



# Moral Monsters, Significance, and Meaning in Life

Chad Mason Stevenson<sup>1</sup> 

Accepted: 11 August 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

One popular way of informing, developing, and critiquing a theory about meaning in life is by compiling a list of *paradigm cases*, i.e., lives which we pre-theoretically hold to be the most meaningful lives (if any lives can be). In doing so we investigate what common denominator, or denominators, exist between them which would vindicate our intuitions (Kauppinen 2016, p. 283). One class of lives which are cited as highly meaningful are those of ‘moral saints’, i.e., individuals whose lives are characterised by moral action (Wolf 1982). Such exemplars include Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela. Such observations have led many to draw the conclusion that morality is either a necessary or sufficient condition for meaning in life.

Yet there is another class of lives antithetical to moral saints which causes a significant schism in our collective pre-theoretical intuitions: moral monsters, i.e., individuals whose lives are characterised by *immoral* action. Consider the following:

**Moral Monster:** Ioseb becomes enamoured with politics after reading Chernyshevsky’s *What Is To Be Done?* At fifteen, he becomes an avowed Marxist after reading *Das Kapital* and later joins Vladimir Lenin, who eventually leads a successful political revolution. After Lenin passes away, Ioseb - now Joseph Stalin - becomes de facto leader of Soviet Russia at forty-six. Stalin’s rule proves devastating for the people of the USSR, with mass repression, ethnic cleansing, wide-scale deportation, hundreds of thousands of executions, and famines which result in the deaths of millions. He passes away peacefully in bed at age seventy-four.

Can the life of a moral monster be meaningful? Did Stalin live a meaningful life and, if so, how meaningful was it? Our answers to these questions are unlikely to converge because we do not seem to have a shared intuition about the relationship between morality and meaning in life. For some, Stalin’s life is not meaningful because of the highly immoral actions he performed throughout his life. For others, Stalin’s life was meaningful because moral actions are irrelevant to meaning. Either

---

✉ Chad Mason Stevenson  
c.stevenson-8@sms.ed.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

way we develop a theory about meaning in life and its relationship with morality will produce undesirable results. If a theory about meaning claims morality is important for meaning in life, it will be rejected by those who think moral monsters live meaningful lives. On the other hand, if a theory claims morality is irrelevant for meaning in life, it will be rejected by those who think moral monsters live meaningless lives. So what is the relationship between morality and meaning in life? And how might we resolve it to the satisfaction of all?

In this article, I chart a course between Scylla and Charybdis by arguing that both sides are partially right but for the wrong reasons. My position is the following: moral monsters do not live meaningful lives but not because of immoral actions per se, but rather because of the consequences of their actions, namely, harm and suffering. Those who maintain that morality is relevant to meaning in life have confused the cause (moral action) with the effect (consequences). But those who maintain that moral monsters live meaningful lives have confused two closely related evaluative dimensions a life can have: significance and meaning. While good/positive outcomes are an important input into the meaningfulness of a life, significance, while also concerned with outcomes, cares not whether those outcomes are good or ill. On this view, the moral monster can live a significant life, but not a meaningful one.

This article proceeds as follows. I begin (§1) by providing the relevant background information. Then (§2) I advance the first half of my argument; that while I agree moral monsters do not live meaningful lives, it is not because morality is an input into meaning in life. I complete my argument (§3) by examining how someone could mistakenly think moral monsters live meaningful lives, namely, because there is a confusion between meaningfulness and significance.

## 1 Paradigm Cases and the Theoretical Landscape

There are four basic data points we need to get a grip on before moving forward. First, we need a working definition of ‘morality’ as it is understood within this context. Second, we need an outlining and examination of paradigm cases and their role within the literature. Third, we require a fleshed out picture of what constitutes a moral monster. And fourth, we need a basic outline of the theoretical landscape with regards to the differing views about the relationship between morality and meaning in life. The purpose of this section is to address these data points.

To begin, we should understand that talk of ‘morality’ and ‘moral actions’ within this context is wide and far-reaching, i.e., not specific to any particular conception of morality or ethical theory. In this way, we should understand morality as a collective term, that it contains ‘being moral’, ‘performing moral/ethical actions’, ‘ethical behaviour’, ‘good works’, ‘doing good’, ‘being good’, ‘rightness’, ‘virtue’, etc. Additionally, the domains of morality and moral action are threefold: actions categorically demanded in accordance with impartiality, duties typical of personal relations, and supererogatory actions (Kipke & Rütter 2019, p. 228).

