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## Meaningfulness, Existentialism, and the Reverse Priority View

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MEANINGFULNESS, EXISTENTIALISM, AND THE REVERSE PRIORITY VIEW

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MEANINGFULNESS, EXISTENTIALISM, AND THE REVERSE PRIORITY VIEW

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Both of my parents are Mexican nationals. Growing up at the U.S.-Mexico border, I was continuously exposed to life on both sides of the border. I spent my life experiencing the contrast of life in a third-world country versus a first-world country. Seeing the disparity of quality of life between the two countries has always been shocking, even now. It always felt incredibly unfair to know that the opportunities I had access to and the quality of life that I had were only matters of luck. My mother decided to give birth on the ‘right’ side of the border and that was the only reason I was entitled to better life.

The unfairness of this reality has been haunting me all of my life. Having attended elementary school in México, I witnessed first-hand the injustice, inequality, need, poverty, and suffering that is lived over there. Then I would go back home, to the U.S. side of the border, where I saw much more comfort, happiness, and possibility. For a while I felt responsible for fixing this injustice. After all, I had access to the resources that could potentially ameliorate the situation on the other side of the border. But I always wondered whether engaging in an undertaking like that was actually *my* responsibility. There were so many other things I enjoyed doing in life and other dreams that I wanted to pursue, and giving those up so I could undertake such a responsibility seemed incredibly grueling. This feeling kept growing as I became older. I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder, so I started learning about the importance of mental health. This further cemented my belief that it was in fact *not* my responsibility to make all of the world a better place. I really deeply cared about making the world a better place, but I also had to care for my own well-being.

Later, I found a way to combine my two passions: writing and finding ways to make the world a better place. I started studying philosophy and learned how writing can change the

world. This is what particularly attracted me to the world of ethics. I found any study on moral theory fascinating, from intrinsic value to normative theories to metaethics. However, it was always disappointing and discouraging to see that theories in normative ethics would often conclude that it *is* my responsibility to always work on promoting the good, and try to make the world a better place. Nevertheless, going back to what I had been wondering my whole life, especially after experiencing depression, I started to think that there must be something fundamentally wrong with these theories. How would they ever be able to account for mental health problems and the importance of promoting one's mental well-being?

Finally, I learned that the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed significant philosophical criticisms of traditional ethical theories, specifically on a topic similar to the one mentioned above. Such criticisms highlighted the fact that normative ethical theories can be overbearing and overly demanding of moral agents. Such theories can put a strain on moral agents to follow moral rules and possibly to sacrifice something that is especially meaningful to their lives. According to this “demandingness” objection, the idea central to normative ethical theories is that moral considerations override all other reasons for action, even if morality threatens what is most valuable or especially meaningful to moral agents. This is problematic since there are many other types of individual values<sup>1</sup> that give meaning to a person's life—what helps them to get out of bed in the morning. In this thesis, I will build upon this type of “demandingness” objection.

It seems that this demanding conception of morality was originally derived from the idea that if someone chooses to protect what is most valuable to her, then this choice must be based on selfish or self-interested reasons. This view ultimately neglected the possibility that there are

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<sup>1</sup> Many philosophers draw a sharp distinction between reasons and values, but in this thesis, I am not drawing a sharp distinction between them: reasons and values are both considerations that should guide our actions and attitudes in various ways.

individual, personal values worth protecting, and that these values can potentially outweigh moral considerations, because they provide the very meaning of a person's life. In this sense, the demandingness of moral theories ultimately threatens the integrity of individual moral agents by jeopardizing what gives meaning to a person's life and her very reasons for living. Philosophers such as Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf have highlighted this objection. They argue that a choice to protect what is valuable to the self is not necessarily based on self-interested reasons, but rather on reasons that provide meaning in, and are the very reasons for, an individual agent's living the particular life she lives. Normative ethical theories should therefore be seen as problematic to the extent that they disregard the idea of meaningfulness in a person's life, which is an essential part of living a rewarding and attractive human life.

There are many problems that arise from the limitations that normative ethical theories put on the self. Williams points to the threat these theories pose to one's integrity, while Wolf highlights the importance of meaningfulness in life. They argue that a proper account of morality must be one in which the self is prioritized and given a more dignified place. The reverse priority view defended in this thesis further challenges traditional ethical theories by arguing that such theories need to give the individual an even *more* central, more dignified place. An individual agent needs to be able to define herself, and to protect what is most valuable to her, giving considerations of the self priority over moral considerations. However, this does not mean that anything goes. The self cannot simply run rampant and completely disregard the demands of morality. The goal of my reverse priority view is to provide a balance between the self and moral considerations, but to insist that we *begin* our practical reflections by giving room to individual agents to live a meaningful and authentic life—while *also* caring for others, positively contributing to the world, and doing the right thing when the situation demands it.



Wolf and Williams successfully indicate what these limitations on the self entail and how problematic such limitations can be. However, the limitations in their own arguments come from the fact that Wolf and Williams are still working within the broad framework, and with some of the central assumptions, of ethical theories as traditionally conceived. This leaves them with only one move: to try to make room for the self in opposition to the already-existing theories. They argue that consequentialism, deontology, and in some cases even virtue ethics fall short of acknowledging important considerations about the self, but that perhaps a better view results by making some adjustments to our understanding of these already-existing theories. However, I argue that this move does not work. If we are going to successfully respect the integrity of the individual agent, then we need to first prioritize the self, and only then explain how morality fits into the definition of living a meaningful life.

In this thesis, I will argue that existentialism provides a more helpful guideline to understanding the relationship between meaningfulness and morality. Then, I will explain how existentialist ethics provides a good example of a moral theory that balances morality and meaningfulness. In Chapter 1, I will highlight the important considerations that philosophers like Susan Wolf, Bernard Williams, Harry Frankfurt, and Sophie Grace Chappell have pointed out could be reasons for action that are important enough to outweigh moral duty in some situations. In Chapter 2, I will further outline Wolf's criticism of normative ethical theories and explain her "meaningfulness" objection. I will explain how she uses this objection to highlight how normative ethical theories can seriously threaten the integrity of the self. Finally, in Chapter 3, I will defend a view of morality that balances morality and meaningfulness by giving priority, not to morality, but to what is most meaningful in the lives of individual moral agents. I call this view the "reverse priority view." This view draws examinations about the self, morality, and

value from 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialism, but ultimately aims to highlight the way in which non-instrumental values can compete in different situations and the way in which the agent might be able to navigate through this problem. Overall, I think we should all care deeply about making the world a better place, and in general about moral considerations, but only *after* we take care to give adequate place to our own concerns, to our own well-being, and most of all to the commitments that make our lives worth living.

## CHAPTER 1: OTHER REASONS FOR ACTION

There are other objectively good reasons for action that go beyond doing what is morally right. Making the world a better place and promoting the good is not the responsibility of any one person. We can, and we ought to, find meaning and value in other things besides morality, for our own well-being. In order to show how this is the case, and how morality can significantly threaten other important values in life, my purpose throughout this thesis is first to expand on a prevalent ‘moralistic’<sup>2</sup> outlook that can be found in prominent normative ethical theories and, second, to object to the idea that this outlook is the only one that can successfully contribute to the meaning of a good life.<sup>3</sup>

The moralistic outlook has been famously described and criticized by Susan Wolf, Bernard Williams, and Harry Frankfurt, among others. The moralistic outlook is based on three main assumptions: 1) it is always better to be as morally good as possible; 2) morality is an all-encompassing arbiter of human actions and values; and 3) morality is supremely valuable, trumping all other rival claims. The criticism that is presented here, and that I will develop further in Chapter 2, mainly drawing on the works by Susan Wolf, is to the idea that there is a hierarchy of values with moral goodness at the top. The belief in such a hierarchy significantly threatens other non-instrumental values that give meaning to our lives. Specifically, the Wolfian view highlights the idea that, although morality can be understood to be an important value in life, it should not be considered to be an overriding one. As Ernesto V. Garcia explains in a

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<sup>2</sup> My definition of ‘moralism’ comes from a paper presented by Ernesto V. Garcia at the conference *Meaning and Morality: A Conference in Honor of Susan Wolf* at Rice University on April 28-29, 2023. All references to Garcia in this thesis come from Garcia’s excellent presentation on this occasion.

<sup>3</sup> My aim in this thesis is to show that non-moral reasons seem to weight *at least as heavily* as moral reasons, especially in cases where meaningfulness—i.e., the reason that anybody has to get up in the morning and continue to keep living—is at stake. I argue that the moralistic outlook often overlooks the legitimacy of these reasons for action.

recent discussion of Wolf's views, "you can have too much of a good thing: it is possible to be viciously moral, i.e., to be morally good to an excessive degree." He captures a central feature of Wolf's thinking when he writes that there is "no guarantee that being a moral saint will be an attractive human life." This suggests meaningfulness in life and moral sainthood can be mutually exclusive. Additionally, although, the moralistic viewpoint can claim to be comprehensive or subsuming of all other non-instrumental considerations, the stipulations regarding this are question-begging in favor of moralism—i.e., all things considered, moral concerns *necessarily* override all other considerations.

In this thesis, I aim to expand on the objections presented to moralism. However, my objections to this outlook are not meant to be directed at any particular normative ethical theory. I argue that, although there could be softer versions of any of these theories that can try to accommodate to the concerns that will be outlined here, the limitations that can be found in these theories—even in their softer versions—in regard to the importance of meaningfulness in life, ultimately come from this moralistic outlook that aims to place morality at the top of a hierarchy of values. Therefore, I aim to criticize the overall standpoint from which these theories are usually conceived, namely, the view that it is always better to be as morally good as possible, under all circumstances, at all times.

There are other important non-instrumental values, such as prudential value, aesthetic value, epistemic value, interpersonal/social value, and what could perhaps be an anti-rationalist value, to show how these can contribute to objective meaning and to living a good life. In this chapter, I will outline reasons for action that are based on these other non-instrumental values and that can be considered as equally important, if not, in some cases, more important than moral reasons. Some of the theories outlined below will show how we can find value in reasons of

love, reasons of beauty, or even in doing things for no reason at all, only for the sake of being spontaneous. I will show the different types of valuable reasons that philosophers like Sophie Grace Chappell, Harry Frankfurt, among others, have explained can help us find meaning and value in life. For the most part, the reasons outlined below have the potential to outweigh moral reasons because they contribute to meaningfulness and value in a person's life. Thus, I argue that it is important to consider the different kinds of reasons for action that go beyond moral duty when we look to define the meaning of a good life.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. There are three main sections. In the first section I discuss Harry Frankfurt's defense of the interpersonal reasons that he calls 'reasons of love.' These types of reasons stem from a feeling of connection with other people and other things. They not only promote a sense of purpose in the individual but also a sense of belonging. Reasons of love ultimately motivate us to promote the good of whatever is our object of affection. In the second section, I draw on Sophie Grace Chappelle's 'reasons of beauty.' As argued by Chappelle, reasons of beauty are motivated simply by the idea of putting some beauty into the world, no matter what shape or form. In the third and final section, I will discuss a kind of anti-rationalism<sup>4</sup> that argues against the idea that reasons should structure or guide all of our deliberations about what to do, how to act, or how to behave. Overall, I want to defend a middle position between the excesses of moralism and the opposite extremes of anti-rationalism. I argue that reasons of beauty and reasons of love can guide us into finding meaningfulness in life and can be good, motivating reasons for action.

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<sup>4</sup> My interpretation of this view comes from a paper presented at the conference *Rice Workshop in Humanistic Ethics* at Rice University on April 22-23, 2022. All references to this view are based on this presentation. However, since this is a working theory, the author of this paper asked not be mentioned explicitly.

## **OTHER REASONS FOR ACTION: REASONS OF LOVE**

As mentioned, prominent normative ethical theories have been largely guided by the attitude of moralism. Moralism claims that we must always aim to do the morally right thing in every situation at all times. Additionally, it argues that our actions should invariably be guided by impersonal, universal moral principles. Many of the claims within moralism stem from the idea that this is the only way to act rationally. The morally right, selfless thing to do is also the rational thing to do. In these cases, impartiality is often necessary.

Nevertheless, the end of the previous century saw a philosophical movement that pointed to the fact that it can be valuable, and perhaps sometimes even necessary, for the individual to be able to put her moral duties to the side if something she values is at stake. This argument also claims that the individual would not be in the wrong—i.e., she would not necessarily be acting with selfish, self-centered reasons—if she decides to choose to protect the things she loves. This means that “reasons of love” are *reasonable* reasons for action. This is an interesting claim since it points to the importance of interpersonal relations. As mentioned before, the relationships we have with others not only help us develop our purpose in life but also help us promote a sense of belonging. This is especially important since having a sense of belonging is what motivates us to be active and engaging in our environments. For example, a mother can often find the motivation to live, better her life, and accomplish her goals only for the sake of giving a better life to her child. In this sense, loving relationships are often what root us to our projects. Furthermore, if the mother chooses to stop doing volunteer work in her community, for example, because she sees her child’s need to spend quality time with her, we would not think she would be in the wrong for making that decision.

Therefore, if we can agree that it is not necessarily wrong to choose to care for the things and the people we love, we can see that there are other legitimate<sup>5</sup> reasons for acting. There can be reasons of beauty (doing something because it is the ‘beautiful’ thing to do<sup>6</sup>), epistemic reasons (solely wanting to do something because it will lead me to learn the truth about a particular subject), reasons of love, or perhaps no reasons at all (as is argued by the anti-rationalist). In the case of reasons of love, it seems to be reasonable to want to protect the things and the people we love. Thus, it is important for the individual to have the room to make those decisions and to put what she loves above other important values. It is important to be able to promote these values because they ultimately contribute to meaningfulness in a person’s life and motivate the individual to keep on living. In *Reasons of Love*, Harry Frankfurt explains how we can justify the protection to our commitments. In his book, Frankfurt points out that moral theory agrees that it is important to be able to protect the things we love, although it is not entirely clear under what conditions. Bernard Williams also famously started this conversation. He argued that, when it comes to these types of existential ‘dilemmas,’ where an individual is forced to choose between doing the morally right thing or saving someone or something she loves, having to think on what is morally acceptable is having “one thought too many.”

