provide an informative term that at the same time manages to cover a sufficient number of definitions. That is why we prefer to be content with a collective term that on the one hand covers the realms of morality associated with the theoretical meaning-debate, and on the other reflects common language usage and its application. Understood in this way, the term “morality” can address at least one of three domains: first, the broad domain of actions categorically demanded from a perspective of impartiality that is commonly used for moral-philosophical reflections (e.g., questions of justice or the prohibition of killing); secondly, the domain of partisan actions typical of personal relations (e.g., familial duties); and thirdly, the domain of non-categorically demanded supererogatory actions (e.g., a lifelong and challenging dedication to people in need).¹¹

3. Theoretical Options

But how do morality and meaning relate to each other? Considering the established discourse, there are five options available:

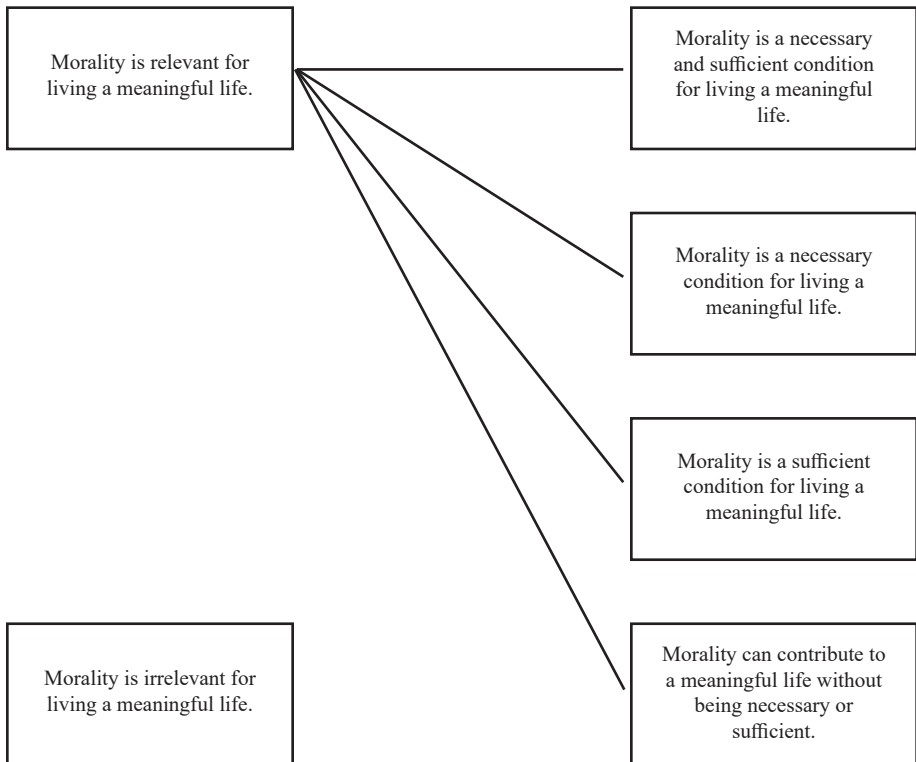
- (1) Morality is a necessary and sufficient condition for living a meaningful life.
- (2) Morality is a necessary condition for living a meaningful life.

life because they were *dedicated* to those values or because they *achieved* something that manifested or furthered those values. However, here is not the place to discuss this question but rather just to illustrate some widespread intuitions regarding meaningful lives. A discussion of the relevance of achievements for meaningfulness can be found in Bramble 2015 and Wells 2015.

10. For convenience we are talking about *moral actions* or *moral acting* in the following, aware that the sphere of morality involves other things such as moral preferences, moral judgments, emotions, and attitudes.
11. It seems immediately obvious that *how* one understands the term “morality” will in turn partly affect one’s answer to the question of the relation between morality and meaning. We will come back to this question in section 5.

- (3) Morality is a sufficient condition for living a meaningful life.
- (4) Morality can contribute to a meaningful life without being necessary or sufficient.
- (5) Morality is irrelevant for living a meaningful life.¹²

Even if there is considerable disparity between these five options, the first four still have a fundamental commonality: they all assume a relevance of morality for living a meaningful life. The fifth option, the irrelevance-thesis, however, differs from the others in this respect. That is why we can illustrate the field of options as a first approximation in the following way:



12. At this stage, possible further views might come to mind, e.g., the quasi-Nietzschean view that morality is not only irrelevant but is a minimizer of meaning. Even if this might be intuitively plausible, this position has not been put forward in the discourse. While it might be worth pursuing it is beyond the aim of this paper, which analyzes stances in the current discourse only.

Furthermore, all positions that presuppose some relevance of morality for meaning are forced to determine the *amount* of relevance, since nobody defends the position that *every* singular moral act makes a difference for the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of a life. For example, for the necessary-thesis this would mean that the person involved must act in a moral way *every moment* of his life in order to live a meaningful life. This would certainly be an extreme and implausible position, since an otherwise exemplary moral life would lose its whole meaning with the slightest misconduct. Surely there are “minor” acts of moral misconduct, like queue jumping, which by themselves would not detract from a meaningful life. On the other hand, there are unquestionably singular moral acts, like a one-time charitable donation, that do not turn a life into a meaningful one. In order to have an impact on the meaning of one’s life, the amount of moral misconduct or goodness must be higher. How high this amount has to be in reality cannot be decided in this article, but rather must be answered within the frame of a substantial theory. At this point, it is merely important that every representative who claims at least some relevance must say *something* about the amount of morality that is distinctive for a meaningful life. To clarify this aspect, the phrase “a certain amount of morality” will be added to the following relevance-theses.