It is important that we recognise morality and moral actions in this wider, commonsense way because, as we shall soon see, the purported relationship between

morality and meaning in life is not thought to be specific to any particular theory. That is, the view is not that moral actions confer meaning upon a life if by ‘moral’ we mean under some Kantian, utilitarian, or virtue theory, etc. Rather, whatever ethical theory turns out to be correct (if any) will be compatible with whatever particular hypothesis about the relationship meaning and morality one champions.

Second, let us consider paradigm cases. Paradigm cases, to reiterate, are those cases in which we intuitively hold to be exemplars of the concept we are investigating. With regards to meaning in life, paradigm cases come in two kinds: meaningful lives and meaningless lives. Within the literature, paradigm cases have played a pivotal role in not just getting a grasp upon the concept and subject matter of meaningfulness, but also for developing and critiquing theories about meaning in life (Bramble 2015, p. 445; Brogaard & Smith 2005; Landau 2011; Purves & Delon 2018; Smith 1997, p. 212; Smuts 2013, p. 536; Svensson 2017, p. 48; Temkin 2017, p. 23; Thomas 2018, p. 265; Wielenberg 2005, pp. 18-23; Wiggins 2002, p. 100; Wolf 2016, p. 256). What we hope for is a theory that explains what it is that meaningful lives have in common which makes them meaningful, while also being the exact thing which those meaningless lives lack. Given how vital paradigm cases have been, it matters a great deal that we get them right or, at the very least, come to a collective agreement about them. Below, I provide paradigm cases of both meaningful and meaningless lives which are often provided throughout the literature, dividing them along moral lines:

---

Paradigm Cases: Meaningful Lives

Moral	Non-moral	Immoral
Martin Luther King Jr.	Marie Curie	Pablo Picasso
Mahatma Gandhi	Albert Einstein	Richard Wagner
Nelson Mandela	Vincent Van Gogh	Caravaggio
Harriet Tubman	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	William Shockley

---

Paradigm Cases: Meaningless Lives

Immoral	Non-moral
Adolf Hitler	Someone in an experience machine
Joseph Stalin	The grinning excrement eater
Pol Pot	The couch potato

---

But are these cases accurate? Would such lists even be widespread among us? There may be good reasons for thinking not, which can be understood as differing views as to the relationship between morality and meaning. On the one hand, one might argue these cases *overstate* the role of morality, while on the other hand, one might argue these lists *understate* the role of morality.

To give this clarity, let us consider a morally problematic case such as Pablo Picasso. Picasso’s artistic contributions and the legacy he left behind are, to put it mildly, significant. Further to that, he engaged with life projects which he deeply cared about. Regardless of one’s theoretical commitments, Picasso seems a prime candidate of a paradigm case of a meaningful life. That said, it is widely known that

he was a highly immoral character; a serial womaniser and misogynist who treated people, particularly women, cruelly and callously.<sup>1</sup> What are our intuitions about the meaningfulness of Picasso's life? Well, some may hold that Picasso's life is *disqualified* as being meaningful because of his immoral actions. Others might maintain his life is meaningful *despite* his immoral actions, while others still might think his life is meaningful *because of* his immorality.

Third, I should elaborate on what I think constitutes a moral monster.<sup>2</sup> What I provide here is a working and intuitive picture of them. In the introduction I described moral monsters as a class of lives which are antithetical to moral saints because their lives are characterised by patterns of immoral actions. While Wolf describes a moral saint as someone "whose every action is as morally good as possible" and "is as morally worthy as can be", with their life being "dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole" (1982, p. 419-420), it is highly unlikely any such individuals exist. Given that, I used moral saints to capture lives which, I think, we would most likely consider the next best thing; lives which are arguably characterised by moral actions which work towards some larger morally praiseworthy project. Such lives included Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, or Mother Teresa. Now, the aforementioned people were not morally perfect - they were not as 'morally worthy as can be' - but their lives were at least largely characterised or motivated by morally good ends and they worked towards them or achieved them by largely morally good actions. They are as close as we're going to get.

By contrast, we can understand a moral monster as being an individual whose life is characterised by immoral actions which make up some larger morally heinous project. Their life is one that caused great harm, or suffering, or violating the rights of others, etc., over the course of their life for some end which they might deem of great value for themselves but arguably is morally heinous for the wider community. It seems, intuitively at least, that those ends can either be prudentially valuable for the moral monster even when they recognise those ends as being morally heinous, or ends they take mistake as being morally good.