It is reasonable to automatically choose to save the one we love. There is no real dilemma with situations like this. If one loves another, and that person is in trouble, we are going to help that person, regardless of whether there are so many other persons that might also need our help. For example, imagine a person named Jack, who works for a government organization that works on ameliorating a crisis of homelessness in his community. Jack has been working for

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<sup>5</sup> Legitimate in the sense that it is *reasonable* to want to do those things, and it is *reasonable* that we do them.

<sup>6</sup> Sophie Grace Chappell goes into depth on how reasons of beauty work and how they can be valuable in themselves. I will explain her argument in the next section.

months on developing a service that will become a sort of one-stop shop for any need an unhoused individual may have—e.g., mental health resources, housing, addiction services, etc. However, Jack’s child suddenly becomes ill with a strange disease that is difficult to diagnose. Jack’s child becomes incapacitated by this illness and also requires continuous visits to the doctor to run tests that will help diagnose the disease and find treatment. This ends up significantly interfering with his work. Jack is in a predicament: he is the only that can take care of his child while he is sick, but he also is leading the launch of this new service. Jack cares deeply about his work and knows that neglecting it any longer can run the risk of jeopardizing the success of the project. However, he feels the responsibility to care for his child since there is really no one else available to care for him—after all, he does not have the means to hire someone because his job does not pay very much. In this case, Jack would not necessarily be in the wrong if he chooses to care for his child even if it means the project could be jeopardized.

But how is this reasonable? Frankfurt spends a great part of his book trying to answer this. He points out that human connections give us purpose, a reason to live, motivation to act and keep going with our lives. It is essentially a human psychological need. Similarly to the mother, Jack might have been finding motivation to do his work so he can create a better world for his child. If he were to lose his child, he might end up losing his motivation and abandon the project and his work altogether. Love is in itself a motivating<sup>7</sup> force in our lives. For this reason, it is important to recognize that there are other legitimate reasons for acting, like reasons of love, that have the same weight—and could perhaps even be heavier—than moral reasons.

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<sup>7</sup> I am using the word ‘motivation’ throughout my thesis not merely as word for something that pushes us to do some particular action, but rather as a word for what pushes us to continue living in the first place and engage in doing anything in the world.



Love is often understood as being, most basically, a response to the perceived worth of the beloved. On this account, we are moved to love something by an appreciation of what we take to be its exceptional inherent value. But the things we love do not necessarily need to have any inherent value or be particularly special in any way to inspire that kind of devotion. We often love someone or something before we even recognize its value. As Frankfurt explains, “what we love necessarily *acquires* value for us *because* we love it. The lover does invariably and necessarily perceive the beloved as valuable, but the value he sees it to possess is a value that derives from and that depends upon his love” (39). Love is, in this sense, a comprehensively foundational generator of value. It does not stem from some inherent value that the beloved possesses. The value we see in our beloved is created by the love we have for it in itself.

Furthermore, love inspires something important in us—namely, as stated above, a reason to live, a motivation to act, and the purpose to live a good life. Frankfurt points out that loving people and things gives us purpose because it helps us shape our goals. We take the interests of the people and things we love and use that to shape our goals so that they will fit together with those interests. This also works to help preserve the things we love and help keep our connection to those things. For example, when we choose to build a life with someone, we take their interests and aspirations into account when we think about our own goals. If your significant other dreams of living a life in a city far away from where you met, for example, you take that desire into account and contemplate the ways that a dream like that can fit together with your own dreams and aspirations. In other, simpler cases, the act of loving others can give us goals that we might otherwise not have. For example, we might be motivated to be spontaneous or adventurous because it will help us spend time with someone we love and strengthen our bond. We might also be moved to be generous and charitable because we find the need to take care of

someone we love, who might be in great need. Thus, some of the ways in which love gives us purpose is that it inspires us to promote the well-being of the things and the people we love. The things we love become ends in themselves. As Frankfurt explains,

There must be ‘some end of the things we do which we desire for its own sake.’ Otherwise our activity, regardless of how purposeful it may be, will have no real point. We can never be genuinely satisfied by it, because it will always be unfinished. Since what it aims at is always a preliminary or a preparation, it will leave us always short of completion. The actions we perform will truly seem empty and vain to us, and will tend to lose interest in what we do (53).

In this sense, reasons of love root our motivations for living. They help us shape our goals and help us find meaning in them.

We all need to create ends for ourselves. If we have no purpose in our lives, we have no meaning. Reasons of love, beauty, and others, can be a source of purpose for us, depending on who we are and what we find to be motivating. These ends, especially when they are personally generated by us, give our lives meaning. They help paint a picture of what our lives will be like and what we could be able to achieve. Love is important in this sense because it is a source that will help us create those goals. We need purpose to find motivation for anything, and we can find purpose in our connections and the love we feel for others. In this way, loving others can ground our purpose. Thus, love is necessary in our lives for a wide number of reasons. The purpose it inspires in us is essential because some of us might not find a source of purpose anywhere else.

Nevertheless, reasons of love are significantly different from rational, moral, and self-interested reasons. Reasons of love differ from these other types of reasons in that they do not motivate us to do something because it is the logical thing to do or because it will directly benefit us in some way. They motivate us to do something solely because they will benefit or promote the things we love. As Frankfurt explains, “loving someone or something essentially *means* or *consists in*, among other things, taking its interests as reasons for acting to serve those interests.

Love is itself, for the lover, a source of reasons. It creates the reasons by which his acts of loving concern and devotion are inspired” (37). Reasons of love also differ from rational reasons because we do not really get to choose what or who we love, and what we love does not necessarily have to be valuable in itself. In this sense, caring about someone does not necessarily have to be rational. The reasons for why we love what we love cannot be further simplified. As Frankfurt shows, “it is a necessary feature of love that it is not under direct and immediate voluntary control ... With regard to certain things ... a person may discover that he cannot affect whether or how much he cares about them merely by his own decision. The issue is not up to him at all” (44). There is no logical argument that would make someone love someone or something in the way described above. There is also no argument that would make them fall out of love.

Additionally, Frankfurt points out that the feeling of love seems to arise from a natural human instinct. It is natural for people to love others and to feel passionate about things. If we were to find someone that has managed to go through life without loving anything at all, we would think there is something fundamentally wrong with that person. Frankfurt points that love, in this sense, is *reasonable*. Reasonableness, in this sense, comes not from having some rational set of reasons that guide us through our decisions but because it is practically acceptable.

For example, if an individual is inflicting self-harm, whether it is physical or psychological—as when one cuts oneself on purpose or alienates from those around them—it is usually not because there is a logical contradiction in their thinking. We would think of an act such as this as unreasonable because of other reasons—namely because those actions are contradictory to what we understand to be our fundamental human instincts. On this, Frankfurt explains that there are other forms of unreasonableness,

We are accustomed to understanding rationality as precluding contradiction and incoherence—as limiting what it is possible for us to think. There is also a sense of rationality in which it limits what we can bring ourselves to do or to accept. In the one sense, the alternative to reason is what we recognize as inconceivable. In the other, it is what we find unthinkable (45).

In this sense, not experiencing feelings of love in our life is something that is inconceivable. It is such an essential part of living. Further, it is also inconceivable to live a life in which we choose not to protect what we love. For this reason, reasons of love can be said to be a natural necessity. There is no human life that can reasonably go without them. It is a human necessity to love and connect with others, and it is unreasonable to believe that we can shut those feelings off at will.

Thus, the necessity of reasons of love shows us that we do not always need to have clear, specific reasons for doing the things we do. In the case of the reasons described here, the love we feel towards others is reason enough. It is not a reason that can be further simplified. Frankfurt points out that, because of this, it does not make sense to equate morality with reason.

Sometimes, when we opt against doing the morally right thing, it is not because we are being irrational, but because we can have other, legitimate reasons for doing things. In the case of reasons of love, as Frankfurt explains it, “there are no necessities of logic or of rationality that dictate what we are to love. What we love is shaped by the exigencies of human life, together with those other needs and interests that derive more particularly from the features of individual character and experience” (47).

With this in mind, we can ultimately see that there is a plurality of values that goes beyond morality. We can find legitimate reasons for action that stem from very justifiable values. However, an interesting feature of these values is that they include a subjective component—i.e., what I find valuable might not be valuable to someone else; we all love different things and different people. As we saw with Frankfurt, many of these personal values come to us

involuntarily, but they still give meaning and purpose to our lives in the same ways. In the second chapter of my thesis, I will explain how Susan Wolf shows that this is possible, and how personal, subjective meaning can be also objectively admirable. In the meantime, however, I will move on to explain how Sophie Grace Chappell argues that beauty can produce another type of legitimate reason for action.

### **OTHER REASONS FOR ACTION: AESTHETIC REASONS**

As explained at the beginning of this thesis, reasons for action are very diverse. There is value in doing other things besides what is morally right. We can find value in doing things for love, for truth, for meaning, for beauty, among others. Frankfurt helped explained the way in which reasons of love function, how they can be identified and how they can promote meaning and motivation. Now, I will turn to Sophie Grace Chappell and her discussion of aesthetic reasons.

In her essay “Duty, Beauty, and Booty,” Chappell presents the possibility of acknowledging aesthetic reasons as valuable in themselves. She argues that it is a very acceptable possibility for someone to be motivated to do something simply because it is the ‘beautiful’ thing to do. We can be motivated simply by the idea of putting some beauty into the world, no matter what shape or form. Alternatively, we can also find motivation in simply doing something because it will help us appreciate or promote the beauty that the world already has to show us. We can all find motivation in aesthetic actions because what is beautiful adds meaningfulness to the human experience regardless of whether we personally care about beauty or not. For example, art is widely used for people to express themselves, especially when they find it difficult, or something impedes them from directly being able to explain their experiences. This often leads to forming connections with others who have gone through similar experiences.

For example, people tend to quote literature when they find it hard to explain what they are feeling. Other people tend to share songs with each other to express how they feel for them. In other cases, understanding different experiences through art can even make us aware of our own experiences, especially when we repress or minimize them. For example, we can read a poem that perfectly describes an experience we had that we had never been aware of or thought about it in this specific way. Thus, art helps us feel connected with others and enhances our human experience.

For this reason, Chappell argues that we have reason to accept a kind of “aesthetic normativity.” She explains that in this “aesthetic normativity,” we can not only find types of aesthetic *action*—as opposed to merely appreciation or understanding—but we can also find an *ought, must, or should* that lead us to promote beauty in the world. For example, we could find duty in creating or promoting art, making music, taking a photograph, writing a literary masterpiece, promoting an appreciation towards nature. Chappell argues that this is not only true for the artist, but that it could also sporadically apply to any other individual. She argues that it would be important for any other individual to subscribe to a kind of aesthetic normativity because this would ultimately promote meaning in their lives. For example, as mentioned, people tend to use different forms of art as a form of expression. It generally helps them enhance their understanding of their own experiences. It can help them learn something about their experience that they might not had been able to understand before. For this reason, Chappell argues that aesthetic normativity could be necessary in everyday life. Aesthetic normativity not only has the potential of being therapeutic but, at the very least, it can bring meaning to our lives. Additionally, Chappell argues that we can understand aesthetic normativity as a neo-Aristotelian possibility. In this sense, beauty can contribute to our flourishing or our happiness. It can

contribute to *eudaemonia*. In this sense, an individual can find meaning entirely in dedicating her life to aesthetic actions.

Furthermore, in order to understand the idea of aesthetic reasons, it is important to first understand what aesthetic agency actually is. Chappell explains that what we would call “the beautiful” is more than what we would find in artistic expression. She argues that “the beautiful” can be said to be a category that is as broad as “the good.” It includes not only artistic actions but also actions that could be considered admirable, noble, fine, excellent, gracious, heroic, wise, humane, merciful, sublimely tactful, compassionate, kind, or funny. When we call an action beautiful, we might also mean that an action is extraordinary, outstanding, or went beyond expectations. Additionally, beautiful actions can also be moral or virtuous actions, and virtuous actions can also be beautiful. With some of the concepts described above, we can see the overlap there might be between beautiful actions and moral ones. For example, I might see someone in the parking lot of a grocery store helping an elderly person who was previously struggling with loading their groceries into their vehicle help them load them, and I might think to myself that spotting that need and moving to help was something that was ‘beautiful.’ It might seem that this sort of compliment is obscure and confusing, but Chappell shows that it can be very precise. Again, if there was an explanation for that sort of complement, it might be in the realm of thinking that it is noble, or fine, or admirable, or gracious, etc. However, it would be perfectly reasonable to think that the act was simply beautiful.

In this sense, Chappell argues that we can subordinate “the beautiful” with “the good.” She explains that “whatever the standing of art, the beautiful must have a central place within our thinking about normativity, no less a central place, in fact, than the good itself has” (107). Here, Chappell is claiming that there can be reasons of beauty within moral or ethical reasons, or, at

the very least, we could start to see the value of aesthetic actions if we think of them in connection to morality. As she puts it, “our moral, and so our ethical concepts, and the moral and ethical normativity that goes with them, are deeply aesthetically colored” (108). This suggests that, in a sense, there are many moral actions that can also be said to be beautiful. Nevertheless, there is still a distinction to be made between the moral and the beautiful—as stated above, there can moral actions that are beautiful and vice versa, but not all beautiful actions are moral and not all moral actions are beautiful (e.g., morally difficult actions). As mentioned, just as I think a ballerina performing is beautiful, I might think a person helping another is as well.

Furthermore, Chappell points out that considering the value of aesthetic actions from a neo-Aristotelian point of view can be helpful. Here, we can see that beauty can contribute to an individual’s flourishing or happiness. This shows us a “hierarchy of ends” within an individual. The overall human end, in this picture, is eudaemonia, but there are other goals within that greater end that can help us get there. Chappell explains that “ends get their endhood by derivation from the shape of my overall life” (105). This suggests that we can accept that if an individual finds meaning, happiness, purpose, or motivation in the beautiful, then they have genuine reasons to act in accordance with beauty, to see beauty as an end in itself. As Chappell shows, “I have reason to pursue the ends of art, or of some particular art, just insofar as those ends cohere with and enrich my overall pursuit of eudaemonia, good human living in general” (105).