So much for general remarks concerning the possible options. In the following, we go on to outline how they are to be understood, which subvariants will emerge, how frequently and by whom these positions are discussed/defended, and—at least partly—how persuasive they are. The order in which they are discussed implies no assessment of their value.

3.1 Morality as a Necessary and Sufficient Element of a Meaningful Life

As stated above, one possible position views morality as a necessary and sufficient condition for living a meaningful life. To be more precise, it can be claimed that:

T₁: The only way to live a meaningful life consists in living a life that is characterized by a certain amount of morality.

This definition obviously assumes an *equation* for living a meaningful and moral life. The only examples for this kind of theory are historic, and categorizing them in this way requires interpretation that may be controversial. So, for instance, some occasionally attribute the equation-thesis to Immanuel Kant and George Edward Moore.¹³ The argumentation then proceeds as follows: in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Kant claimed that the advancement of distinct talents and capabilities constitutes a moral duty towards oneself. Admittedly, he did not mention the term meaning—in his day it did not

13. For an interpretation like this see, e.g., Wolf 2014: 58–59.

have its modern meaning—but the perfecting of oneself, which Kant saw as an integral part of a moral life, would be a paradigmatic aspect of the meaningful.¹⁴ Accordingly, one could claim that the meaningful life (or at least one aspect of it) can be derived from leading a moral life. Moore, however, suggested in the last chapter of his *Principia Ethica* that friendship as well as the perception of the beautiful should be the central moral values. Like all other values, they can be deduced from the impartial point of view of the universe. Thus, one might claim that the identification of meaningfulness and morality can also be found by Moore.

As already mentioned, T_1 is not reflected in the contemporary debate. This surely correlates in particular with the basic assumption that gave rise to the renaissance of the debate on meaning-in-life in the first place: that meaning is at least partially independent of other value dimensions, i.e., of morality, too. As Susan Wolf observed:

If we approve of people who sacrifice themselves for the sake of people, causes, or values with which they identify, it is not because we take them to be doing what they think is best from the point of view of the universe. . . . Why do we do them [these actions; the authors]? Roughly, out of love or commitment to specific goods or values. . . . But we do not do these things because we think we ought to—because it is objectively best or morally required.¹⁵

According to Wolf's argument, a meaningful life does not seem to be completely the same as a moral life. Meaningfulness is a category of value in its own right that should be clearly differentiated from the category of morality. Nevertheless, despite this difference most authors seem to accept that the meaningful life is somehow connected to the moral one. Meaning and morality may differ, though the latter still seems to affect the former. But how can that be spelled out systematically?

3.2 Morality as a Necessary Element of a Meaningful Life

Another strong thesis, which differs from the equation-thesis in one crucial respect, is the following:

T_2 : To live a meaningful life one's life must necessarily be characterized by a certain amount of morality.

This thesis implies that morality is a necessary condition that must be fulfilled for a life to be meaningful. Therefore, the absence of morality entails a meaningless life. In contrast to T_1 the question remains whether there are any more

14. Of course, this implies that Kant must be interpreted as deriving every value of meaning from a moral point of view—if he presumes any besides perfecting oneself. See Kant 1994.

15. Wolf 2014: 52–53.

normative elements beyond morality that affect the meaningfulness of a life. Viewed this way, morality might be important but not sufficient.

Taking a closer look, one can interpret T_2 in two different ways. The fact that a certain amount of morality is necessary for the meaningfulness of a life can, on the one hand, mean that the regarding person *must fulfill positive moral actions*. On the other hand, it can also mean that this person *should refrain from certain immoral actions*. While in the first case morality displays a necessary value that must be realized in a positive way, in the second the dimension of (im)morality works as a minimizer of meaning, necessarily lowering a life below the threshold of meaningfulness in the case of moral misconduct.¹⁶ From the point of view of moral theory, this reveals a distinction between positive and negative moral duties. The first case requires a fulfillment of positive moral duties, the second an observance of negative moral duties.

Given that, the two possible theses read like this:

T_{2a} : To live a meaningful life, one's life must *necessarily* be characterized by a certain amount of *moral actions*.

T_{2b} : To live a meaningful life, one's life must *necessarily* be characterized by a certain absence of *immoral actions*.¹⁷

Thesis T_{2a} , for example, can be found in the works of Violetta Igneski, who mentions the necessity of morality explicitly in several places:

There are many other morally worthwhile ends and pursuits that are not only morally permissible but are also necessary if we are to develop deep relationships and live meaningful lives.¹⁸

But what are those moral duties that everybody must perform? Igneski might be read as presenting a pluralistic approach that considers the option of not

16. This differentiation could theoretically have been made by the equation-thesis too, but to our knowledge this has not been put forward because of its insufficient persuasiveness. One can clarify the implausibility of the minimizer-option by drawing attention to the resulting thesis, which would state the following: "The only way to live a meaningful life consists in our life being free from a certain amount of immoral actions." Accordingly, life would lose its meaning through a certain amount of immoral actions, but would also be considered meaningful if one did nothing one's whole life. How life actually gains meaning remains unexplained. Not only does this make this position extremely counterintuitive, it also does not actually provide an answer to the question of what makes a life meaningful.