There are, of course, pressing philosophical problems about how, or when, one becomes a moral monster: should an individual be considered a moral monster solely because of the negative consequences of their actions? Can someone be a moral monster even if they believe their actions are for the greater good? Is it possible for someone who kills many people to save even more people to be considered a moral monster? etc. How ends, motivation/intentions, and actions interface with one another to determine whether one is a moral monster (and to what degree) is a complicated matter which I do not here have the space to answer (indeed, providing

<sup>1</sup> Picasso is quoted by one of his mistresses as saying that, 'women are machines for suffering' and that, 'there are only two kinds of women: goddesses and doormats. Additionally, in *Picasso, My Grandfather*, Marina Picasso wrote of his treatment of women: "he submitted them to his animal sexuality, tamed them, bewitched them, ingested them, and crushed them onto his canvas. After he had spent many nights extracting their essence he would dispose of them, bled dry. Like a vampire at dawn."

<sup>2</sup> I thank the reviewer for pushing me to provide clarification on moral monsters.

an answer would require its own article).<sup>3</sup> Even so, I believe the rough understanding of moral monsters I have described above gives us enough of an intuitive notion to work with.

Finally, we need a working understanding with regards to the theoretical landscape of the relationship between morality and meaning as found within the philosophical literature. What we find, it turns out, is a proverbial smorgasbord. We might think the only way to live a meaningful life is by characterising one's life with moral actions. We might instead opt for a weaker claim, arguing that morality is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for meaning in life. But, as Kipke & R  ther (2019) note, how we understand that condition can differ. With regards to necessary conditions, we could maintain either that, for a life to be meaningful it must pass a threshold of moral action (Igleski 2016), or that to count as meaningful a person must not cross a threshold of immoral actions (Cottingham 2003, p. 28; Landau 2011; Louden 2013; Metz 2013, pp. 234-235). With regards to sufficient conditions, it could be that a life can be meaningful if it either passes a certain threshold of moral actions (Landau 2011; Metz 2013, pp. 227-229; Mintoff 2008; P. Singer 1995, p. 259), or that it does not cross a threshold of immoral actions.<sup>4</sup> A third option could be to concede that while morality is not necessary or sufficient, it can still contribute to meaning in life when supplemented with the appropriate element, whether that be some subjective element (Wolf 2010, 2016), such as caring about performing moral actions, or some objective element, such as caring relationships (Baggini 2004; Eagleton 2007, pp. 164-173), discovering scientific truths (Smith 1997, p. 213), or artistic endeavours (Taylor 1970).<sup>5</sup>

We could instead position ourselves on the side that moral actions are irrelevant to meaning in life. While such a view is not explicitly fought for in the literature, we can identify some who implicitly endorse it or have views which are at least compatible with it. Both Kekes (2000, p. 30) and Edwards (2000, p. 144) can be read as accepting that morality is irrelevant to meaning, or being sympathetic to the idea.<sup>6</sup> That said, any theory about meaning in life which does not adopt one of

<sup>3</sup> These same sorts of problems hold for moral saints too, or even the more mundane cases of describing a person as 'good' or 'bad'.

<sup>4</sup> While this latter option exists theoretically, so far as I can see it is not represented in the literature. Quite arguably there is good reason for that, as such a view produces the counterintuitive upshot that a person who sits on their hands all day and never leaves the house would have, while not doing anything immoral, lived a meaningful life.

<sup>5</sup> Talk of thresholds one must pass or not cross over to make one's life meaningful (or meaningless) may give one the impression that a meaningful life is a categorical concept, i.e., that a life is either meaningful or it is not. I want to clarify here that I take meaning in life to be a value which exists on a spectrum, i.e., that lives can be more or less meaningful. If there are thresholds, then we can understand them as either thresholds for a life to be considered meaningful whatsoever, i.e., that a life which just crosses the threshold has gone from barely meaningless to barely meaningful, and that the further one strides across that threshold the further one moves from barely, to moderately, to very, etc. Or, we can take the threshold as being a sort of deontological side-constraint, i.e., that while meaning in life varies in degrees, violating the threshold side-constraint or failing to meet it vitiates whatever meaningfulness (or meaningfulness, or anti-meaningfulness) one has accrued. I thank the reviewer for flagging this potential confusion.