Nevertheless, Chappell notes that even if we consider aesthetic reasons as legitimate, they would not necessarily be categorical, only hypothetical—after all, they would only apply to those that find meaningfulness in the beautiful. In this sense, aesthetic ends can still be recognized as good personal ends, but they will not translate to the higher picture, at least not in the same way



that morality contributes to the higher picture—i.e., to the good of the world. Still, Chappell points to the possibility of seeing “degrees” of hypothetically and categorically. She explains that “the closer we get to the top of the hierarchy, the closer we get to ends that we necessarily have, and can’t avoid acting on, or responding to, or being motivated by; the closer we get to the bottom of it, the closer we get to particular outworkings of human agency in practice that are so particular that they mostly turn out to be very optional indeed” (106). In this sense, depending on what makes our lives meaningful, we find things we *have* to act on.

The idea that there could be “degrees” of hypothetically and categorically is interesting. It suggests that there is no one end or one form of action that we should all be aiming at. The moralistic attitude believes that we are all meant to act morally, above anything else, and we ought to find value in morality, more than anywhere else. However, when considering the possibility of beauty contributing to the meaningfulness of someone’s life, or at the very least enhancing the human experience in some way, we can also see the possibility that there are other acts aside from virtuous ones that can contribute to human flourishing. In this sense, Chappell points to a “false dichotomy” that Susan Wolf has also previously pointed to when talking about the types of actions we consider to be motivating. In philosophy generally, the claim has been widely held that the only types of reasons that can motivate an individual are self-interested reasons or reasons based on “pure practical reason.” Reasons based on pure practical reason are said to lead to the moral realm—i.e., the rational thing to do is also the ethical thing to do. On the other hand, self-interested reasons are based solely on what we might desire or have a preference for. However, as Chappell and Wolf have shown, there are so many other types of reasons that motivate us to do things. As Chappell explains, the neo-Aristotelian picture especially “allows for all sorts of levels and complexities of motivational structure” (122). Chappell shows that we

can have reasons of beauty that motivate us. Wolf also outlines a greater complexity in reasons for action and motivating reasons. Wolf points to reasons of love, similarly to Harry Frankfurt, and reasons that ultimately have to do with personal values and what makes our lives meaningful.

My aim throughout this thesis is to show, similarly to what Wolf, and partly Chappell, has shown, that what makes a life meaningful goes beyond the moral or ethical realm. Additionally, we can find genuine, objective value in other forms of living that do not necessarily focus on making the world a better place or promoting the good, and these other forms of living, or types of value, can still contribute positively to the world around us while giving us meaning. I acknowledge that showing that there is a multitude of reasons for action that are valuable in themselves might be hard to do. As Chappell mentions in her paper, understanding reasons of beauty, and, in turn, any other type of reasons, as valuable in themselves might be a difficult concept to understand. For example, we might be inclined to accept the value of aesthetic action if we explain *why* we might see it as valuable, but that defeats the purpose of the argument. The argument is meant to show that aesthetic actions are valuable because beauty in itself is valuable. Chappell compares this idea to the value and admirability we might find in sporting achievements. In this sense, we are more likely to admire sporting achievements when they are done for their own sake, instead of being done for money, fame, or recognition. Nevertheless, Chappell acknowledges that the reason why we struggle to articulate the reasons for our admiration in instance of beautiful actions, or sporting achievements, is because we are more likely accustomed to wanting to put reasons to why we admire those things. We often also place this problem in the realm of ethics, like when we ask what makes an action good and why, or when we ask why we should be moral. But it is important to note that

oftentimes we do not need any other reasons to do something except because the action would be valuable in itself. The end, whether it's beauty, love, or purpose, is valuable in itself. She explains, "to the why-be-moral problem, that I am recommending here is that there are important cases in which we should stop thinking about *benefit* or *harm* at all, and think instead about the beautiful, the noble, the excellent, and the admirable" (116-7).

In the two sections above, I explained two different types of reasons for acting that can bring value and meaning to our lives, namely, interpersonal reasons and aesthetic reasons. I have shown how reasons of love can be valuable in itself because they provide us with important motivating reasons to get up in the morning and continue to pursue our goals. Nevertheless, I now want to point to a completely different perspective that shows how acting for no reason at all can itself be valuable. I call this the anti-rationalist view. Although I believe this view to make interesting and important claims, I believe that going to the full anti-rationalist route can be problematic. Instead, I want to highlight what I find valuable in such a view and why it can be worth considering when thinking about reasons for action.

## **THE ANTI-RATIONALIST VIEW**

The anti-rationalist view<sup>8</sup>, as it will be presented here, draws on the idea that there can be value in doing an action for no reason at all. This view claims that there can be value in spontaneous activity. The anti-rationalist view claims that spontaneous activity and unpremeditated action can be valuable for opening our minds, help us understand new perspectives, and find other ways to

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned above, I base this view on a paper presented at the conference *Rice Workshop in Humanistic Ethics* presented at Rice University on April 22-23, 2022. The author asked not to be disclosed here since this is a working theory.

create meaning in life. Spontaneous activity, in this sense, can be described as open-minded attitudes and a greater openness to experience that goes beyond rationalizing every action we take throughout our lives. Spontaneous activity involves not just *doing* unplanned things or *being* obscure, it also involves a sort of higher-order attitude of ‘being okay’ with the incompleteness of reflective understanding and control. Some of these spontaneous activities can include erotic love, conversation—in which one abdicates interpretive sovereignty and avoids pulling rank by claiming privileged authority for the deliverances of introspection—aesthetic appreciation, and play. The anti-rationalist view argues that these attitudes and experiences are important because they expand our appreciation and understanding of different experiences in life. In this sense, the anti-rationalist view is claiming that spontaneous activity involves a kind of higher-order attitude of lightweight endorsement of human finitude. This means that spontaneous activity can be valuable in opening up perspectives and considerations that might not be completely apparent to an individual if she is constantly rationalizing things.

Moreover, the anti-rationalist view highlights the importance of spontaneity and attempts to deflate the value of rational thinking in our lives. The author argues that spontaneous, non-critical action can be just as valuable, and have just as much importance, in everyday life as rational and premeditated action. This contrasts the more common philosophical view that we should always aim to act in such a way that we end up doing the right thing, for the right reasons, in the right way, reflectively. In this sense, this theory makes an interesting criticism to the value we put on rational thinking. It argues that it is wrong, in an ethical and existential sense, to always aim to act rationally. The anti-rationalist claims rationalization is wrong in an ethical sense because a lack of openness to experience might cause us to miscalculate or misjudge a situation that we might had been better able to understand if we were not already predisposed to

the idea that we could just rationalize through the situation. This is especially true in cases of conversation. As mentioned above, spontaneity can be helpful in cases of conversation because it can help one abdicate interpretive sovereignty and avoid pulling rank by claiming privileged authority for the deliverances of introspection. For example, imagine Gwen experiencing severe symptoms of major depressive disorder that have kept her from spending time with family and friends. Gwen's loved ones have scolded her for not being as present in their lives as she used to be. Gwen feels extremely guilty for this, but her depression has been preventing her from having the energy and motivation to go out and spend time with her loved ones. She tries to explain this to them, but since they have no idea of what major depressive symptoms can be like, they believe that she simply does not want to spend time with them. If she wanted to, she would make a greater effort. This is a very common conclusion that people who have not experienced any sort of mental illness usually make. For them, it is reasonable to think that if one really cared about something, one would make the time for that thing. It is very hard for them to know what it is like to have a kind of heavy weight in your mind that keeps you from enjoying and being motivated by things. However, if Gwen's loved ones were to be more 'spontaneous' in their way of understanding what Gwen is trying to communicate, they might be able to see the possibility that she does want to spend time with them, but she has found it very difficult to do it. It is in cases like this that a more spontaneous, open-minded attitude can help us engage in conversation in a more ethical sense. By choosing to be more open to my understanding of someone else's experience, I avoid pulling rank, and I can eventually find ways to empathize with the other person.

Further, the anti-rationalist claims that rationalization is wrong in an existential sense because, with it, we might simply be closing ourselves to many other possibilities of what we can

do and how we can live. This highlights the importance of keeping ourselves and our minds open. This is important for the anti-rationalist since, as mentioned, spontaneity and unplanned action keep us open to the possibilities in our experiences that we might not be able to see if we are constantly rationalizing things. For example, we can say that the core of aesthetic appreciation is an appreciation of our own finitude and opacity as non-privately pleasurable and valuable. It can be a pleasure *not* to understand objects of aesthetic appreciation. This pleasure can come from recognizing that the mysteriousness of works of art and objects of natural beauty presents not just an opportunity to strive for greater understanding but also an opportunity to find this mysteriousness compelling and satisfying by itself. This obscureness is non-privately valuable and pleasurable because, when we experience properly aesthetic appreciation, we suspend the effort to make sense of an aesthetic object and engage with it using a different sort of reflecting and contemplative attitude.

In this sense, the anti-rationalist view claims that elevating spontaneity to a higher level, just as rational critical thinking is placed, can help us open our minds through our experiences and get a better understanding of the world around us. This idea ultimately highlights the fact that rational thinking can be somewhat limiting. If we are always thinking rationally through everything we do, we end up missing out on many opportunities for experiencing new, meaningful things. The idea of spontaneity helps us break that barrier. It suggests that it can be valuable to experience things for no reason at all, and that an approach to random conversations with others that is more open can be very fruitful. This is an interesting claim since it seems to be true that philosophy has historically put too much importance on rationality. On the other hand, spontaneity and openness to experience can be helpful tools, as philosophy seems to overlook, to find different ways of understanding the world and live a fuller life.

Furthermore, the author points out that philosophy puts too much value on the idea that we should always be critical and self-reflective, and that our actions should be the product of deliberate thinking and rationalization. Theories in moral philosophy encourage the individual to live a fully rational life. Kant even goes as far as saying that this is the only way in which a fully human being could live. After all, it seems that only by thinking rationally, we can arrive at knowing what the right thing to do would be in any given circumstance. In this view, only through constant self-reflection and critical thinking, we can live a better, more ethical life. We have to critically think about our mistakes, learn from our failures, and go as far as to understand the historical catastrophes that society has experienced, in order to move forward in more ethical ways and build a better world. However, the anti-rationalist view claims that this is not necessarily something we should exclusively aim at. The author argues that there is value in impulsivity and un-premeditated action. In this way, spontaneous activities open the door to different experiences and encourage us to keep ourselves and our minds open.

It does seem to be the case, as the anti-rationalist claims, that spontaneous activity could be a helpful tool to better understand the world, to grow our empathy, our compassion, and our appreciation for living and for others. In this sense, the anti-rationalist view shows that our placing the greatest value on living a life filled solely with rationally premeditated actions is not necessarily the only way in which we would be able to arrive at the conclusions that will help us to live a moral, meaningful life. Thus, there is value in being open to other levels of experience, especially those that might lead us to understand the world in new and interesting ways. The anti-rationalist view claims that the world would also be a better place if individuals were more open to letting go of rational action and constant reflection. As was the case with Gwen, being more open in conversation would have helped them understand the mental and physical

limitations that Gwen was experiencing and would have helped them empathize better and perhaps even find a way to be there for her and motivate her. In this sense, spontaneous activities open the door to a fuller understanding of the world and greater acceptance to how much we can know about it and how much we can do to make it better.

The anti-rationalist view shows that spontaneous activity requires us to mainly be open to the experience without having to rationalize too much about who we are, what we understand, and how we ought to act. For example, erotic love requires the individual to think less about the experience and be open to possibilities in order for the encounter to be more significant. In this sense, spontaneity enhances the experience. Furthermore, conversation is better experienced when we choose to think less rationally since good, productive conversation requires each participant to acknowledge the limitations in experience and understanding within themselves. This is important for each participant in order for them to be able to learn from each other and respect each other's autonomy and sensitivities, for each person to be able to express more freely, as was shown in the example of Gwen. This is also evident in cases of having conversations with individuals from different cultures. In these cases, the difference in cultural and historical backgrounds make any potential conversation less clear for both parties. The difference in perspectives and understandings of the world create a greater possibility for both parties to end the conversation having learned something new. This often requires us to let go of what we think we know and be more open to the experience. Additionally, aesthetic appreciation, in which one takes pleasure in *not* fully understanding an object of beauty and being at peace with the unexplained, highlights the value that one can find in accepting that not all experiences can be rationally understood but can nonetheless be fully appreciated. Spontaneous activity, in which one lives through some unplanned experience, keeps us open to



new adventures. Finally, play, in which we forgo of any greater, big-picture aims in order to concentrate our consciousness to the aims and goals of a game, helps us to focus on living in the moment and forget about the pressures that our overall goals and the world around us can have on us. Play can also help us recharge, and forgetting about the world around us can help us regain the energy to achieve our goals.

In this sense, the anti-rationalist's argument echoes the claims found in ethical anti-theory. Similar to the anti-theorists, the anti-rationalist is arguing that there is a mistake in the common philosophical assumption that rational thinking is of utmost importance in navigating the world, and that to act rationally is to act ethically. Ultimately, impulsivity and unpremeditated action do seem to help us expand our experiences, and, I argue that, in the ethical sense, it helps us develop a greater respect for others. They help us acknowledge our limited understanding of the world, and this can lead us to learning about other ways of living, and thus, other forms of suffering, oppression, and pain. This is important since it is only by knowing about these experiences that we can start to take our part in changing them. Additionally, an openness to experience that is more directed at the self is also important for an individual to find new ways of making her life meaningful. Being open to new experiences, especially when we don't think too much about them, can help us open our minds to new adventures and to find new things we like or don't like about the world.

Nevertheless, the anti-rationalist acknowledges that many would be skeptical to accept a view that lowers the value of reflection and our aims to find a deeper, more critical understanding of the world. Some might say that it is only through critical reflection that we can achieve moral progress and achieve ideals like justice and liberation. Still, the anti-rationalist points out that rationalizing each situation, or the world at large, is not necessarily always

helpful. We might aim to rationalize something or critically think about a situation and still end up with the wrong conclusions. Thus, basing our actions on spontaneity is not as threatening to the moral order as one might think. This suggests that our way of understanding and navigating the world might be missing something—namely spontaneity and openness. It could perhaps even be said that un-premeditation is sometimes necessary in doing the right thing in certain circumstances. For example, in the case of Gwen, her loved ones could have done better by her if they let go of common assumptions and decided to be more open to understanding what Gwen was experiencing. In these cases, anti-rationalism can help us understand our loved one better and grow our relationship and bond with them.