17. Of course, these two aspects can constitute the necessary condition for a meaningful life *together*. In this case, a possible thesis T_{2c} would read as follows: "To live a meaningful life, one's life must *necessarily* be characterized by a certain amount of *moral actions* and by a certain absence of *immoral actions*." But even though this thesis can theoretically be differentiated from T_{2a} and T_{2b} , it is probably still systematically connected to T_{2a} . For hardly anybody who regards the fulfillment of positive moral actions as a necessary condition for a meaningful life will *not* regard the fulfillment of negative duties as such, because they are generally considered as more fundamental or binding.

18. Igneski 2016: 148.

just having a duty, namely to help the most disadvantaged, but of having an additional duty to help all other persons in our moral range.¹⁹ Of course that is debatable.²⁰ However, in this context it is more important that Ignieski links the necessity-thesis with a positive understanding of moral duties. She presents a thesis that claims that we have to perform a certain number of moral actions to live a meaningful life—if we do not, we live a meaningless life.

Thesis T_{2b}, i.e., the assertion that minimizers of meaning exist, can be found as an integral part of Thaddeus Metz's theory of meaning:

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more she, *without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice*, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.²¹

The immoral actions Metz has in mind are described in the following:

[T]he following actions and attitudes would subtract from the overall meaning of a life, beyond merely failing to enhance its meaning: blowing up the sphinx; spreading nuclear waste; holding sexist and racist beliefs and emotions; hating others by, say, viewing them largely in terms of their weaknesses; torturing others for fun.²²

Here, Metz explicitly states in a negative way what should not occur if one wants to live a meaningful life: actions that surpass a certain amount of immorality.²³

However, how great is the influence of morality as a minimizer of meaning? This question leads to an additional sub-discussion within the theories that can be ascribed to T_{2b}. It is discussed under the keywords, “anti-matter,”

19. See, e.g., Ignieski 2016: 152–53. Yet, there is a tempting second reading. In this, Ignieski claims that there is a range of morally permissible actions that we do not necessarily have moral duties to perform, such as developing personal relationships that contribute to a meaningful life. Interpreted this way, it provides weaker support for the necessity-thesis. Taken as a response to the utilitarian imperative of performing the morally optimal act, it can be seen as a challenge to the necessity-thesis, i.e., the morally right action is not the one that gives a life the most meaning. Although Ignieski is not clear in this respect, we think the cited passage offers enough evidence to consider her position under the heading of T_{2a}. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insightful hint on the second reading.
20. The contrary thesis states that we should only help the most disadvantaged, regardless of whether there are close family members or strangers involved, and is famously represented by Peter Singer with his concept of “effective altruism.” See, exemplarily, Singer 2015.
21. Metz 2013a: 235, emphasis added; also Smuts 2013: 553.
22. Metz 2013a: 234.
23. Further representatives of T_{2b} are, e.g., Cottingham 2003: 28, Landau 2011, and Loudon 2013. See also Wolf: “[A] child-molester cannot get meaning from molesting children, whatever he may think or feel about this matter” (Wolf 2010: 60). The reasons for this position are in part very different. While Metz attributes a minimizing impact on meaning to amorality, one can, e.g., find a kind of discourse-ethical argument when following Loudon—the appreciation of certain fundamental moral norms is the requirement of any form of rational arrangement and argumentation (Loudon 2013: 38–39).

“anti-meaning,” or “negative meaning.”²⁴ The underlying assumption of the debate is the claim that there are lives that do not just lack any meaning but also distinguish themselves by having a negative balance of meaning. There are lives that are not only meaningless but are even “anti-meaningful.” We can now assign this differentiation to T_{2b} and ask whether moral misconduct is to be understood as a minimizer of meaning in terms of the first or second interpretation; or, in other words, whether it “only” allows a life to become meaningless or if it even implies anti-meaning. The first thesis is at least indicated by Metz when he talks about certain immoral actions that “would subtract from the overall meaning.” The second is explicitly held by Iddo Landau. He writes:

Highly immoral lives should be seen not only as not meaningful, but, because of their immense immorality, as the inverse of meaningful. Hitler’s life is not merely meaningless, a life in which meaning is absent, but instead is a life in which the converse of meaning is present.²⁵

Admittedly, the representatives of the two theses agree on the fact that it is a necessary condition for a meaningful life to refrain from severe moral misconduct. At the same time, they can be distinguished by the level of influence they grant morality on the dimension of meaning. While at least in the passage cited above, Metz asserts that moral misconduct minimizes the meaning of life, Landau claims that it can in fact burden a life with negative meaning.

As different as the positions might be, they both correspond to the necessity-thesis: without a certain amount of morality there is no meaningful life. What to make of this thesis? A comprehensive discussion is not possible at this point. However, it is obvious that version T_{2a} presents a comparatively strong assertion that contradicts a widely shared intuition (which might explain why it is rarely held): why should not fulfilling one’s moral duties subtract all meaning from one’s life? What if someone failed morally but accomplished outstanding achievements in other domains of meaning, e.g., in creating arts? The commonly presented example *par excellence* is the life of Paul Gauguin, who, as the story goes, seriously neglected his family to evolve as an artist. For many authors, the example of Gauguin (and many others like him) seems a good reason to reject T_{2a} and search for alternative options.