<sup>6</sup> "That immoral lives may be meaningful is shown by the countless dedicated Nazi and Communist mass murderers" (Kekes 2000, p. 30), and "Although frequently when people say about somebody that his life has or had meaning, they evidently regard this as a good thing, this is not invariably the case.

the previously outlined views would, I think, be compatible with the position that morality is irrelevant (e.g., Ayer 1990; Calhoun 2018; Frankfurt 1982; Sartre 1946). And though not represented in contemporary literature, we could alternatively hold that morality either minimises, or that immorality enhances meaning in life. Though this view is highly counterintuitive, Nietzsche (1887/2006) and Rand (1957/1999, 1964) can both be interpreted as holding such a view, if we understand ‘morality’ and ‘moral action’ in the commonsense pre-theoretical way I have described above (i.e., prosocial, altruistic, etc.).<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Meaning and Morality

Let me put my cards on the table. My view is that morality is irrelevant when determining the meaning of a life. Performing moral actions does not confer meaning, nor does performing immoral actions reduce meaning. Morality is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning in life, and neither does it contribute any additional meaning upon a life when accompanied by relevant elements. For brevity, I shall call this the *irrelevance thesis*. So, I endorse the irrelevance thesis. However, I also want to say that moral monsters, such as Stalin or Hitler, lived meaningless lives. In this section, I aim to show why morality is *not* the reason for why moral monsters live meaningless lives.

To begin, however, I would like to draw attention to some attractive qualities of the irrelevance thesis. For one thing, it seems to vindicate intuitions one might have about a class of lives I call *game changers*; lives which make such a contribution that we either overlook or ignore (almost) any moral wrongdoing they may have done in their life.<sup>8</sup> Such lives might include Paul Gaugin, Pablo Picasso, Caravaggio,

---

Footnote 6 (continued)

[...] As long as I was a convinced Nazi (or communist or Christian or whatever) my life had meaning, my acts had a zest with which I have not been able to invest them since, and yet most of my actions were extremely harmful” (Edwards 2000, p. 144).

<sup>7</sup> The growing body of work in experimental philosophy on meaning in life appears to both reflect the various positions within the cited philosophical literature, but also corroborate roughly how they are represented, (e.g., (Fuhrer & Cova 2022; Klein 2017; Prinzing, De Freitas, & Fredrickson 2021; Prinzing, Le Nguyen, & Fredrickson, 2023a; Prinzing, Sappenfield, & Fredrickson, 2023b; Schnell 2009; Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulsey 2016). Folk intuitions about the ordinary concept of a meaningful life appear to converge, though not unanimously, upon the role morality plays in attributions of a meaningful life. For example, Prinzing et al. (2021) found that morality appeared to be an important contributing factor as to whether a considered life was meaningful from a third person perspective, while morality mattered significantly less for judgements about how meaningful that same life would look from the inside. Corroborating this, Fuhrer & Cova (2022) also found that their results suggested morality had a major effect on attributions of meaningfulness. Such results should come as no surprise, given that we find both so many categorically different theories about meaning in life and their relationship with morality within the philosophical literature. I thank the reviewer for bringing this material to my attention.

<sup>8</sup> I say ‘one might have’ because whether someone has this intuition is likely going to turn upon how strongly they feel about the relationship between morality and meaning. So far as I can tell, the experimental philosophy literature has not tested for cases such as game changers. However, judging by public discourse about how we should act towards morally problematic or heinous lives which have contributed to society greatly - such as Pablo Picasso - suggests that at least some portion of wider society takes such lives to be meaningful and that what makes their lives meaningful ought not be spoiled by morally prob-

or Richard Wagner.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, these cases seem to provide evidence against the claim that morality is a necessary condition for meaningfulness, since we know that they were both highly immoral people who, in all likelihood, did not do much moral good during their lives. Game changers appear to live meaningful lives in spite of their immoral actions.

The second attractive quality of the irrelevance thesis is that it can account for the pre-theoretical intuition that moral monsters, like Stalin, can or do live meaningful lives. Moral monsters, to repeat, are lives which seem meaningful regardless of any and all immoral actions they committed during their lives (indeed, we might think it is precisely those immoral actions which make their life meaningful). After all, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao made a significant impact upon the world in their own time and for generations to come, shaping the geo-political world and its history. How, one might ask, could their lives not be meaningful?

But one's vindication is another's counterexample. As mentioned, there is also the pre-theoretical intuition that moral monsters live meaningless lives. Given the irrelevance thesis allows otherwise, this makes it appear highly counterintuitive. I share this intuition; moral monsters, like serial killers, committed racists or antisemites, or sex offenders, are not exactly the types of lives which spring to mind when people compile their list of paradigm cases of meaningful lives. Yet the irrelevance thesis, and any theory either endorsing or being compatible with it, is vulnerable to such counterexamples. I take the aforementioned counterintuitive results to be a compelling reason as to why the irrelevance thesis, even in light of its attractive qualities, is not strongly endorsed or represented in the literature. It is arguably because of such cases that the majority believe there to be some sort of relationship between morality and meaningfulness.