Still, the anti-rationalists can go as far as to argue that these experiences be held in higher regard, or considered of higher value, than rationally premeditated actions. On my view, I don't necessarily agree that these activities have a better chance at leading us to live a superior ethical life, but they do seem to matter when it comes to finding new and different ways of living a more meaningful life and having a greater appreciation of the world. In regard to the ethical life, I argue that leaving room for spontaneous activity is surely helpful for further developing our empathy and compassion towards others. As mentioned, these forms of un-premeditation help us open our minds to new experiences and new perspectives. For example, in cases of conversation, I might be able to learn something new about certain experiences or points of view, even from someone who I would not naturally think is someone who can offer a different perspective on something—e.g., someone with who I share the same cultural and historical background—and this can lead me to have a greater capacity for empathy and compassion that I would not otherwise have. This method also gives the person who I might be having a conversation with a more dignified place in our conversation. It might give her more agency and room to express

herself without worrying about what assumptions I might make or how I might interpret what she is telling me.

Although I believe spontaneous activity can be helpful for opening our minds, enhancing our experiences, and learning more about the world around us, I do not think that this should be our main way of living in the world. Spontaneous activity can be useful in *some* cases, but practical actions does seem to require a level of rationalization to keep our deliberations in check. We do need to know how to think through different situations. But we also need to know when to *not* think through a situation. For this reason, a balance of rationalism and anti-rationalism might be helpful when we think about our practical deliberations.

In this chapter, I have explained different reasons for acting that go beyond moral reasons. I have shown how different types of non-instrumental value—love, beauty, anti-rationalism—can bring meaningfulness to a person’s life and motivate her to keep on living. I have also explained how these actions, if at all, can relate to morality, but that they nonetheless are still valuable on their own. Now, I will turn to the works of Susan Wolf to further explain her criticisms of moralism and how the moralistic attitude can significantly threaten meaningfulness in life. I will also explain the Wolfian conception of meaningfulness and show why it matters and how it contributes to the meaning of a good life.

## CHAPTER 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANINGFULNESS

As I explained in the previous chapter, there is a variety of reasons for action that have non-instrumental value but that prominent normative ethical theories tend to overlook. Some of these values include prudential value, aesthetic value, epistemic value, interpersonal/social value, and maybe even religious value. The values that I expanded on in the previous chapter were aesthetic value, interpersonal/social value, and a kind of anti-rationalist value. These values are important to human life since they give the individual purpose and a reason to get out of bed in the morning and keep on living. In this sense, prominent ethical theories seem to ignore, or at the very least, overlook, one important aspect of human life, namely meaningfulness.

Granted, one of the reasons that anybody can have to get up in the morning can be morality, but it is not often going to be the case that morality would be anybody's main reason for living. We can care about making the world a better place, and that can be a great motivating reason for why we get up in the morning and continue to pursue our goals, but there will often be other things that we care about that come to mind when making the world a better place does not feel like reason enough to continue living. In these cases, we might find motivation in other valuable activities, people, or things, like music, art, the people we love, or the things we like to do for fun. In this sense, Susan Wolf gives us important guidelines that could help us define what could be considered to be meaningful in our lives. As explained, Wolf does this by first objecting to the claims of moralism and explaining the demandingness that normative ethical theories can have on the agent, and then by showing how important meaningfulness can be in our lives and how valuable it can be in itself.

Wolf explains that the problem with the claims of moralism come from the idea that morality has an undisputed place at the top of our hierarchy of values and that it is always better

to be as morally good as possible, under all circumstances, at all times. As explained by Ernesto V. Garcia, the critique of moralism is directed towards the underlying ideology associated with traditional accounts of morality. Garcia explains that this critique—which can also be seen in Marxist and feminist philosophy—aims to expose a ‘false consciousness.’ This false consciousness points to a set of beliefs which give an overall illusory view of the world. For example, the kind of ideology attributed to the moralist often claims that it is *natural* to behave in a certain way, when in reality the ideology is derived simply from the ways societies have historically believed that something is supposed to work—Garcia explains this to be a metaphysical feature of the way in which ideologies can be construed. Additionally, the ideology often claims to be normatively neutral or impartial when it in fact is biased and prejudicial typically in favor of an unjust/oppressive status quo—Garcia explains this to be an axiological feature of the ideology. Although I do not have the time or space to expand on these criticisms, I argue that these criticisms, if true, have the potential to deeply threaten the plausibility of moral theory as we know it. In this sense, if we can prove that moral theory is mostly biased or prejudicial as it has been conceived, or that it is derivative of social principles instead of natural ones, we would be in serious need to rethink our moral commitments.

However, the positive project that can be derived from Wolf’s work expands on some general principles about the overall relationship between morality, or moral value, and the rest of our human lives. As Garcia explains, Wolf seems to defend a sort of ‘incommensurability’ thesis, in which “the moral viewpoint and the non-moral ‘point of view of individual perfection’ are incommensurable and both limited in certain respects despite their claims for being comprehensive/subsuming all other consideration, [and thus] there exists no one-size-fits-all solution for which viewpoint we should choose/prioritize in every situation.” In this sense, Wolf

argues that morality should stay in its lane. There can be incommensurable value conflicts between moral and non-moral value, where morality is not the ultimate arbiter and there exists no one-size-fits-all solution for what we ought to do.

In this chapter, I will expand on Wolf's 'incommensurability thesis.' I will also explain how she highlights the importance of meaningfulness in life and the way in which other non-instrumental values compete with each other. I will argue that Wolf makes many significant points about the importance of meaningfulness in life. I will explain how she believes prominent normative ethical theories can seriously threaten this important aspect of life. Finally, I will argue how, although her views point to an important problem in moral theory, she still comes limited in her explanation of how moral and personal values can interact with each other. I will explain how we can think about this interaction in Chapter 3.

### **MORAL SAINTS AND THE UNAPPEALING NATURE OF MORAL PERFECTION**

Susan Wolf is a prominent contemporary critic of moral theory who has dedicated her career to explaining the limitations of the actual practice of normative ethical theories and how these can become problematic. She has mainly worked to highlight the importance of recognizing a plurality of values that goes beyond what is morally good—that is, she has worked to emphasize the importance of acknowledging things like beauty, love, knowledge, among other things, as intrinsically valuable. In this sense, she has worked to point out other ways in which we can live a good life, even if it is not solely focused on promoting the good in the world. Wolf was widely influenced by the criticisms to moral theory that were first presented by Bernard Williams and Harry Frankfurt. She was attracted to the idea that moral theories ignored fundamental features of a good life and what give people's lives meaning—e.g., love, beauty, art,

music, spontaneity, as mentioned above—and how they essentially had the potential of destroying an individual’s integrity, or what makes them unique, distinctive, and perhaps even human.<sup>9</sup> Her main criticism, however, is on how moral theories fail to account for a plurality of values in life, and she has shown the importance of accentuating the fact that these can contribute to giving meaning to someone’s life.

Wolf first outlines her criticism on meaningfulness in her widely known paper, “Moral Saints.” Throughout this paper, she highlights the ramifications that can come from aiming at living a perfect moral life—i.e., a life that is solely concerned with promoting the good in the world. Wolf suggests that moral perfection is not something that is necessarily appealing for everyone and will not often bring meaningfulness to an individual. In this sense, Wolf suggests that the personality and goals that are prominent in someone we might call a ‘moral saint’—that is, someone that always aims to be perfectly moral—might be missing something. There seems to be something fundamentally wrong with someone that can be described as a moral saint. Thus, Wolf argues that moral perfection is not something that we should all be aiming for. There are other valuable things in which individuals can invest their time and energy. For example, we could dedicate our lives to science, literature, medicine, art, music, athletics, agriculture, construction, architecture, etc. and still be able to offer something valuable to the world. We have other legitimate reasons for doing things besides what is morally good.

Wolf argues that a morally perfect person, or a ‘moral saint,’ is not something that we would be greatly motivated to aspire to be, nor we *should* be necessarily motivated to become. She explains that “moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a

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<sup>9</sup> Human in the sense that people tend to care about those close to them and care about promoting their own well-being. People also have their own interests and passions that they also look to promote and grow.

human being to strive” (419). There are other valuable things that we can focus our attention to that will bring value and meaningfulness to the world in different ways. In this sense, moral perfection is not particularly appealing, because it potentially works to dissolve a person’s integrity.

In Wolf’s view, a moral saint would be defined as the idealistic version of someone that strictly believes in moralism. They diligently follow the moral systems outlined by normative ethical theories. Essentially, a moral saint is someone that is close to a perfectly moral person as anyone can be. A moral saint can either be motivated by the rational appeal of morality—for example, one might find that living a morally good life will promote one’s status, will bring peace and comfort to one’s life, or will make our interactions with the outside world much easier—or the individual could be motivated by a love or passion for morality—that is, the individual might care deeply about the world at large and decide to dedicate her life to promoting other people’s well-being and happiness. In this sense, Wolf points out that we can distinguish between a ‘Rational Saint’ and a ‘Loving Saint.’ Their motivation for living a morally good life will tell which model an individual may fall into. As Wolf explains, the Loving Saint aligns with the utilitarian ideal and the Rational Saint aligns with the Kantian ideal. And although she acknowledges that both deontology and utilitarianism would argue that they do not encourage a life of moral saintliness, their moral ideals and disregard for a plurality of values—i.e., their commitment to moralism—ultimately leads to the belief that moral values take precedence over everything else. This is what inevitably leads to a life of moral saintliness.

Furthermore, Wolf explains that moral saints can still have other qualities—they could be athletic, creative, etc.—but their priority will always be on promoting the good. This is true even if it means that they would have to sacrifice their ideal lifestyle or what is valuable to them. In



this sense, they have a good personal character and show impartiality towards others. But their commitment to morality can be too great that it might appear as worrisome. As Wolf, explains, “there comes a point in the listing of virtues that a moral saint is likely to have where one might naturally begin to wonder whether the moral saint isn’t, after all, too good—if not too good for his own good, at least too good for his own well-being” (421). If they worry this much about promoting the good, they might ultimately feel like they would have to sacrifice their own ambitions and interests in order to promote the good in the world. Moral saints might also restrain themselves from other pleasures. They might not be able to laugh at a satire or enjoy leisure time because those things do not contribute to the moral values they try to uphold. Moreover, what takes away the appeal of a moral saint is not only their saintliness, but also their lack of individuality. If an individual feels forced to give up their ambitions, values, and pleasures, then their individuality will be dissolved. Ultimately, we want people to be decent human beings, but we do not want them to be moral saints. We want for them to have fun or take pleasure in activities that might not be morally relevant.

Wolf points out that we avoid being around moral saints because there are other lifestyles that we might want to adopt, and we might feel shame or inadequacy by being around individuals who live perfect moral lives. We want to be free in deciding the lifestyle that suits us and motivate us, without feeling ashamed for not investing one’s time into putting more good into the world. On this, the concern is not with a person’s life revolving around moral goodness, but about the commitment that we might have to moralism that puts morality above all else. Through the moralistic attitude, individuals ultimately lose touch with their being, ignore interests and passions, and disregard what is valuable in their lives. The ideals of moralism are too demanding to the individual that, if they do not motivate one to become moral saints, at the

very least might lead individuals to feel inadequate and ashamed for choosing a life that does not uphold morality as of the utmost importance. As Wolf shows, “our objection then would not be specific to a life in which one’s dominant concern is morality, but would apply to any life that can be so completely characterized by an extraordinary dominant concern. The reduction in that case would reduce to the recognition that such a life is incompatible with well-roundedness” (423). In this sense, well-roundedness is better and preferable than moral perfection, because it leads to living a more meaningful life, one that is defined by the individual.<sup>10</sup>

As previously explained, the ideal of moralism assumes that the goal that we should aim at with every action we make should be to do what is morally best, what will promote the most good in the world. In this sense, the moralist assumes that our desire to act in any other way that is not meant to do what is morally good comes from an instinct or an urge that we should not pay attention to, and even be ashamed of. As Wolf explains, “it is generally assumed that one ought to be as morally good as possible and that what limits there are to morality’s hold on us are set by features of human nature of which we ought not to be proud” (419). However, as Chappell and Frankfurt show, the desire to act in ways that are not grounded in morality is not something that we necessarily need to be deterred from. We might not be acting out of duty, but we might be acting out of love, beauty, or something else that gives meaning to our lives and is worthwhile at the same time.

Moral saintliness is not a style of life that should appeal to everyone. Thus, the fact that these moral theories, with their commitment to moralism, prescribe a way of life that is

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<sup>10</sup> I will go more in depth on what it means for an individual to ‘define’ her own meaningfulness and how this could affect our understanding of moral values in Chapter 3. I believe the existentialists do a better job of explaining what the process is for defining meaningfulness while also considering the importance of adopting moral values along with personal ones.

predominately unappealing, and perhaps even unreasonable<sup>11</sup>, shows that there is something fundamentally flawed with the way these theories view the practice of morality, and, in turn are not helpful guidelines for how to live a good life. Wolf also points to the strangeness of building a life around a passion for morality and forget about other types of meaningfulness. As Wolf explains, “morality itself does not seem to be a suitable object of passion” (423). In this sense, it is important to care for others, but that is not necessarily the value that can define us and that would keep motivating us through life. For this reason, Wolf proposes the need to reassess what it means to live a good life and the way we think about moral theory.