By contrast, the necessity-thesis T_{2b} seems to be immune to these counter-examples. Nevertheless, it too can be viewed skeptically—not so much because of its intuitive implausibility, but rather because of its under-determination: those who represent the minimizer-thesis do not state what exactly gives a life its meaning. And even if it is not necessary, morality could still be relevant for a meaningful life in various other ways.

24. See, e.g., Landau 2011, Smuts 2013, and Campbell and Nyholm 2015.

25. Landau 2011: 317.

3.3 Morality as a Sufficient Element of a Meaningful Life

But how can morality be relevant if it is not necessary? One possible option is to understand its role as a sufficient condition for meaningfulness. The thesis then is:

T₃: To live a meaningful life it is sufficient to have a certain amount of morality.

According to this thesis, morality is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for living a meaningful life. This makes morality a possible bearer of meaning that can lift a life over the minimal threshold of meaningfulness, although there can be a meaningful life without any moral significance in it.

The distinction between positive and negative duties, between morality as a promoting factor for meaning and immorality as a minimizing factor, can also be implemented in this theory. The thesis would accordingly read as follows:

T_{3a}: To live a meaningful life, one's life must be sufficiently characterized by a certain number of *moral actions*.

T_{3b}: To live a meaningful life, one's life must be sufficiently characterized by a certain absence of *immoral actions*.

But as with the equation-thesis, T_{3b} is highly questionable. Not only it is not represented by anyone in the discourse, it also does not specify what one has to do to confer meaning on one's life. The thesis instead presupposes a meaning that can easily be lost in the course of a lifetime.²⁶

In contrast, the thesis that positive moral action is sufficient for a meaningful life (T_{3a}) can be found in the works of many authors. For instance, Metz writes:

[G]reat meaning was conferred on Mandela's life by virtue of having sacrificed so much to overcome apartheid and on Mother Teresa's life by virtue of having acted so compassionately with respect to large numbers of people in wretched conditions.²⁷

26. It appears that a thesis that combines the negative and positive elements would be more plausible. Thus, T_{3c} could be read like this: in order to be meaningful, a life must be characterized by a certain number of *moral actions* and by the absence of certain *immoral actions*.

27. Metz 2013a: 227. It should be considered that for Metz morality is a sufficient condition, insofar as it is one of the "forms of positively orienting one's rationality towards conditions of a characteristic human being's life" (Metz 2013a: 227). However, according to Metz this is not an additional condition but rather the fundamental feature of everything that confers meaning on a life.

Still Metz's "fundamentality theory" of a meaningful life does not only ascribe meaning to these "moral heroes," but "also captures more everyday respects in which people obtain meaning from beneficence."²⁸

One should assume that the sufficiency-thesis can be combined with the necessity-thesis *without* resulting in the equation-thesis. This is because both theses can refer to different aspects of morality: the necessity-thesis can relate to the observance of fundamental negative duties, i.e., the absence of severe moral misconduct, while the sufficiency-thesis can relate to the (outstanding) fulfillment of positive duties or supererogatory actions. This combined position is often used in the contemporary discourse and is represented by Metz, for example: on the one hand Metz considers a certain moral minimum standard as necessary,²⁹ on the other, he claims moral actions, as Mother Teresa for example practiced in an outstanding way, to be a sufficient condition for a meaningful life.³⁰

Some representatives of the sufficiency-thesis differentiate between the *importance* or *preferability* of morality as a way of leading a meaningful life. For, on the one hand, one can hold that morality is not only sufficient but constitutes the most preferable way—namely one that generates the most meaning; on the other, one can hold the position that morality is admittedly sufficient for a fairly meaningful life, but that not much meaning can be generated, at least compared with other possibilities. To be clear, these two claims do not depict two distinct positions but rather highlight two poles on a continuum. The two poles can be formulated in the following way:

T_{3v}: To live a meaningful life a certain amount of morality is sufficient and this is usually the most preferable way for leading a meaningful life.³¹

T_{3w}: To live a meaningful life a certain amount of morality is sufficient, but this way is usually of subordinate relevance for leading a meaningful life.

Thesis T_{3v} is represented prominently by Peter Singer and his plea for an "ethical life," which he interprets as a life dedicated to the poor and needy. Although he concedes that there are other options for living a meaningful life, he holds the belief that

living an ethical life enables us to identify ourselves with the grandest cause of all, and that to do so is the best way open to us of making our lives meaningful.³²

28. Ibid., 228. Other representatives of this thesis are Singer 1999, Mintoff 2008, and Landau 2011: 314.

29. Metz 2013a: 234–35.

30. Ibid., 227; see Landau 2011.

31. "Usually" emphasizes the possibility of individual exceptions.

32. Singer 1997: 259.

Besides reasoning that an ethical life facilitates a connection to the “grandest cause,” he also emphasizes that an ethical life is “the commitment with the firmest foundation.”³³

T_{3w} is less common but can also be found, e.g., in Joe Mintoff. He holds the conviction that morality, e.g., in the form of certain moral values³⁴ or actions eliminating misery, can generate meaning although not in large amounts: “[D]oing good things . . . will not contribute much meaning to our lives anyway.”³⁵ Accordingly, much more potential for meaning can be found in the connection with certain entities through knowledge and thinking. The reason Mintoff gives for this belief is that this form of connection is less arbitrary, more significant, and permanent:

We can be attached to any given object—and in particular the so-called ‘higher’ things—more intimately through knowing it than through acting upon it.³⁶

However the sufficiency-thesis is determined, and however the contribution of morality as a way to a meaningful life is estimated, these authors agree in moral acting to a certain degree as a sufficient condition for living a meaningful life.