Even so, I believe that once we partition our moral concepts we shall find that morality is not what confers meaning, nor immorality which minimises it. As I will argue, it is not moral actions which confer meaning, but improving or protecting others' well-being which does. But because moral actions often result in promoting or protecting others' well-being, we mistake the cause for the effect. If we remove the common effects of moral actions, i.e., making others better off - or worse still that moral actions result in harming well-being - we shall find that morality is not enough on its own to confer any meaning upon a life.

I should like to draw attention back to the fact that it is not specified what type of moral action counts towards making a life meaningful. As noted, what is meant by 'morality' is both pre-theoretical and commonsensical. Presumably then, *any* moral action counts as a meaning maker and so *any* configuration/combination of moral actions will be enough to make a life meaningful. If we look back to the paradigm

---

Footnote 8 (continued)

lematic behaviour. How large that portion of society is I do not know, but if discussions with colleagues and students could be considered representative, it would be a non-trivial amount.

<sup>9</sup> Gauguin abandoned his wife and five children to pursue art and pedophilia in Tahiti. Picasso was a misogynist and abuser of women. Caravaggio was abusive, violent, and a murderer, Wagner was an anti-semitic, racist and German nationalist who, even to this day, is still associated with Nazism and German nationalism.



cases which were meaningful and moral, we see that, though their lives are characterised by patterns of moral actions, these patterns are not identical and differ in a variety of ways. But it does not seem that just any pattern of moral action shall do, as there appears to be moral actions which, no matter how many of them we add to a life, never confer meaning upon it, let alone reach a sufficient threshold for making a life meaningful.

As I shall argue, those moral actions which do appear to confer meaning will be those that promote or protect the well-being of other welfare subjects, while those that do not confer meaning do not promote or protect others' welfare. For our purposes, we can group moral actions into three categories. First, moral actions which often result in promoting others' well-being (e.g., donating to a charity). Second, moral actions which often result in protecting others' well-being (e.g., saving someone from drowning). But intuitively not all moral actions promote or protect others' welfare (if we thought otherwise, there would perhaps be many more ethical consequentialists running about), so there must be a third category, namely, moral actions which rarely result in promoting or protecting others' well-being. I should also point out here that the first and second categories are not, or need not be, consequentialist. Even if one were to hold a non-consequentialist ethical view, we can all still agree that protecting rights, doing our duty, honouring agreements, acting virtuously, etc., most often produces outcomes which protect or promote others' well-being.<sup>10</sup>

The paradigm cases listed earlier, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, appear to be examples of the first two categories; the most often cited paradigm cases are those which are characterised by moral actions which most often promote or protect others' well-being. But what of the third category? What sort of actions might belong to it? At least two come to mind: resisting temptation and self-duty. Below I shall explore each in turn.

To begin, we can imagine a person - Cara - who, though strongly tempted to act immorally, chooses to not give into temptation. Her life is characterised by a type of moral action which neither protects nor promotes well-being. In light of that, does Cara's life seem meaningful? Intuitively, the answer is no, and her life certainly is not as meaningful as Mother Teresa's or Gandhi's. And the feature which seems to explain this intuition is that the pattern of moral actions which characterise Cara's life do not confer meaning because she does not impact others' well-being.

One might object that Cara is not a case of a life characterised by moral action because she only refrained from doing immoral actions which is not the same as doing moral actions. Just because you did not do something bad does not mean you did something good, so Cara is not a fair case. I do not think this objection holds

<sup>10</sup> This correlation between impacts on well-being and what counts as a moral action is arguably one of the reasons some adopt ethical consequentialism and presumably why utilitarianism has cast such a looming shadow over ethics. For example, Foot (1985, p. 196) writes, "it is remarkable how utilitarianism tends to haunt even those of us who will not believe in it. It is as if we for ever feel that it must be right, although we insist that it is wrong". Likewise, Korsgaard (1993, p. 24) writes, "to later generations, much of the moral philosophy of the twentieth century will look like a struggle to escape utilitarianism. We seem to succeed in disproving one utilitarian doctrine, only to find ourselves caught in the grip of another".



because, as framed here, Cara is actively choosing to do the right thing in the face of temptation; she chooses not to steal, or lie, etc. Suggesting she is not making a choice but instead simply not acting is inconsistent with our recognition that choosing not to do evil is still choosing a moral action. For example, when it comes to the trolley problem, it is widely acknowledged that refraining from pulling the lever is still choosing an action which, for some at least, also proves to be the correct moral action.