Wolf points to the strangeness of building a life around a passion for morality and forget about other types of meaningfulness. Moral saints, then, seem to have a lack of appreciation for some aspects of life, a lack of joy. Wolf shows that both the Loving Saint and the Rational Saint seem to share this strangeness. As she puts it, “there seems ... to be a kind of joy which the Loving Saint, either by nature or by practice, is incapable of experiencing. The Rational Saint, on the other hand, might retain strong nonmoral and concrete desires—he simply denies himself the opportunity to act on them” (424). The Loving Saint is possibly incapable of feeling these desires, and thus is shown to be ‘disabled’ in this way. The Rational Saint simply rationalizes them away, and can thus be said to be ‘pathological’ in this sense. In this way, to be moral, in the way described by the moralist, is to deny the self. As Wolf shows, “the way in which morality, unlike other possible goals, is apt to dominate is particularly disturbing, for it seems to require either a lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self” (424). In this way, morality asks the individual to dissolve her own identity.

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<sup>11</sup> Unreasonable because it is more reasonable for the individual to want to pursue her own passions, even if it means that their concern for promoting the moral good would significantly diminish.

It is true that one can find a way to implement nonmoral activities or behaviors to achieve moral ends, but under normative ethical theories, this would only be considered to be “happy coincidences.” As mentioned above, the stipulations regarding moralism’s capacity to be comprehensive or subsuming of all other non-instrumental values are question-begging in favor of morality. All things considered, moral concerns *necessarily* override all other considerations. Nevertheless, the nonmoral qualities that moral saints put aside could also be called virtues, even if they are nonmoral virtues. In this way, there are commendable achievements and ways of living that do not center in an interest in morality. For example, we tend to admire athletes, chefs, musicians, artists, even if they do not put too much focus in promoting the moral good.<sup>12</sup> Thus, nonmoral virtues are good for providing greater happiness to the individual, but the individual will always be ultimately asked to put these virtues to the side so that she can focus more on promoting the good or, at the very least, moralism will expect her to sacrifice these things if the situation requires it.

Placing and defining morality as the most important value discourages the individual from dedicating and investing as much time as she would want in other valuable activities. As Wolf puts it, “the way in which the utilitarian can enjoy these ‘extra-curricular’ aspects of his life is simply not the way in which these aspects are to be enjoyed insofar as they figure into less saintly ideals” (429). In this sense, what the moralist would encourage us to do is to pursue any activity that would help to promote the general happiness. Wolf highlights Bernard Williams’ phrase that utilitarianism provides the individual with “one thought too many.” In this context, the thought too many comes when trying to decide what to dedicate one’s life to and what activities one ought to pursue. The individual should be able to more freely decide what values to

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<sup>12</sup> I will describe below how Linda Zagzebski shows how individuals that can be described in this way can be seen as admirable.

promote and what kind of life she should live. In many ways, the utilitarian worries more about promoting utility than the own good of the individual. The individual's life has to be directed in an instrumental way. In this sense, the individual is considered to be a tool of the utilitarian. It only matters that she is useful. On the other hand, Wolf acknowledges that deontology does not necessarily require a life of moral saintliness, but deontology can still ask the individual to sacrifice what one values if the situation requires it. Ultimately, deontology encourages rationalization and a check on our passions. It claims that morality comes from rationality, so the only rational way to act is in a morally good way.

Wolf points out that we might more readily admire an individual that falls under the characteristics of moral saints if they are motivated by a more personal passion towards promoting the moral good. In this sense, we seem to prefer a person to be moral not out of morality itself, but for other, more personal reasons. Thus, it seems that the limit to the demanding ideals of morality could come from making significantly much more room for individuality and personal values. It would be more ideal and motivating if we make those ideals our own. We would not be mindless, dull moral saints, but individuals with a more personal passion while also being more morally inclined. In this way, it does seem to be the case that we need to reassess the way we think about moral theory. We need to make more room for individuality and personal values, since there are multiple ways of living a good life.

## **ON MEANINGFULNESS AND WHY IT MATTERS**

As mentioned, the ideology of moralism seems to ignore, or at the very least overlook, one important aspect of human life, namely, meaningfulness. This aspect of life is extremely important since it represents the overarching reason, or reasons, that anybody has for getting up

in the morning and continue to keep living—these reasons can include family, friends, music, art, a sense of purpose, ideas, goals, among other things. It is true that morality can fall under this category, but it will not often be the case that it would be anyone’s reason to keep on living. Wolf has spent much of her career explaining the importance of meaningfulness in life and how we can define and find such a thing. One important point she makes is that meaningfulness is not something completely subjective. We are not the sole authority of defining what makes our lives meaningful. In this sense, there needs to be an objective component to meaningfulness.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is not possible for us to find meaningfulness in atrocious ways of living, like being a human trafficker, drug dealer, or Nazi.

On this, Ernesto V. Garcia points to the famous exchange that happened between Harry Frankfurt and Susan Wolf, where Frankfurt posed the problematic conclusion that could arise from Wolf’s ‘meta-moralism.’<sup>14</sup> Frankfurt argues that the Wolfian meta-moralism gives way to the idea that, if moral value is not as important, and the individual is free to find her own values, then we can have situations when individuals lead morally depraved lives but can still believe their lives to be meaningful. For example, as Frankfurt puts it,

The fact that Hitler’s life was so dreadfully immoral might really have had no deleterious effect whatever on the value to him of living that life. It is possible that immoral lives may be good to live. In my view, at least, the value to Hitler of living the life he chose would have been damaged by the immorality of that life only if morality was something that Hitler actually cared about, or if the immorality of his life somehow had a damaging effect on other matters that he cared about (248).

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<sup>13</sup> I will explain more thoroughly how Wolf explains this relationship below. I will explain in Chapter 3 how existentialism also explains this relationship.

<sup>14</sup> The ‘meta-moralism’ that I refer to was also introduced by Garcia during his paper presentation. He explains this concept as a “first-order normative investigation into what we should ultimately value/care about.” A Wolfian meta-moralism claims that morality should be regarded as just one competing kind of non-instrumental value among others.

This points to the concern that even someone as morally depraved as Hitler would have been able to say that he lived a meaningful life. On the other hand, Susan Wolf's response to this objection is to highlight the importance of objective value in what we would define as meaningfulness in life. She responds to Frankfurt,

But it is curious that Frankfurt's silence, or near silence, on the relevance of objective value to the questions of what to care about and love resonates with Frankfurt's discussion of other topics, where I also think inattention to (or silent denial of) the relevance of objective value leads Frankfurt to flawed conclusions ... Because of this—at least so I shall argue—his positions are ultimately unsatisfactory (227-8).

Garcia points out that, based on Wolf's meta-morality, we can argue that, when we engage with objective value, we have to care, at least in part, about moral value. This leads us to the conclusion that, in cases of existential dilemmas—i.e., where meaning in life/a meaningful life is at stake—morality does not always trump all other rival considerations—i.e., the claims of morality are sometimes, even all things considered, defeasible. Furthermore, in the case of Hitler, being not morally depraved—or stronger, being a morally decent person—is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for a meaningful life.

Nevertheless, a question that could pop out to those who are skeptical to the idea that there are other competing (subjective) values that stand against morality, is on why we should give importance to subjective value in the same way as we do with objective value—in this case, morality. If we accept that being a good person or doing the right thing—whether it is through maximizing happiness or following our moral obligations—is important, then why should we compromise that idea by giving equal value to what an individual finds subjectively meaningful? The answer is that meaningfulness is what gives an individual purpose. It is an individual's reason for living and doing anything in life. It is an important aspect of human life. We all need to find our motivation in life, because if not, we would not be able to do anything. And it is

simply not the case that everyone will find this kind of motivation in moral life, nor do they necessarily have to.

As shown in Chapter 1, there are other legitimate reasons for acting that can all be meaningful in their own way. Philosophy and science can help us identify important things like truth and objective value, but those by themselves cannot provide the motivation an individual needs to continue on living. We have seen that some individuals might find meaning and motivation in living an ethical life, in doing the right thing and making the world a better place, but objective value alone will not be the only source of motivation for anyone—individuals will always have to find a subjective reason for living any kind of life. Thus, when we think about duty and moral purpose, even if we acknowledge that these are of great importance, we also have to consider subjective values and motivations.

### **WOLF’S “FALSE DICHOTOMY”**

In her lectures, “Meaning in Life and Why It Matters,” Wolf highlights an important mistake that is widely seen in philosophy, namely, that philosophical models of human psychology and motivation usually only account for two types of motivation: one that is self-interested and another that is rationally driven, or non-personal. But these are neither the only forms of human motivation, nor the main ones. We have other motivations besides the ones that directly benefit us or the ones that are just ‘objectively’ valuable. We care about ourselves, and we care about doing morally right things, but we also care about other things.

As explained before, in the cases of loving others and caring about their well-being, there are often no rational reasons involved, nor self-interested ones. Our interest for other valuable things, like art, sports, etc., are also not necessarily rational. For example, athletes often suffer



from serious injuries and even health conditions but put those worries aside in order to continue with their ambitions. It would be more rational *and* self-interested if they were to just give up and pursue other goals. But there is something greater that is motivating them, like their own ambition, goals, and passion. Thus, we can see that there are clearly other important sources of motivation for individuals, and as Wolf explains, “we might say that the reasons and motives left out by the [self-interested and rational] models are the most important and central ones in our lives. They are reasons and motives that engage us in the activities that make our lives worth living” (74). This suggests that many of these other reasons for action, like love, beauty, spontaneity, as explained above, are not inconsequential, secondary reasons for acting in our lives, but can in fact be our main reasons for doing anything. Additionally, this type of reasons can also be valuable in themselves. In this sense, we can see that the human psyche and what motivates us is much more complicated than being motivated by just non-personal or self-interested reasons. As Wolf claims, for example,

Reasons of love—whether of human individuals, other living creatures, or activities, ideas, or objects of other sorts—have a distinct and important role in our lives ... Insofar as we fail to recognize and appreciate the legitimacy and value of these reasons, we misunderstand ourselves, our values and distort our concerns (76).

This is what I mean when I say that moral theories have the potential to disregard a part of us that makes us human. We are often driven by passion and love, ambitions and aspirations, and these need not be self-interested nor rational. I will call this type of reasons, reasons of *meaning*.

### **HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY TRUE MEANINGFULNESS?**

In her essay, “Meaning and Morality,” Wolf highlights Williams’ criticism against utilitarianism, namely, that it threatens to destroy a person’s integrity. She points out that many

philosophers have interpreted Williams' point as pertaining to finding happiness in life, and how moral theories hinder this goal. However, Wolf argues that Williams' concern for integrity has more to do with meaningfulness than with happiness. On this, she explains that it is important to make the distinction between meaning and happiness. As Wolf shows in her paper, an individual might be happy in her life and have no meaning. On the other hand, an individual might live a meaningful life and be deeply miserable. She explains, "as Camus pointed out, if a thing is worth living for, it may also be worth dying for, and *a fortiori* it may be worth living with much pain and sorrow for. Having a reason to live, then, and a reason to care about the world in which one lives, is linked fundamentally not with happiness but with meaning" (303). For this reason, moral theory, if it is to be effective, persuasive, and motivating, needs to find a balance between meaningfulness and morality. On this, Wolf has repeatedly claimed that normative ethical theories constantly threaten a person's pursuit of meaningfulness and purpose in life. As she explains in "Moral Saints," morality often threatens a person's identity, purpose, and personal values, and, in turn, their meaning in life. This poses a serious problem for moral theories since, as previously shown, individuals first need to find their own personal motivation in order to do anything else. As Wolf explains,

According to Williams it is absurd, or at any rate, unreasonable for morality to insist that a person do X or refrain from Y even at the cost of robbing himself of what gives meaning to his life. Since, however, as Williams sees it, morality is committed to doing just that, morality, if it is to be thought of as an institution to which we are to be universally, unconditionally and proudly committed, is in serious trouble (300).

In this sense, if life has no meaning, then it has no reason for doing anything.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that subjective value is extremely important to find meaningfulness. What is valuable to me might not be valuable to someone else. What motivates me to get up in the morning is not the same as what would motivate someone else.

Nevertheless, I do not fully get to choose what I find valuable. We all have different interests, talents, purposes. We all have things we are naturally good at and that we naturally enjoy. As Wolf shows, “paradigmatic examples of what gives meaning to people’s lives are vocations, to which one feels oneself called, and close relationships with people to whom one feels oneself drawn” (303). For this reason, a good account of meaningfulness in life needs to include room for subjective value.

It is true, however, that reasons of meaning have a much deeper complexity than self-interested and non-personal reasons. As previously mentioned, beauty cannot be easily defined, and our love can be misplaced in people and objects that are not worthy of it. It is much harder to identify through these sorts of motivations the things that will actually give meaningfulness to our lives. The point here, however, is that this type of motivations and reasons actually exist and are more prevalent than what moral philosophy has previously considered. Still, Wolf acknowledges this problem for this subset of reasons that Frankfurt and Chappell fail to address, which is the probability of being motivated by these reasons and ending up loving atrocious people or things, or being a mediocre, unsuccessful artist that neglected everything else that was valuable in her life. That is, she acknowledges that these motivations can threaten something like moral decency. It could be said, however, that whether these actions are justified is just a matter of luck, namely, moral luck. Nevertheless, as Wolf argues, there is value in acknowledging and being motivated by these reasons, regardless of whatever outcome these values might lead to. Wolf points out that us allowing ourselves to be motivated by reasons of meaning is valuable and meaningful enough. As she puts it, “proneness to being moved and guided by such reasons, I believe, is at the core of our ability to live meaningful lives” (77). This suggests that we might be able to find meaning simply by letting ourselves be motivated by these reasons.

As mentioned above, philosophical models of human psychology only take into account two forms of motivation—one that is self-interested and another that is rational, or non-personal. This account ends up completely ignoring a source of motivation that is much more important to life, a motivation that comes from reasons of meaning. We all have passions and goals that are not rooted in self-interest or rationality. As Wolf explains it, “being able to pursue a passion adds something distinctive and deeply good to life” (81). Thus, passions and goals provide individuals with a distinctive type of meaning. This type of meaning, however, is neither based on happiness nor living a morally good life. As mentioned, meaningfulness, as Wolf defines it, does not equate to happiness, since the greatest things we can achieve, the accomplishments we are most proud of, require the biggest sacrifices, dedication, and pain. Wolf points out that “the fact that most of us would willingly put up with a great deal of stress, anxiety, and vulnerability to pain in order to pursue our passions can be seen as providing support for the idea that fulfillment is indeed a great and distinctive good in life” (82). In this way, Wolf shows that passions and goals can fulfill an individual in a more meaningful way than morality or merely self-fulfillment.