However, for some this still seems too strong a thesis. Can morality really provide a sufficient condition for meaning on its own? Some authors hold the opinion that this question must be answered in the negative. For them, morality is not sufficient for living a meaningful life although they do not want to label it as completely irrelevant. Instead they share another, a fourth, thesis regarding the relation of morality and meaning.

3.4 Morality Is an Element of a Meaningful Life, but Is Neither Sufficient Nor Necessary

The fourth main thesis that one might infer from the criticism above, can be read as follows:

T_4 : Morality can contribute to a meaningful life, but is neither sufficient nor necessary for it.

This thesis claims an extremely weak relation between morality and meaning. Morality is not necessary: we can live a meaningful life without it. In this regard, T_4 follows the line of argument of the positions of the sufficiency-thesis. In contrast to it, exponents of T_4 presume a much weaker influence of morality on meaning: morality might be relevant, but it must be supplemented by ad-

33. Ibid., 258.

34. Mintoff 2008: 71.

35. Ibid., 75.

36. Ibid., 78.

ditional elements in order to be sufficient. What are those additional elements? With regard to their character, two theses can be differentiated:

T_{4a}: To make a sufficient contribution to a meaningful life morality must be supplemented by *objective* elements.

T_{4b}: To make a sufficient contribution to a meaningful life morality must be supplemented by *subjective* elements.

The first thesis is favored particularly by authors who believe that certain activities, projects, or achievements have to be supplemented in order to guarantee a meaningful life. In the contemporary literature, a tendency to think that in addition to moral acting there must be accomplishments in science or the arts to lift a life over the threshold of meaningfulness can be found.³⁷

The second thesis is held by authors who consider not only objective elements but also a subjective component as being necessary for meaning. Its best-known proponent is Susan Wolf. From her perspective, meaning is given “when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.”³⁸ Wolf claims that meaning cannot arise from an action that only results from observing moral duties,³⁹ but that morality can be an integral part of meaningful activities, for example in a personal social relationship:

The meaningfulness of the relationship, if not its strength, might in this case be better preserved by respecting morality rather than by showing oneself willing to give it up.⁴⁰

This is not only a special case of meaning, but:

Moral concerns are perhaps the most obvious and most typical engaging of such valuable aims. . . . [M]any if not most people get meaning from more specific projects and relationships that morality should applaud: from being good and doing good in their roles as parent, daughter, lover, friend, and from furthering or trying to further social and political goals.⁴¹

37. The differentiation between morality as a sufficient and contributive element of a meaningful life is commonly not considered too carefully in the contemporary discourse. Consequently, it is often not easy to determine exactly how the relevance of the objective element in relation to morality is conceived in a theory. But if we follow the suggested thesis and assert that at least some theoreticians have the tendency to supplement morality with an objective element, what are those additional elements that must occur alongside morality to generate a meaningful life? Certain candidates are constantly mentioned in the argumentation. These include, in particular, the fostering of caring relations (e.g., Baggini 2004: 181–84; Eagleton 2007: 158–59, 164–73), the discovering of scientific truths (Smith 1997: 213), and the performing of an artistic activity (e.g., Taylor 1970, esp. 14).

38. Wolf 2010: 62.

39. Ibid., 1–7, 51.

40. Ibid., 61.

41. Ibid.

Nevertheless, morality is not necessary according to Wolf, because meaning can also be found beyond personal relations, namely in general “projects of worth”⁴² that can conflict with moral claims. Yet morality is also not sufficient, because for Wolf a meaningful life must always be supplemented by a subjective element, like passion or love, for a project of worth. No matter how moral what a person does is, if he/she does it without love or passion he/she might live a moral life but not a meaningful one something else needs to be added. Only when both are combined can we consider a life as meaningful.

At this point a question arises for many proponents of T_{4b} , which leads to a further sub-differentiation: what is the actual axiological status of morality? Do proponents such as Wolf believe that morality by itself contributes to a meaningful life, while this contribution is *too weak* without a subjective supplement? Or are they convinced that morality on its own *cannot provide any value* for living a meaningful life, at least without being supplemented by a subjective element? This question is controversial even among followers of a hybrid-theory. Essentially the decision depends on whether one considers morality to be an intrinsic value or not, i.e., whether moral action is regarded as a value in itself or as something that needs something in addition in order to be valuable. Most proponents appear to affirm such an intrinsic value of morality. Thus, they believe that morality constitutes *at least* a contributive value for a meaningful life. This extended thesis would be:

T_{4bv} : To provide a sufficient contribution to a meaningful life, morality must be supplemented by subjective elements, since the moral contribution is *too weak*.

However, this common point of view has been challenged in recent years, e.g., by Susan Wolf. She is skeptical about the intrinsic value of morality and presents an alternative *relational* model: she holds the view that morality is *only* relevant for a meaningful life *if* the subjective element (which she believes is love) is added. *Before* this, morality has no influence on meaning, either as a necessary or a contributive condition. The resulting thesis is therefore:

T_{4bw} : To provide a sufficient contribution to a meaningful life, morality must be supplemented by subjective elements, since morality on its own contributes *nothing at all*.