Another objection could be that the Cara case actually collapses the category she represents into one of the other two. The reason being, one might argue, is because choosing not to rob people or steal from them is, in some sense, protecting their well-being. By not giving into temptation, Cara protects others' well-being from herself. This would be a neat solution if it did not contradict our general intuitions about analogous cases; we do not, for example, think the bully or the abuser who refrains from assaulting someone has protected their would-be victim.

Perhaps Cara's life is not meaningful because she simply has not performed enough moral actions to pass the threshold required. Perhaps the moral actions of the third category aren't 'worth' as much as the other two, and so Cara needs to perform additional moral actions in order to pass this threshold. This manoeuvre fails because we can simply stipulate a case in which Cara's life is characterised by nothing but moral actions of this third sort. We can imagine a case in which Cara, from birth to death, is continuously tempted to violate the rights of persons or act maliciously/viciously, but refrains from doing so. In this case, Cara is a type of moral saint; she never, under any circumstances, gives into temptation. Yet it seems no matter how much we add of this particular variety of moral action, our intuitions about the meaning of Cara's life do not change.

A final objection could be that all this shows is that the type of moral action which characterises Cara's life is not enough for a life to be meaningful; only moral actions of the first two are those which confer meaning. But this objection seems to abandon the claim that morality is a condition for meaning in life, and instead opting for a much weaker position that morality merely contributes to meaning. The reason being because the considered objection requires moral actions to be qualified by features aside from their moral character in order to confer meaning; moral actions themselves would not be enough. Recall, however, that the pre-theoretical intuition in question maintained that morality was enough on its own. Yet we have seen only certain types of moral actions appear to contribute meaning while others do not; only those moral actions which promote/protect well-being appear to count.

The above argument has opened up a noticeable gap between moral actions and good outcomes. And if I am on the right track, it appears as though moral actions which also result in those good consequences confer meaning, rather than moral actions themselves. We can exacerbate the problem by considering two more types of cases which are both arguably characterised by moral action yet fail to be meaningful lives. First, a life in which one fulfils one's moral duties owed to oneself, and second, a life in which one's moral actions have the unintended consequence of making others worse off.

First, that we have moral obligations to ourselves is an old idea and though there may be some debate as to whether any such duties exist (or how binding they are),

let us assume for the sake of the argument there are (Cholbi 2015; Denis 1997; Eisenberg 1968; Fotion 1965; Hills 2003; Kading 1960; Mothersill 1961; Muñoz 2020; M. G. Singer 1959, 1963; Timmermann 2006). In the spirit of Cara, we can imagine a life characterised by moral action à la self-obligation: Daniel, who, as the last living being on Earth, owes no moral obligations to anyone but himself which he unfailingly meets. Do the moral actions Daniel takes throughout his life make his life meaningful? Again, like Cara, the answer appears to be ‘no’ and for the same reasons; this variety of moral action does not seem to be the right type to confer meaning upon a life. Even if these moral actions promote/protect his own well-being, Daniel’s life still does not seem to be made meaningful because of it. The types of moral actions which appear to confer meaning upon a life are those which promote or protect the well-being of *other* welfare subjects.

Second, we should consider cases of moral actions which often promote/protect others’ well-being yet fail to do so. We can imagine, for example, Erin, who engages in a variety of ethical endeavours of all the other types combined but, despite her best efforts, always ends up doing more harm than good. The consequences of Erin’s moral actions, regardless of her intentions, neither improve nor protect anybody’s welfare and, more often than not, result in harming others. Erin still strikes me as a life characterised by moral action but, much like Cara and Daniel, her life does not appear meaningful.

Let me put the nail in the coffin here by considering one final case, a counterfactual scenario involving one of the exemplar paradigm cases, Nelson Mandela. Suppose we were to discover the secret diary of Nelson Mandela, where he confessed in earnest that all of his efforts were done to feed his narcissistic ego and to become an authoritarian despot who would purge South Africa of all those who he believed wronged him or stood in his way. Not only would such revelations prove shocking, they would also colour his actions in a very different light. Intuitively, if these were to be his motivations, that would make the actions which characterised his life immoral actions. What we have in this alternative world would be a life which, though characterised by undoubtedly immoral actions, still produced good consequences. But would such revelations change our intuitions as to how meaningful Mandela’s life was? I suggest not.