Nevertheless, Wolf highlights the fact that meaningfulness does not solely rely on a pure subjective attraction for activities or ideas. That is, it is not only up to the individual to define what would be truly meaningful in their lives. Thus, the individual would not be able to find meaning in inconsequential, mundane, or atrocious activities or ideas. For example, if an individual were to only find passion or motivation in doing crossword puzzles all day, or perhaps in doing something more appalling like human trafficking or drug dealing, and they were to believe that these activities can actually give meaning to their lives, they would be wrong. What would actually give an individual true meaningfulness in their lives is both that the activity or idea has a subjective feeling of fulfillment for the individual and that her activities or ideals are

based or inspired by something greater than herself. As Wolf puts it in the *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, “we might understand the view as one that recommends involvement in something *more important* than ourselves—something, in other words, that is larger than ourselves not in size but in value” (85). In this way, having a subjective appeal towards the activity or ideal the individual is interested in is not enough to provide her with true meaningfulness. The activity or ideal has to be objectively valuable in some way.

Thus, the types of reasons that motivate us and give our lives meaning are those that include both subjective and objective components. For example, Wolf shows that “reasons of love” are usually inspired by people, objects, or actions that are both deeply loved and appreciated by us and are *worthy* of that love. We can only find meaningfulness in these activities or objects when we are actively engaged with them and are worthwhile at the same time. In this sense, people, objects, or activities need to have both subjective and objective value in order to provide the individual with true meaningfulness. Wolf shows that

The condition that says that meaning involves engaging with the (worthy) object of love in a positive way is meant to make clear that mere passive recognition and positive attitude toward an object’s or activity’s value are not sufficient for a meaningful life. One must be able to be in some sort of relationship with the valuable object of one’s attention—to create it, protect it, promote it, honor it, or, more generally, to actively affirm it in some way or other (78-9).

This highlights the fact that in order for something to give our lives meaning, it has to be personally valued by the individual and has to also be valuable beyond the individual. Thus, meaningfulness cannot be found in things that are inconsequential, dull, or repugnant. For example, reasons of love cannot contribute to the meaningfulness in our lives if they are inspired by someone that is evil, abusive, or violent. In this sense, love can give meaning to one’s life, but only if that love is directed at someone or something that is worthy of it.

Nevertheless, the question remains: what does it mean for an object, activity, or person to be worthwhile? Wolf points to the idea of “objective attraction” to answer this question. Objective attraction, in the way that Wolf describes, comes from something that would be considered independently valuable from oneself. The value of the object has to be greater than the value of the individual. For example, an individual might be passionate about contributing to the world of classical music, whether or not this brings some great benefit or success to her. This qualifies to reasons of meaning since the individual would be said to not be pursuing those goals neither for self-benefit nor non-personal reasons, just for a love for the craft. Additionally, her goals are independently valuable because, as explained above by Chappell, the individual would be motivated by reasons of beauty, by simply bringing something beautiful and engaging to the world. The world of classical music, then, is something ‘bigger’ than the individual since it can provide others with relaxation, comfort, and even inspiration.

Furthermore, Wolf explains that projects and activities can be considered worthwhile when they are both useful and challenging. She shows that “an activity’s or project’s suitability as a meaning provider rises as it becomes more challenging, or offers a greater opportunity for a person to develop her powers or realize her potential” (97). This suggests that objectively valuable projects are those that have a greater goal or endpoint in mind and that can contribute to the success or growth of an individual. In this sense, some things can be considered to be valuable independently of ourselves but are not valuable to the point that we should dedicate our lives to them. For example, it can be said that keeping one’s house clean is a valuable activity, but it would not be considered productive to only dedicate our lives to always keeping one’s house clean. Ultimately, keeping one’s house clean does not contribute to some higher, more valuable goal. This suggests that there can be valuable activities or things that do not contribute

to the meaningfulness in one's life. True meaningfulness comes from activities or things that contribute to a higher goal.

Wolf provides a helpful guideline that can help us find what it means for something to have objective value. She explains that we can find objective value by finding something that is valuable independently of ourselves, and the standard of judgement for determining value must also be partly independent. The importance of engaging with objects or activities that are independently valuable than oneself comes from the fact that it helps us acknowledge that our lives are not particularly more valuable than others' and that what we subjectively value should not always come first. As Wolf puts it,

A meaningful life is one that would not be considered pointless or gratuitous, even from an impartial perspective. Living in a way that connects positively with objects, people, and activities that have value independent of oneself harmonizes with the fact that one's own perspective and existence have no privileged status in the universe. This is why engagement with things that have value independent of oneself can contribute to the meaningfulness of one's life in a way that activities directed at one's own good and valuable in no other ways do not (101).

With this, it could be said that meaningfulness gets its footing from things that have objective value and that are worthwhile, like morality, but it still needs the subjective component in order to get the individual motivated and engaged.

Although Wolf acknowledges that the concept of objective value can be somewhat obscure and uncertain. Many philosophical accounts on the subject do not entirely agree on what it means for something to have objective value, or how we can define objective value in the first place. Wolf notes that there can be helpful starting points in some theories that can lead us to successfully determine what kinds of things are objectively valuable. One of these, she claims, is by considering hypothetical responses on questions of value given by some kind of idealized group. She explains that "whether something is valuable, according to such a view, is associated

with the claim that it *would* be valued by someone sufficiently rational, perceptive, sensitive, and knowledgeable to be, as John Stuart Mill would say, ‘a competent judge’” (105). Nonetheless, Wolf notes that this view can still be problematic since it is not entirely clear how some ‘objective judge’ would easily appeal to many individuals about what they should think to be objectively valuable. Ultimately, Wolf seems to be unsure about what guideline would be the most reliable for us when looking for objective value.

Linda Zagzebski, on the other hand, also introduces a helpful guideline that can help individuals find what they personally value in life, especially when it comes to things that can also be considered to be objectively valuable. In “The Moral Significance of Admiration,” Zagzebski points out the helpful qualities that a feeling of admiration can have in finding what kind of objectively valuable things we can be attracted to. She explains that “admiration typically includes the desire to emulate, and that makes it more than mere approval” (205). This suggests that admiration mirrors what we value. Furthermore, Zagzebski emphasizes that although virtue can be admirable, admiration does not necessarily always equate to virtue. This is important to point out since the fact that virtue can be something that we typically admire can help show that admiration usually leads us to objects or activities that can be considered to be objectively valuable. To further explain this, Zagzebski makes the distinction between admiration and desire. She explains that desire is often related to things that are self-beneficial and can only contribute to one’s own well-being or pleasure, whereas admiration is often directed at things that we think have some ‘higher’ value—i.e., a value independent of ourselves. As Zagzebski shows,

We desire happiness, health, love and friendship, and a purposeful life, but it would be odd to call any of these goods admirable. We admire generosity, courage, self-control, intellectual humility, and other virtues, but we would call them desirable only as the conclusion of an argument that not everyone would accept (205-6).



On this, however, it is important to note that Zagzebski makes this desire/admiration distinction to specifically show the relationship that admiration has with virtue—namely, that it is something that we might either want to emulate or minimize. On the other hand, Wolf uses the idea of “objective attractiveness” to shed light on the importance of meaningfulness in one’s life. Still, Zagzebski’s admiration/desire distinction, as mentioned above, is helpful to guide an individual to find what is personally valuable to her. Ultimately, as Zagzebski shows, individuals would want to emulate whatever it is they find admirable, and it is not necessarily because those things will bring them any type of pleasure or self-benefit, but because they are seen as objectively valuable.

#### **PROBLEMS WITH WOLF’S THEORY**

Although Wolf does a great job of emphasizing the importance of meaningfulness in life and defining what can be considered to be truly meaningful, her theory falls short in explaining *how* one can create a meaningful life. It is true that philosophical theories of objective value are not entirely clear or helpful in helping us find those things. Ultimately, this means that finding true meaningfulness can become difficult for the individual. We can look at instances of admiration, and we can look at theories of objective value, but these might not always help us find what would be truly meaningful *for us*. For example, we might admire someone who is athletic, and admire their accomplishments and dedication, but that does not necessarily mean that we would want to dedicate our lives to playing sports, or that we might find meaningfulness in those activities. That is, we might recognize that athletics has value in itself, but we might not be subjectively attracted to it. Similarly, we might follow the guidelines provided by theories of

objective value to find that doing what is morally good, for example, will always be valuable in itself. But, as shown above, a life dedicated to doing what is morally good will not be meaningful to everyone.

It seems that what we need is a theory that will simultaneously help us find a life that is motivating to us and valuable in itself—i.e., a life that is meaningful. I argue that we can find a helpful guideline on how to develop such a theory if we turn to existentialism. When engaging in existentialist theories, one's goal is ultimately to find a way for an individual to define her own identity.<sup>15</sup> Still, it is important to note that a very important worry about existentialism that came up when the theory was barely finding prominence was that existentialism could lead to solipsism, or the idea that the self is the only thing that matters in the world. Nevertheless, it has since been argued that existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir do highlight the importance of considering and promoting objects or activities that are valuable independently from oneself, and that considering the good of others is important when defining meaningfulness in our lives.

Simone de Beauvoir later expanded on these ideas in her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Essentially, Sartre and Beauvoir's process for defining one's identity, or meaning, relies on the idea that an individual needs to acknowledge three concepts of the self: the self's facticity (or the person's historical background or origins), transcendence (the person's freedom or autonomy), and ethics (our consideration for the good of others). In this sense, the individual needs to understand the parts of herself that cannot be changed—e.g., her race, socioeconomic status, cultural background—and find the parts of herself that she can personally define—e.g., her

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<sup>15</sup> I argue that identity, in this sense, can be equated to Wolf's conception of meaningfulness, since existential identity greatly considers what would be a person's life's projects and goals and what they would want to dedicate their lives to do, while it also considers the things the individual values and would want to promote throughout her life.

values, ideas, projects, goals, etc.—and then live a life that reflects these, but she can only define those values and projects while also taking into consideration the well-being and value of others. In this sense, Sartre’s view of the ethical component of individuals (the ‘for-others,’ as he called it) has been linked to Hegel’s idea of ‘intersubjective recognition.’ Although Sartre’s concern for objective value mostly stems from a concern about moral value, I believe his theory can also lead us to find other types of objective value, since we can also look at the idea that it is important to take other people’s value into consideration and also think about value that is independent of oneself. In this sense, in a similar way to Wolf, existentialist theories also urge the individual to look for both subjective and objective value. I will expand on this argument in the next chapter.

### CHAPTER 3: EXISTENTIALIST ETHICS AND THE REVERSE PRIORITY VIEW

In the previous chapters, I have outlined the important aspects of a good life and the importance of one's own pursuit of meaningfulness. Specifically, I have shown that there are other things besides morality and promoting the moral good—things such as beauty, love, spontaneity, among others—that bring objective value and contribute to meaning in someone's life. I have also shown how these values can only contribute to meaningfulness in a person's life if that person also subjectively values the thing and is motivated by it. Thus, I have shown that meaningfulness can only stem from both objective worth and subjective appeal. Furthermore, I have shown how normative ethical theories, when basing their ideals on the moralistic view<sup>16</sup>, fail to account for the importance of having a subjective component in our values. In this sense, they fail to account for the importance of finding meaningfulness in life and, in turn, fail to consider how this contributes to the motivation that anyone has to keep on living.

Prominent normative ethical theories seem to automatically assume that meaningfulness in life can only come from living a morally good life and promoting the moral good, or at the very least, from pursuing some form of objective value. However, as has been shown by Chappell, Frankfurt, and especially Williams and Wolf, meaningfulness can come from so many other values, besides morality, and from other ways of living. Nevertheless, although these philosophers point to important aspects of meaningfulness and other values in life, they still miss something in their argument. They fail to explain how different kinds of values can interact with morality and how moral values can contribute to different versions of meaningfulness.

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<sup>16</sup> My aim here is not to criticize any particular theory or any specific moral theorist. My criticism is aimed at the overarching ideology surrounding these theories, namely, the ideology that leads to believe that it is better to do the morally good thing, under all circumstances, at all times.

Furthermore, I have argued that although Wolf comes closer to describing what true meaningfulness looks like for the individual, she fails to give any kind of guideline to how one can create meaningfulness for oneself, and, again, fails to account for the fact that moral considerations are still important. For this reason, in this chapter, I will turn to 20<sup>th</sup> Century existentialism. I will show how existentialist identity is similar to Wolf's conception of meaningfulness. Additionally, I will show how the guideline that philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir give for finding one's existentialist identity can complement Wolf's system of meaningfulness. I will show how this existentialist system is superior and especially essential to consider when forming normative ethical theories because they also account for the importance of moral considerations and promoting the moral good in the world. Finally, I will describe my conception of the "reverse priority view," and how this view can eventually help us develop a moral theory that would not only guide us through moral situations but would also give a more dignified place to the individual and give more room for her to find her own meaning.

In this chapter, I will first explain the way in which existentialism shows how to find our identity. I will explain how they believe that our identity has to be 'authentic'—meaning, authentically ours, considering our facticity, transcendence, and responsibility towards others. I will explain how this relates to the Wolfian conception of meaningfulness. Then, I will explain how we can derive an ethics from the forms of existentialism found in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Finally, I will expand on what I call the "reverse priority view" and explain how existentialism can help us create such a theory.

## MEANINGFULNESS AND EXISTENTIALIST IDENTITY

The kind of existentialism that I find particularly appealing, and the I believe best complements Wolf's conception of meaningfulness, is the existentialism that we find in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. It is an existentialism that stems from the idea that "existence precedes essence"—Sartre's famous slogan that he first presented in his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* at the Club Maintenant in Paris in 1945. This idea became the slogan of 20<sup>th</sup> Century existentialism and of Sartre's philosophy. He explains, "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterward" (22). This slogan serves to introduce what is most distinctive of existentialism, namely, the idea that no general, formal account of human nature can be given, since that meaning is decided in and through existing itself. Consequently, existentialism rejects the claim that there is such thing as human nature, in the sense that we might find in Aristotle's philosophy or through various types of religion. As Sartre explains, "Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (22). Thus, there is no set purpose for why we exist in the world, and there are no set characteristics that define human nature. There is no general definition of what it means to be human. There are no sets of values that human beings are instinctively drawn to. Values are instead found and defined only through the process of existing. For this reason, the existentialists believe that human freedom is the most intrinsically valuable thing that we ought to protect at all costs. It is only through our freedom that we can define our own values.