Obviously, these differentiations are in some way positioned orthogonally to the differentiation of T_{4a} and T_{4b} . One who claims that morality must be supplemented—be it subjective or objective—says nothing about whether morality contributes to a meaningful life on its own or in conjunction. However, it is remarkable that this axiological distinction is made exclusively within the frame of T_{4b} . This certainly correlates with Wolf’s powerful position, which argues within this theoretical frame of T_{4b} . From a systematic perspective, this much

42. Ibid., 26.

can be said in advance: this restriction is not justified.⁴³ It is implausible to assume that the axiological differentiation is irrelevant for every proponent of T_{4a} or, on a more global level, for every position stating a contribution of morality to a meaningful life.

One might also propose an axiological differentiation: thesis T_4 always attributes a comparatively weak value to morality. Consequently, a life characterized by outstanding moral accomplishments, like Mother Teresa's, for example, would not be meaningful as long as it did not feature any additional characteristics. Such an assessment is likely to collide with widespread intuitions and thus burdens itself with a significant need for justification.

Nevertheless, T_4 is not the most radical position concerning the relevance of morality. There is one more final step: denying morality any relevance whatsoever.

3.5 Morality Is Irrelevant for a Meaningful Life

The fifth thesis is essentially different from all those previously mentioned. While all the prior theses posit some kind of connection between meaning and morality, this one denies any relation:

T_5 : Morality does not matter at all for a meaningful life.

To our knowledge, this irrelevance-thesis is not represented in the current discourse. Nor is it easy to identify any proponents in more classic works. However, with some interpretative work we believe that John Kekes and Paul Edwards can be read along these lines:

[T]hat immoral lives may be meaningful is shown by the countless dedicated Nazi and Communist mass murderers.⁴⁴

[A]s long as I was a convinced Nazi . . . my life had meaning . . . yet most of my actions were extremely harmful.⁴⁵

One way of interpreting these passages is to say that both implicitly concede that even someone who is highly guilty of moral misconduct (the Nazi, the mass murderer) can live a meaningful life. Of course, according to Kekes and Edwards those persons do not live a moral life, but this does not detract from the meaningfulness of their lives.

However, should it not be possible that morality makes at least a sufficient or some other contribution to meaning? It seems that even this must be denied by these authors. An indication of this interpretation can be found in their radical confrontation of morality and meaning. Thus, for both of them a moral life

43. See our detailed elucidations in section 5.

44. Kekes 2000: 30.

45. Edwards 2000: 144.

consists in following objective and partly universal rules, which are obviously neglected by the Nazi and the mass murderer, while a meaningful life must satisfy entirely different criteria.⁴⁶ For Kekes, regarding the meaningful life, it is vital that actors “may be successfully engaged in their projects, derive great satisfaction from them, and find their lives as scourges of their literal or metaphorical gods very meaningful.”⁴⁷ For Edward, it is similarly important that our actions are performed “with a special zest” and additionally are linked with “dominant, overall goal or goals which gave a direction to a great many of the individual’s actions.”⁴⁸ Thus, these authors consider only subjective factors as an essential requirement of a meaningful life. Accordingly, morality is strongly opposed to meaning and this inevitably leads to the irrelevance-thesis. Hence, it is one thing to talk about morality, another to talk about meaning. Within this subjective framework, one could admittedly state that someone who considers moral actions as meaningful and acts according to them lives a meaningful life. However, the subjective perception, not morality itself, is still the crucial factor. It is only a contingent object of commitment that can be substituted by any other.