As we can see, we need not appeal to morality or immorality to understand why some people judge the lives of moral monsters, like Stalin, as meaningless; they caused immense amounts of harm to others’ well-being. Unlike this reimagined Mandela case (who aims to do evil but produces good by accident or incompetence), moral monsters are *successful* at harming others. But causing that harm need not be what makes their actions immoral; their actions can be immoral for other reasons.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> One might object that causing harm or otherwise negatively impacting their well-being is not just a common example of what constitutes an immoral action, but that we also pre-theoretically take causing harm to be a foundational wrong, i.e., automatically immoral. Though both of these claims appear highly plausible, upon further inspection it appears clear that our collective folk pre-theoretical intuitions converge upon recognising that causing harm or a negative impact to another’s well-being can be not just morally neutral, but morally permitted too. Contact sports seem to be a prime example. In contact sports, for example, individuals agree to enter into a game or competition in which the risk of having certain types of harms done to oneself are either the by-product of the sport or its direct purpose. For example, in American football or rugby league, the potential for being harmed and harming others is high, and

In light of that, I submit we have an explanation for why someone might pre-theoretically judge morality to be a component of meaning in life: those who judge that moral monsters live meaningless lives because of immoral actions have confused the cause with the effect. Immoral actions (the cause) highly correlate with negative welfare outcomes (the effect) but it is the latter, not the former, which is relevant to the meaningfulness of a life. Such a mistake, however, is understandable because it is highly likely a moral life will be a meaningful one and that an immoral life will be a meaningless one given the strong correlation between morality and consequences to well-being.

In my view, the moral monster lived a meaningless life not because their life was characterised by immoral actions, but rather because they were successful in harming or minimising others' well-being. With the above arguments I hope to have shown that moral action is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for meaning in life. Morality, as I have argued, turns out to be irrelevant when determining the meaning of a life.

### 3 Significance and Meaning

Thus far I have argued that we can hold the irrelevance thesis while also maintaining and vindicating the intuition that the life of a moral monster is meaningless (or not meaningful). But the proposal of the previous section only solves half the problem; what about those pre-theoretical intuitions that maintain that the moral monster *can* live a meaningful life? My argument, thus far at least, does not provide us with any explanation as to why we might find something plausible about describing the life of a Hitler or Caligula as meaningful. As I pointed out previously, there is something plausible and intelligible about describing such lives as meaningful. After all, their lives have been considerably influential. In response to this half of the problem, I shall argue there is a confusion between meaning and significance. In short, I will argue a moral monster's life is significant, but not meaningful.<sup>12</sup>

---

Footnote 11 (continued)

when such harms do occur, though such harms would still be described as bad, we consider their occurrence and the actions which led to them unfortunate, rather than cases of immoral action. In something like boxing, causing harm to one's opposition is arguably the explicit purpose of the sport, yet we do not think that causing harm or negatively impacting their well-being is immoral.

I should point out I have said 'certain types of harms'; obviously entering into a contact sport does not mean any and all harms are morally permissible or morally neutral. The severity of the harm or whether someone has agreed to risking themselves to it both play a role in whether causing said harms is immoral. If A accidentally killed B during a boxing match due to an errant hook to the temple, though both had agreed to such a risk, we would most likely consider that B had not committed an immoral action. Even so, the point here is that we collectively recognise that while harm or negative impacts to others' well-being is bad, causing said bad does not automatically qualify as an immoral action. I thank the reviewer for asking me to clarify myself here.

<sup>12</sup> Distinguishing between meaning and some other evaluative concept or intrinsic value which is often taken to be a contributing factor toward meaning has been a common feature in the literature. For example, Kahane (2022) distinguishes between meaning and importance, Martela (2017) distinguishes between meaning, well-being, moral praiseworthiness, and authenticity, while Metz (2012) distinguishes

So what is significance? I think we can roughly understand it as follows:

**A significant life:** a life is significant insofar as that life impacts the well-being of other welfare subjects.

Note here that significance is also dependent upon outcomes. However, unlike meaning, which depends upon the value of the impacts of well-being, significance is value neutral; it matters not if the impact on others' well-being is for good or ill - both confer significance upon a life. On this view, meaning and significance are closely correlated and it is easy to see why; if a life is meaningful then it is also significant, and the more meaningful a life the more significant it is too. But this relationship does not cut both ways: a life which is significant might not be meaningful because it may be incredibly meaningless as the life in question may have caused a great deal of harm to others. The explanation for why someone might mistakenly hold that a moral monster lived a meaningful life is that they have understandably confused meaning with significance.<sup>13</sup>