There are two important factors that existentialists consider through the process of defining oneself, namely, what they call *facticity* and *transcendence*. The former is meant to highlight the aspects of the self that one cannot change, such as height, race, class, nationality, family background, etc. In this sense, ‘facticity’ can essentially be understood as our physical and historical origins. On the other hand, transcendence refers to the attitude toward the self that is characteristic of practical engagement in the world—which essentially represents the freedom and autonomy we have to define ourselves. These two concepts are important to consider since they both encompass the core of the individual. In this sense, when the individual undergoes the process of defining herself, she needs to consider both the parts of herself that she cannot change but will still affect who she becomes (her origins) and the parts of herself that she will be able to define for herself (her freedom or autonomy).

An individual’s origins<sup>17</sup>, in the existentialist sense, tend to manifest through moods, exposure to ideas, beliefs, one’s understanding and view of the world, and, in the case of one’s social properties, in the opportunities and position that one is given in the world. In this way, one’s facticity can feel like a kind of burden for the individual. It represents all the aspects of the self that one brings into the world. It also tends to represent the weight of having to exist. Both Sartre and Beauvoir explain that this aspect of the self can end up fully encompassing the individual. This means that the individual can end up believing that her factual properties are all that can be true about who she is, and there is no going beyond those properties. In this sense, these aspects of the individual’s facticity may appear precisely as that which defines or determines who she is. However, from the existentialist point of view, this would be a mistake—*not* because these aspects of a person’s being are not real or factual, but because the individual

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<sup>17</sup> I will be using the concepts of ‘origins’ and ‘facticity,’ as well as ‘transcendence’ and ‘freedom’ or ‘autonomy’ interchangeably throughout.

cannot solely be defined in this factual way. The individual is more dynamic and fluid. If the individual ends up asserting only the origins from which she came into the world and not her freedom, she would be acting in what Sartre calls ‘bad faith’—which is an attempt to evade the responsibility of discovering and understanding one’s authentic self. This would mean that the individual is rejecting her freedom to define herself. Instead, an individual’s origins are meant to be *interpreted* by the individual. In this sense, the individual is meant to decide what these unchangeable aspects of her life mean for her. It is only in this way that the individual can begin to assert her freedom.

Moreover, ‘transcendence’ happens when an individual chooses the attitude, action, or stance she would like to take when presented with any given situation, object, or idea. In this sense, things present themselves not as indifferent givens, but as things with the potential for meaning, whether that is salient, expedient, obstructive, and so on. To speak of freedom here is to individuate that the agent “goes beyond” what simply is (her origins) and goes toward what can be (the different possibilities of being). The factual—including the agent’s own properties—always emerges in light of the possible, where the possible is not a function of anonymous forces but a function of the agent’s *choice* and *decision*. Nevertheless, transcendence still interacts with the individual’s facticity. As explained above, one way in which this might happen is in the way that the individual chooses to interpret the aspects of herself that make up her facticity. Another way in which this happens is through the process of transcendence itself. For example, I have the freedom to define my own projects, aims, ideas, and being, but these will always be constrained to the world around me and the things about myself that I cannot change. In this sense, it is through the projects that we define for ourselves that the world is revealed and takes on meaning, but those projects are themselves factic and situated.



Sartre and Beauvoir both put much importance on recognizing human freedom since recognizing and asserting our freedom is what will give the agent a more dignified place in philosophical thought. As Sartre explains, “What we mean to say is that man first exists; that is, that man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something that projects itself into a future, and is conscious of doing so. Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower” (23). This is an important point since it highlights the fact that human values have subjective components that attract us to them and motivate us to protect them. It acknowledges the complexity of the human psyche and understands the importance of subjectivity in our values. However, the existentialists still acknowledge, in the same way as Wolf does, that the values we define for ourselves still have to consider the importance of protecting other people’s freedom, as I explain below. This is important since the outline towards meaningfulness that we can find in existentialism can also be helpful in beginning to understand our own ethical responsibilities.

Nevertheless, Sartre’s idea that “existence precedes essence” highlights the existentialist claim that the individual is solely responsible for creating her own essence—her identity, being, and self. She does this through the choices she freely makes. In practice, Beauvoir explains that the process of defining one’s own values is done by both choosing those values and by committing to them. Thus, it is only through the process of asserting one’s own choices, following one’s own projects, and protecting one’s own principles, while also keeping our commitment to those, that an individual can define her identity and create her own values. In this sense, it is through a repeated endorsement of the same goals and values that these become embedded in our cognitive systems through a ‘sedimentation’ process and end up defining our identity. Additionally, in the existentialist view, it is only through fully asserting one’s own

freedom and interpreting one's origins that one can truly be 'authentic' in who they are. Ultimately, the goal that is outlined by existentialism is that an individual ought to reach 'authenticity.'

As explained above, if the individual were to only assert her origins, she would be acting in 'bad faith.' This means that she would be inauthentic. It is only through the process of asserting our own freedom and continuing our commitment to our values that one can be truly authentic. Authenticity, however, does not stem from the idea that there is a 'right' way to live for everyone. Instead, it emphasizes the importance that what one becomes is one's own responsibility. Thus, authenticity indicates a certain kind of integrity—it encompasses my whole being and the projects and goals I choose to engage in. In this way, to be authentic can also be thought as being autonomous. I argue that this directly relates not only to Williams' understanding of personal integrity but also to Wolf's conception of meaningfulness. The idea that acting in 'bad faith' entails neglecting the freedom we have to define ourselves is directly parallel to the concern that a lack of meaningfulness might destroy the motivation we have to keep on living. In this sense, just as the existentialists seem to give us the imperative to define our values and to follow our own projects, the importance that Wolf gives to meaningfulness highlights the necessity to find and protect our own values in our lives. It is in this way that existentialism seems to give us an outline for how to define meaningfulness in our lives. Furthermore, it is through the connection between the freedom and responsibility to define ourselves and the necessity for recognizing the freedom and worth of others that we can find true authenticity and, in turn, meaningfulness as Wolf describes. I will expand on how this ethical responsibility unravels in the next section. Nevertheless, we can see that both existentialist

identity and Wolf's conception of meaningfulness both require a consideration of both subjective and objective value.

## **EXISTENTIALIST ETHICS**

Seeing the criticisms received by Sartre after the publishing of *Being and Nothingness*, Simone de Beauvoir published *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Here, she explains the ethical responsibility that can be derived from existentialist philosophy. Although there was a worry at the time that existentialist theory might lead to solipsism—that it might lead to the idea that ‘authenticity’ can be found in committing to being anything, even a Nazi, human trafficker, drug dealer, etc.—Beauvoir showed that authenticity could not be possible without considering our moral and ethical responsibilities. She showed that asserting the identity of a Nazi as being authentic would only be possible under bad faith. Additionally, many other interpreters of Sartre have shown that authenticity is also concerned with a consideration of certain moral responsibilities. Beauvoir and others have shown that authenticity can be reached not only by committing to and respecting our own freedom to become anything, but also by committing to and respecting the freedom of others. In this sense, it could be argued that moral considerations and ethical responsibility are part of our facticity. Thus, freedom, in the existentialist sense, finds its limits when we consider the ethical responsibility that comes with our existence.

One way to describe the recognition of ethical responsibilities that we find in existentialism is by acknowledging that there is a part of existence that we cannot ignore or transcend. This relates to the fact that we share the world with other living things and our actions will affect those we share the world with. Thus, we have a responsibility towards them to be mindful and respectful of their freedom. We cannot transcend this situation because there is no

way in which we can overcome the fact that we are not alone in the world. We cannot ignore this situation because that would be to assume that our freedom and our being could be more important than the freedom of others, which is simply not the case. Thus, this responsibility remains. For this reason, I argue that the existentialist view can further complement Wolf's conception of meaningfulness. Nevertheless, I argue that 'existentialist identity' is superior because just as it outlines a path towards meaningfulness, it also acknowledges the fact that we still have ethical responsibilities. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre explains that the responsibility he claims we have towards our freedom is not only directed at us but is also directed toward the freedom of others. As he describes, "the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" (23). In this sense, the person not only ought to make direct choices for herself and commit to those choices. She also has to understand the importance of other people's freedom, and that not one person's freedom is more valuable than another. It is here that we start to see the ethics in existentialism.

Moreover, Beauvoir further explains in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* the relationship between the individual and the world—i.e., the relationship between identity and morality. This is an important relation to establish since this is what will ultimately give the individual a more dignified place in moral thought. In this sense, understanding the fact that the world not only encompasses what is presented to the individual—everything that is presented externally—but the fact that the individual is also presented to the world and that he embodies a distinctive subjectivity is what will give the individual room to define her own projects, aims, and goals, and not just simply give her the purpose and responsibility of promoting the good in the world.

This addresses the fact that moral philosophy has historically placed a greater importance on the external world—which is a consideration that has widely intended to keep the self in check and avoid the concerns of solipsism. Normative ethical theories have the potential of asking too much sacrifice from the individual. This tends to happen for many moral philosophers since there is a worry that giving the self too much importance might lead to corruption and a disregard for morality. However, Beauvoir points out that this is not necessarily what would happen. She explains, “in spite of so many stubborn lies, at every moment, at every opportunity, the truth comes to light, the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my bond with the world, of my freedom and my servitude, of the insignificance and the sovereign importance of each man and all men” (8). This highlights the existentialist idea that one cannot live authentically in the world without living with one’s ethical responsibilities and considerations. We ultimately have a responsibility for others. We ought to acknowledge this responsibility and learn to respect others’ own being and their own freedom. With this, existentialists show that there are ways in which we can find balance between individualism and morality.

Additionally, Beauvoir also expands on the path for creating one’s own values. As explained, meaning and value are completely dependent on the relationship that exists between individuals and the world. It only comes from within, not from without, as many philosophers assume. As Beauvoir shows, “it is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged” (14). This suggests that values only spring up based on the projects and goals that individuals set for themselves. This can apply to groups of individuals and to societies, where they come to a common consensus in which they decide what priorities and what ends they choose to establish. However, these can only be considered acceptable, under existentialism, if they respect and

protect the freedom of others. As Beauvoir puts it, “an ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all” (17). This points to the fact that although we might all live independently of each other and our aims and goals can be ones that do not necessarily involve others, it does not mean that we will not have a responsibility for others. For example, maybe I choose to be a stay-at-home parent, because that brings value to my life. But let’s assume I like to take long showers in the morning. Doing something like this would be unethical because I would be indirectly taking away from communities that greatly need it. Avoiding taking long showers in the morning would be a way in which I can abide to important moral considerations.

This further highlights the fact that we still share the world with other living things. Even if our projects and goals will not directly affect them, our choices, and our existence in general, most definitely will, even if it is in some small, indirect way. Thus, given the fact that we live in a world with other living things and, as mentioned above, our actions will more often than not affect the world around us, the way in which we create values comes with certain responsibilities. The values we choose depend on the goals and projects we set for ourselves, but those cannot be created by us without considering the impact and the importance of our relations with others. It seems to me that this is the way in which some form of objective value can be found in existentialist theory.

On this, Beauvoir gives as an example the way in which people who are oppressed rise up in rebellion. They recognize their worth as being the same as their oppressor’s, assert their freedom, and see the injustice of their situation. In this way, they realize that there is something wrong with the order of things—this is not the way in which societies should function.

Therefore, in order to create change, they push for ideas and reforms that will bring justice to all. They put together systems and institutions that will promote equity and eliminate injustice. These systems become valuable in the society by virtue of the need to correct injustice. As Beauvoir puts it,

It is the need of people, the revolt of a class, which define aims and goals. It is from within this rejected situation, in the light of this rejection, that a new state appears as desirable; only the will of men divides; and it is on the basis of a certain individual act of rooting itself in the historical and economic world that words as goals, progress, efficacy, success, failure, action, adversaries, instruments, and obstacles, have a meaning. Then certain acts can be regarded as good and others as bad (18).

Thus, it is through the projects that individuals and societies set for themselves that *external* value surges in the world. In this sense, it seems that for Beauvoir, and for the existentialists, objective and subjective value are somewhat interconnected. For them, objective value exists but only in the needs of society, as explained above, and in the form of the ethical responsibilities we have towards others. As Beauvoir puts it, “subjectivity is re-absorbed into the objectivity of the given world. Revolt, need, hope, rejection, and desire are only the resultants of external forces” (19). Thus, although existentialist values are said to derive from subjective preferences and from the identities that individuals define for themselves, there is one important value that is set for us regardless of what life we choose to live, and that seems to be moral value.

However, utility and value can only come through circumstance, depending on what is needed in each situation. Thus, the ‘right’ way to act in any situation solely depends on the situation and the individual that is facing it. As Beauvoir explains, “for existentialism, it is not impersonal, universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men, projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situation whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself” (17). The right way to act depends on what the

individual values, what her projects are, and the extremity of the situation—e.g., how much freedom is at risk, for how many people, and how much of an impact would my choices have on whether that freedom is protected or not. For example, let us imagine a parent that has a pregnant partner—call him Dan. He is a member of the United Nations, currently working to provide water to underserved communities during a worldwide water crisis, and he is an integral part of the negotiations. His partner ends up getting into an accident in the middle of the negotiations and is at risk of losing their baby. He worries and feels he needs to be there for his family in case anything happens, which would mean leaving the negotiations to fly to another city and be with his family. An example like this poses three serious problems for him: 1) the freedom and well-being of others greatly depends on the negotiations he is a part of; 2) being a part of these negotiations is important to him and is part of what he considers to be his ‘project’; 3) he believes his family, who are extremely valuable to him, are in great risk, and he is afraid to lose them. Here, we have different kinds of values competing against one another. Additionally, our intuitions might not be of great help in guiding us to what would be the ‘right’ thing to do. We know what prominent normative ethical theories would say, but what would the existentialist say? I do not think the answer is clear here. Protecting the freedom of others—through providing essential resources for life—is important, but protecting what we value is crucial to keep our motivation to live. If Dan loses his family, he might not have the motivation to keep on working on the negotiations anyway. I will expand on how to think through this problem below.