4. Summary and General Observations

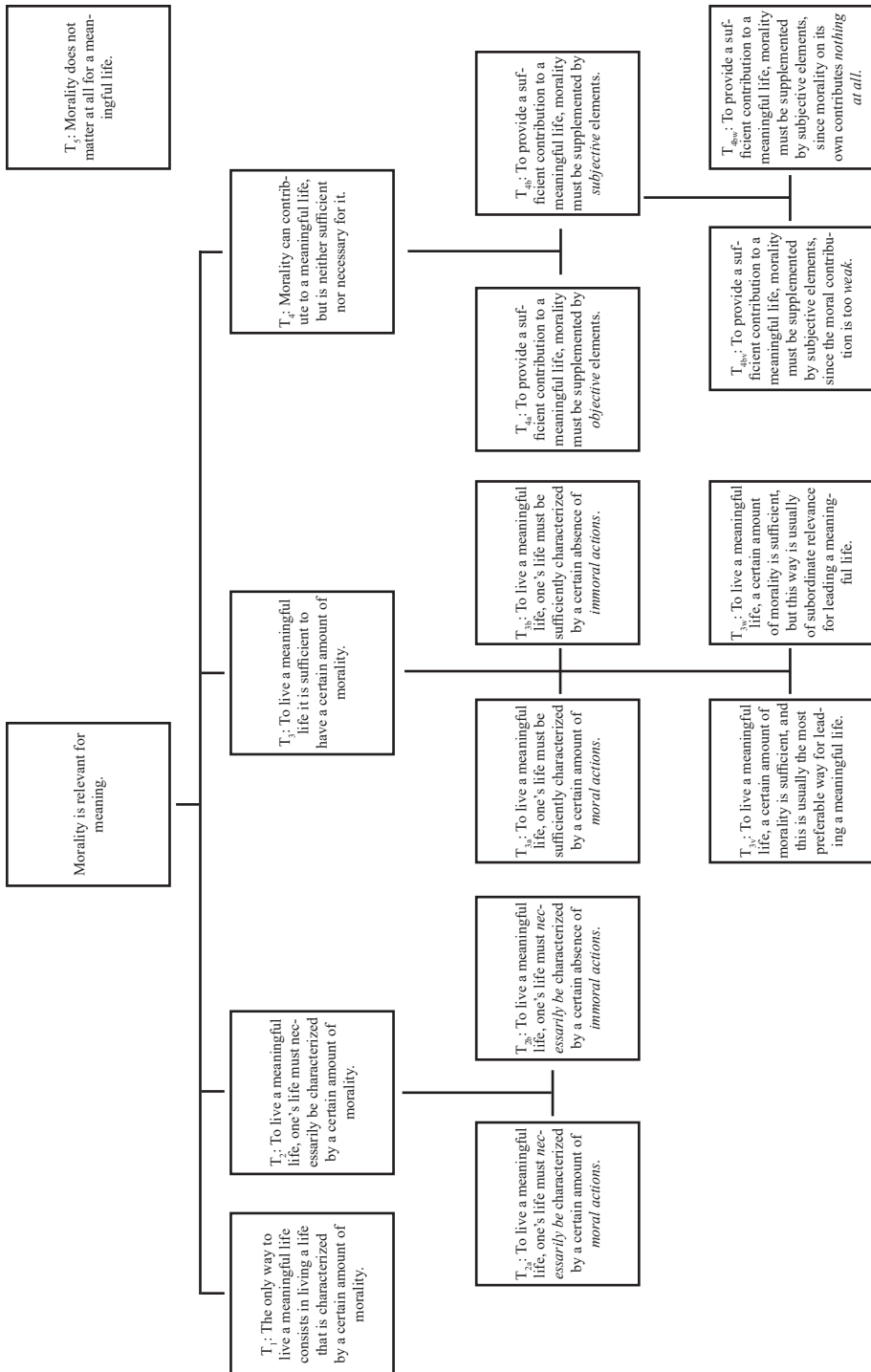
Given these different positions, the results can be summarized in the following graph on the next page. The graph demonstrates that five main theses regarding the relation between morality and meaning can be identified which are put forward with varying frequency in the contemporary discourse. All five focus on the relation between morality and meaning, with the relevance of morality for meaning decreasing from T_1 to T_5 . While the first thesis describes morality as a necessary and sufficient condition, the fifth denies that morality has any influence at all on meaning. Furthermore, one can observe that there are additional differentiations within the framework of the main-theses—for instance, when considering the amount of relevant morality, the differentiation between positive and negative moral actions, or the potential priority of morality.

Additionally, it is noticeable that there is a connection between certain metaethical characteristics of the meaning-theories and the value they ascribe to morality for meaning. These metaethical characteristics consist in the objectivist or subjectivist orientation, i.e., the conviction that meaning is constituted by objective facts or subjective factors such as beliefs or desires. While the belief that morality has a high relevance for meaning can be found particularly in objectivist theories, the denial of any relevance can only be observed in subject-

46. For this interpretation see, e.g., Landau 2011: 309.

47. Kekes 2000: 30.

48. Edwards 2000: 143.



tivist theories (see, e.g., the objectivist approaches of Landau, Metz, Mintoff, Singer, and Smuts in sections 3.2 and 3.3 on the one hand, and the subjectivist approaches of Kekes and Edwards in 3.5 on the other). The so-called hybrid view, i.e., Wolf's version, concedes a merely contributive role and relational value to morality (see section 3.4). These correlations are unsurprising, for morality is an objective matter, and thus a theory that does not ascribe any relevance to objective aspects concerning meaning is structurally unable to include morality. A theory such as the hybrid view, which characterizes objective aspects only as parts of the constituents of meaning, can only ascribe a weakened relevance to morality. This indicates that there is quite an awareness of the relation between morality and meaning.

As mentioned in the introduction, our main task is not to evaluate the different theoretical options or to develop a new account but to systemize the different theoretical accounts according to the relationship between meaning and morality. However, here we wish briefly to explain what judgment we think results from the analysis. In the theory spectrum outlined, the extreme positions are also those that have the biggest plausibility problems: the thesis claiming that morality is identical to meaning (3.1) and the irrelevance-thesis (3.5). These theses are too simple and extreme, and are likely to be rather counterintuitive for most people. At the very least, they contradict widespread views about which people have lived a meaningful life. The identity-thesis contradicts the belief that one can live a meaningful life even with other-than-moral action; indeed, it questions the difference between meaning and morality itself—a distinction we make every day. The irrelevance-thesis, on the other hand, tears apart the connection between morality and meaningfulness—a connection that becomes clear everywhere in the meaning-related appreciation of morally outstanding personalities. It can hardly be a coincidence that these two extreme positions are rarely held anymore within the contemporary philosophical discussion. Most authors operate with the more moderate theses, ranging between these extremes and attributing in some way an important role to morality as regards meaningfulness.

Therefore, the decision as to which theory is appropriate falls between theses 2, 3, and 4. Perhaps these theses contradict each other even less than it first appears. It has already been noted in the treatment of the different theses that they relate to different aspects of morality. Thus, the necessity-thesis is most likely to be deemed plausible in that it is about fundamental negative moral duties, the violation of which undermines the meaningfulness of a life. In the case of the sufficiency-thesis, on the other hand, the reference to negative moral duties would hardly make any sense. Rather, it is more likely to be understood in such a way that only outstanding, perhaps supererogatory, acting is sufficient for a meaningful life. From this point of view, the necessity-

thesis and the sufficiency-thesis appear to be two sides of the same coin. The choice between this complex double-thesis and thesis 4 (“morality can contribute to a meaningful life without being necessary or sufficient”) would then depend only on the fundamental meaning-theoretical question of whether only objective facts are relevant for meaningfulness or whether there must also be particular subjective elements—which is no longer a question that specifically concerns the relationship between meaning and morality.

5. Prospects for Future Work

Apart from these general observations and initial thoughts on the plausibility of the positions, we also wish to mention systematic desiderata within the contemporary discussion that we believe are worth considering for future work. We will briefly elaborate on five of them:

First, it must be stressed that some of the possible sub-differentiations are approached in too narrow a context. For example, the differentiation between positive and negative moral actions is currently discussed only in the context of T_2 and T_3 . However, it is far from certain that this differentiation is not also relevant for proponents of T_4 . For them, the same question arises: whether it is more relevant for a meaningful life to avoid immoral actions or to actively strive for moral actions. The same applies to the question concerning the priority of morality, which is covered in the context of T_3 only but which might also be important when discussing T_4 and possibly even T_2 .

Second, substantial positions can be conceived which have not yet been discussed. Thus, the positions represented have been developed in the framework of a dialectic that depicts the irrelevance-thesis as the weakest thesis about the relation between meaning and morality. Strictly speaking, there is logically more that can be thought of: namely the quasi-Nietzschean assertion that morality is not only irrelevant, but a *minimizer of meaning*. According to this theory, observing moral rules—whether in terms of positive or negative duties—would decrease the meaning of our lives. What amount of meaning is lost—whether it is a necessary loss of meaning in life as a result of obeying the moral rules or whether it can be compensated for by other aspects—has to be clarified, of course. This yields the same spectrum of theses that is present in the positive realm of theses T_1 – T_4 . However, to our knowledge this constitutes only a theoretical option. It is not represented in the contemporary discourse, which is why we have not covered it in this article.

Third, almost every author (except for proponents of the irrelevance-thesis) appears to presume that morality is an intrinsic value for a meaningful life. Thus, it is claimed that morality *on its own* can make an axiological contribution, and subsequently it is argued what precise contribution this is. But why

should morality have an inherent normative force? This question has already been mentioned in 3.4. At this point an alternative relational value-model is exemplified, like the one Wolf describes in her works. A quick reminder: Wolf believes that morality on its own cannot contribute to a meaningful life without being linked to a subjective element that she describes as passion or love. Only when both coincide—the moral project on the one hand, and love for the project on the other—meaningfulness emerge. In a further step, the actual amount of meaningfulness can be measured.⁴⁹ With this relational model Wolf draws our attention to an *additional* level of differentiation, which is not only important for proponents of the supplement-thesis T_4 but for every other position beyond the irrelevance-thesis, too. All of them need to say something about whether morality on its own can constitute a value for meaningful life or whether being combined with another element is necessary.

Fourth, there is a further dimension of differentiation complementing the already complicated taxonomy, that is positioned, so to speak, across all the other dimensions: the particular definition of morality. In this article, we have concentrated on the formal relations between morality and meaning because they have not yet been considered systematically in the contemporary discourse. But of course, every author takes a different position within the spectrum of moral philosophy, so that in particular cases different perspectives might arise concerning the relation of morality and meaning. Thus, a consequentialist, for example, would regard the positive effect of an action on other persons as moral and hence meaning-conferring, while a non-consequentialist would regard the *same* act as an immoral and hence not a meaning-conferring one because certain elements of consciousness and intentionality are missing—even if both thinkers coincide in their basic understanding of the relation between meaning and morality. Therefore, this differentiation must also be considered.

Fifth, it can generally be observed that the vast majority of contemporary authors describe morality as an element contributing to a meaningful life. This conclusion somehow clashes with the widespread distinction between meaning and morality that we mentioned at the beginning. If morality is or can be an integral part of a meaningful life, it is at least questionable to assume a clear distinction between these two spheres. It seems that a further clarification of this relation is required. For example, it might be fruitful to examine the concept of morality itself in light of these new insights.

Taken together, these last remarks should make it clear that a lot of work still needs to be done to raise the degree of differentiation to a factual, more ap-

49. For Wolf, certainly both questions coincide. She asserts that morality cannot make an independent contribution without being connected to a subjective element. If and only if this is the case, i.e., such an element being connected, morality constitutes a sufficient condition.

proprie, level. There are noticeable constrictions and omissions that prevent a complete picture of the actual possible positions. Nevertheless, the desiderata must not hide the fact that both the comprehensive debate on the meaningful life and the specialized debate on the contribution of morality already reflects a greater awareness of the problem, which needs not to be developed anew but rather developed further. The question of a meaningful life is currently experiencing a renaissance in analytical ethics, which also affects the degree of differentiation within sub-topics. For one of those sub-topics, the contribution of morality to meaning, we have hopefully provided systematic assistance for future work.

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