### **THE REVERSE PRIORITY VIEW**



In the previous sections, I have described how the existentialists outline a path to finding meaningfulness in life, through what they call ‘authenticity.’ Furthermore, I have explained how they believe values are formed, how we can find a way to know what would be considered as *external* values, and how we can then know what our ethical responsibilities are. Lastly, I have shown that, in practice, an ethics derived from existentialism is not as straight forward for guiding us through complex moral situations. However, I argue that we can interpret existentialist ethics to say that what is ‘right’ in any moral situation would depend on the individuals involved, what their values are, and the extremity of the situation. I argue that this is a great step into understanding what I call the “reverse priority view.” In this view, I argue that normative ethical theories that fully account for the integrity of the agent and the importance of meaningfulness in life need to first make room for the individual, allow her to define her version of meaningfulness in life, and then outline the moral responsibilities that she, as an individual moral agent, might have. This will give the moral agent a more dignified place in moral theory.

Just as in existentialist ethics, a reverse priority view should first be able to guide us through the process of finding what is a ‘good,’ meaningful life and then go on to explain how we can still address and respect our moral responsibilities. Existentialist ethics guide us through the first part and get us to the beginning of understanding what our moral responsibilities can look like. But it does not get us to fully understanding what morality should look like. However, as I have argued, it seems that the ‘right’ way to act and the way to respect our moral responsibilities depends solely on the situation that each individual is presented with at any given time. For example, let us go back to Dan’s situation. He has three important values competing in the situation presented. He has what could be interpreted as the moral responsibility to help provide to those in need, while also has the incentive to keep working on something that greatly

matters to him, but he also has his family (his personal, family values) at risk. I argue that in this situation, if we have values competing against each other, we can analyze the different outcomes that any possible action in this situation might bring. Then, we can consider exactly what we have control of.<sup>18</sup> For example, he is a crucial part of the negotiations, which means that his involvement, or lack thereof, can really affect the outcome of the negotiations and whether or not underserved communities will be able to receive a greater supply of water. We know that this both draws the ethical responsibility we might have to protect other people's freedom and the meaningfulness in Dan's life, as he deeply cares about doing this for his community. On the other hand, although his partner might currently be in some danger, and he is facing the possibility of losing his child, his being there with his family will not do anything to create one outcome or another. Thus, his agency will be more instrumental if he continues with the negotiations, and monitors his partner's progress remotely, rather than abandon his project to sit in a waiting room to only be able to hear in person what he would hear over the phone. In this way, he will be able to protect two of the competing values that are presented in this situation. Although he will not be protecting the third, we can know that there was no possibility of him being able to do so either way.

Nevertheless, how does this help us form a better normative ethical theory? On this, I argue that there is no set guideline that will help us understand what exactly are our moral 'duties.' Given that a theory like this would put much importance on a subjective account of values, I argue that there cannot be a list of rules—similar to the one Kant provides in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*—that can be provided to guide us through moral life. However, as I mentioned, I believe we can find guidance for identifying a theory that accounts

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<sup>18</sup> Here, I draw from Peter Railton's conception of "objectified subjective interests" as he explains in "Moral Realism," and I argue that his version of moral realism can help us further develop the reverse priority view.

for the reverse priority view if we look to philosophers like Peter Railton, and his moral realism, Philippa Foot, and maybe to some versions of moral particularism. In this sense, a normative ethical theory that is guided by the reverse priority view will mostly be able to provide a guideline to navigate different moral situations. It will help us understand how we can balance competing values in different situations.

On this, Railton provides a helpful understanding of what he calls “objectified subjective interests.” These can help us better understand what our actions might lead to and what we will be able to protect in different situations. Objectified subjective interests represent the kinds of actions that an individual can take in any particular situation depending on any particular need or goal she has. These actions are derived from a rational understanding of the natural facts that are presented to the individual and from an understanding of what her personal goals might be. On this, Railton shows that moral facts can be reduced to natural facts. Reducing moral facts to natural facts, for Railton, will help us better understand each situation. In this sense, Railton denies that we can know *a priori* whether moral propositions must be either true or false. Instead, there can be indeterminate moral propositions in any given situation. The first step in Railton’s moral realism is to give a naturalist account of value in terms of the attitudes of an ‘idealized’ version of ourselves—i.e., a version of ourselves that fully understands what our subjective interests might be and knows how to successfully promote those. Thus, in Railton’s view, subjective interests can be understood to be secondary qualities that supervene on the primary qualities of the perceiver. The complex set of relational, dispositional, and primary qualities is the reduction basis of the secondary quality. The reduction basis produces an objective notion that corresponds to, and helps explain, subjective interests. It is through a process like this that

we can have a better understanding of what a ‘right’ action might look like in any particular situation.

For example, in the case of Dan, we can assume—as we can assume with anyone—that his goal is to protect what is valuable to him. In this case, both his work and his family are at risk. We know that both are important to him, but when we analyze the situation, we find out that he really only has control over protecting one of the two things. Thus, if he were to consider the fact that although both things are important to him, he only has control over the outcome of one of them. This might help him decide and stay to continue the negotiations. However, imagine that he values his family more than he values his work. Maybe he does not care much about providing water to these communities, but he deeply cares about the well-being of his family. Does he have a duty to stay in that case? First, it would not be entirely clear why he would choose to be a part of projects like that if he did not deeply care about them, or at least care about them in some way. However, even if he really did not care for it, the truth of the situation still stands: He still has no control over what happens to his family but has control over the outcomes of the negotiations.

Furthermore, consider another example. Imagine a pregnant person—call her Lucy. She works for an organization that protects animals that are in danger of going extinct. She is about 32 weeks pregnant and finds out that a forest fire is going near a bird sanctuary that protects many different bird species that are in danger of going extinct. She deeply cares about protecting the birds, and the birds are extremely important for the ecosystem they live in, but she is also looking forward to being a mother and loves her child deeply. When she hears of the forest fire, she feels the urgency of running towards the sanctuary, through the forest fire, to save those birds, but this will put her child in great danger. What does she ought to do? Again, if we analyze

this situation, understand the different ways in which Lucy can act and what the outcomes of her actions could be, we can see that, being pregnant, she is the only one that currently has the ability to protect her child's well-being. On the other hand, given that she is part of an organization that is specifically dedicated to protecting animals in danger, we can assume that there are other individuals that can take on the task of saving those birds. In this sense, unlike the birds, Lucy's baby depends solely on her. Thus, the 'right' thing to do in this situation seems to be for Lucy to protect her baby and ask someone else to save the birds. In this case, we cannot say that it is Lucy's responsibility to save the birds, but it might be her responsibility—especially if she cares deeply about it—to save her child.

## **CONCERNS**

The reverse priority view is meant to point to the importance of promoting meaningfulness in life and how this contributes to the motivation we have to keep on living. It is meant to acknowledge the fact that there is a subjective component to value and that protecting what one values is an important part of why anyone does anything. In this sense, this view recognizes the complexity of the human psyche and acknowledges that there are other kinds of motivations—besides those that are self-involved or non-personal—that motivates us to do certain things. Furthermore, I have outlined—with the help of Peter Railton—the possibility of what a theory of morality that accounts for the reverse priority view might look like. I believe there is much more work to be done to expand on these ideas. However, my purpose here is to explain ways in which moral theory can start thinking about how to protect the integrity of the agent. I do not have the space here to further expand on this, but I would like to address some initial concerns that people might have regarding this theory.

First, I acknowledge that there can be the concern that a theory like this might end up leading to the extreme of fully protecting subjective values or of creating a morality that once again has the potential to threaten what is meaningful to us. On the former side, I argue that, as both Wolf and the existentialist show, an outline that can guide us to finding what is truly meaningful needs to account not only for subjective value but also for what can be considered to be objectively valuable. In the case of existentialism, we see that we can identify these values through our understanding of the importance of freedom. However, as Wolf, along with Chappell and Frankfurt, has shown, there are other values besides morality that can bring objective meaning into our lives. Additionally, we can identify those by knowing how they can positively enhance our experiences in life. For example, we know that art and music can help us process our emotions and maybe even relieve pain. Additionally, as explained above, spontaneity has the potential of opening our minds to new experiences and different perspectives that might not be so obvious to us. Finally, love is an essential part of life, and it is important to keep our motivation to live. Thus, we can see that the values we find in meaningfulness are not solely subjective.

However, a concern that might still arise is on what happens when we say we value things like drugs. I argue that we can see, through Railton's theory as well as Wolf's, that once we understand the repercussions that come with having a drug addiction, we would know that doing drugs will not give meaning to our lives. But what if we are not looking to actually consume drugs, we only want to sell them or distribute them? There, we can see through existentialism that we would be acting through some sort of 'bad faith' because dealing and distributing drugs significantly threatens other people's freedom. As we know, the war on drugs has been contributing to the corruption and poverty that is seen in Central and South America.

Thus, we can see through different understandings of meaningfulness that valuing something like drugs would not be encouraged in a view that aims to protect what brings meaning to a person's life. The objective, then, in this view, is not to simply promote what the individual subjectively values, but to promote the values that contribute to meaningfulness in her life.

Furthermore, on the possibility that objectivity can potentially threaten what is valuable to the agent, I would argue that there is not much possibility for that. The reverse priority view is meant to acknowledge that subjective value is important and gives it equal weight when deciding what a 'right' action might look like in any given situation. On this, I argue that what action an individual chooses to make in any given situation is still completely up to the individual. However, the goal will always be to make these decisions 'authentically.' The reverse priority view, and a moral theory that bases off of it, can only serve as guidance to what possibilities the agent has to act. For example, I argue that in Dan's case, even if he does care deeply about the work he does, it can still be possible to allow him to make the decision of leaving the negotiations to be with his family, even if there is not much he can do to ensure their well-being. Maybe he just deeply cares about being present, rather than about being able to do anything to change any potential outcome. In my view, he could still be allowed to do that, especially if not being there for his family can bring intense feelings of guilt and damage his mental well-being. In this sense, we can see that decisions like these are still left up to the individual, if they will contribute to promoting what is meaningful in their lives and what keeps them motivated to keep living. Thus, in this view, there are no imperatives.<sup>19</sup> The only imperatives that can be drawn, in this sense, are from authentically acting to protect what one values.

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<sup>19</sup> This is the feature of this theory which makes it a "reverse priority view," since it puts the individual moral agent and what she values *first*—i.e., it considers her values and motivations for living first—and then makes room for moral considerations.

With this, a question would be on how to create an outline for a normative ethical theory that accounts for the reverse priority view if we cannot create imperatives. On this, I want to clarify that there are no *positive* imperatives that can be derived from this theory, but I argue that we can still find *negative* ones. If we accept the view of the existentialist that we ought to respect other people's freedom as much as our own, we can see that there are certain actions that we have to keep away from that can potentially threaten the freedom of others. For example, in the case of taking a long shower in the morning, my actions have the potential to deprive certain communities of a very essential resource. Additionally, there is no real good reason for why I could be allowed to take long showers anyway. The purpose of taking showers is to promote personal hygiene, and I can do that by taking shorter ones. Even if I were to believe that there is some value in taking a long shower—for example, I might find it relaxing, or I might have a greater concern with personal hygiene that can only be addressed by taking long showers—we can see that I would be mistaken and that I can accomplish these same goals by doing other activities. For example, I can find relaxation through music, long walks, meditation, etc., or I can further promote my personal hygiene by washing my hands more frequently. Thus, we can see that I would have the negative duty to abstain from taking long showers.

Finally, another worry that can come up from this theory is on the problem of keeping oneself motivated to do what can be considered to be morally good. Again, if we look to our understanding of meaningfulness, and to the existentialist conception of authenticity, we can see that there is still personal value in doing things that can be considered to be morally good. For the existentialists, if I were to choose to ignore my moral responsibilities, or I simply do not care about them, I would be acting in 'bad faith' and can then not achieve authenticity. Furthermore, I argue that in the case of meaningfulness, even though Wolf does not address this directly, we can



further promote meaningfulness in life by being mindful of our moral responsibilities. There is still a certain kind of meaningful contentment in knowing that we are not interfering with other people's freedom. For example, something like schadenfreude stems mainly from a deep dissatisfaction with the self, which causes one to find happiness and satisfaction in knowing about the struggles of other people. Thus, meaningfulness and authenticity can only be created if we take into account our moral responsibilities.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have outlined the many different reasons for action that can contribute to meaningfulness in a person's life. I have shown how these considerations are important because we all need a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and this reason ought to always be a personal one. I have argued that prominent normative ethical theories, basing themselves on the ideology of moralism, are very limited in making these considerations. For this reason, I argue that we ought to think about completely restructuring our way of thinking about moral theory.

In Chapter 1, I argued that reasons of love, beauty, and even a version of anti-rationalism are good to consider when we think about creating meaningfulness in life. I explained how these can help promote the motivation we have for living and can give meaning to our lives. In Chapter 2, I expanded on Susan Wolf's objections to moralism. I explained her conception of meaningfulness and how she believes this to be an important feature of a good life. Nevertheless, I argued that her theory still falls short of providing a guideline for finding meaningfulness and how moral considerations still fit into that definition. Finally, in Chapter 3, I turned to the existentialists to show their own guideline for meaningfulness in life. I also explained how existentialism makes room for moral considerations. I, then, presented my reverse priority view. I explained how such a view is meant to give the individual moral agent a more dignified place in moral theory. I explained how normative ethical theories can be restructured to account for the reverse priority view. Lastly, I explained how a normative ethical theory might work when considering the reverse priority view. As explained, I do not have the room here to further expand on this theory. My aim here, however, is to show how one can begin to think about how a theory like this might work. I do look forward to expanding on this theory in future works.

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## VITA

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