Let me begin by pointing out that by understanding meaning and significance in the way I have proposed provides us an explanation for how pre-theoretical intuitions both converge and diverge across paradigm cases. Consider, for example, Gandhi and Hitler. While Gandhi improved and protected lives while Hitler caused great harm and suffering, the actions they took in life are still felt today (and most likely will continue to be so into the future). But saying that both of these lives are equally meaningful seems mistaken. However, in understanding the difference between meaning and significance as I have proposed, we have a way of capturing what that difference is while also capturing what their lives have in common; while Gandhi's life was meaningful and Hitler's was meaningless, both lives are significant. If my proposal is compelling, then the distinction between meaning and significance offers us a straightforward way of resolving the pre-theoretical intuition that moral monsters live meaningful lives: those intuitions are best understood as tracking significance rather than meaning, but it is understandable why someone would be misled given they overlap.

We can see further support for the distinction between meaning and significance when we consider our intuitions about meaningfulness and praiseworthiness and choice-worthiness. There is, I contend, an incompatibility between (a) the intuition that moral monsters live meaningful lives, and (b) the intuition that meaningful lives are both praiseworthy and choice-worthy.<sup>14</sup> That is, if meaning is a normative

---

Footnote 12 (continued)

between meaning and worthwhile. In addition, both Calhoun (2018, pp. 22-23) and Irving Singer (2009, pp. 101-148) understand meaning and significance as being distinct.

<sup>13</sup> In his recent work on meaningfulness and importance, Kahane (2022, p. 94) has observed the conflation between meaning, significance, and importance, citing Nozick (1981, pp. 603-604), Metz (2013, p. 18), and Benatar (2017) as taking these three notions as either being synonyms or more or less interchangeable. Martela (2017, p. 239) also notes that along with Metz, Smuts (2013, p. 548) treats meaning, significance, and mattering as synonymous.

<sup>14</sup> This point echoes a similar one made by Kahane (2022) in their analysis of the relationship between meaningfulness and importance. Kahane notes that while meaningfulness seems to always be to be connected to some external and independent value beyond our own good, importance does not, at least

concept which provides us with reasons, and if the life of a moral monster really were meaningful, then we would have reason for becoming a moral monster ourselves. But such a result I take to be highly counterintuitive and so good reason for thinking (a) mistaken.

It is widely acknowledged that a life which is meaningful is considered worthy of praise; to be lauded and held in esteem. Kauppinen, for example, remarks:

In short, then, it seems that when we say that someone's life is meaningful or want our own lives to be such, what we say or want is that certain positive attitudes are fitting towards it. Consequently, asking what makes our lives meaningful amounts to asking what makes agential pride, admiration, and elevation fitting (Kauppinen 2016, p. 283).

Further still, we take meaningfulness to be choice-worthy too. If some action were to make a life more meaningful then we take that as a reason for performing said action. While meaningfulness does not seem to produce duties or obligations, all things being equal, we recognise it is better to perform actions which confer meaning upon a life than not. Given that meaning is widely thought to be both praise-worthy and choice-worthy, it seems right to say that meaning is, for lack of a better term, a 'good' thing. Meaning is valuable and worthwhile in its own right, for its own sake.

Yet those who think moral monsters can live meaningful lives run into considerable trouble here. For if the above observations are correct, then the life of a moral monster, such as Hitler or Stalin, would be praiseworthy. Stranger still, the sort of immoral actions which they committed would also be choice-worthy too. If one wanted one's own life to be meaningful then committing heinous immoral actions would be a legitimate way of doing so. Yet this upshot seems highly counter-intuitive.

Given the above, it seems we have but three options: (i) bite the bullet and admit the life of a moral monster is both praiseworthy and choice-worthy, (ii) give up the intuition that meaningfulness is both praiseworthy and choice-worthy, or (iii) give up the notion that the life of a moral monster is meaningful. I take (i) to be highly unattractive in light of how counterintuitive it turns out to be. Though (ii) is a better option, it does not seem viable given how widespread our intuition is about how praiseworthy and choice-worthy meaningful lives are. That leaves us with (iii), which I also take to be the best option.

How I have understood meaning and significance also dovetails neatly with the above observations. Note that, pre-theoretically speaking, meaning and significance do not have the same connotations in terms of value. While meaning has positive connotations, such as praiseworthiness and choice-worthiness, significance in and of itself, does not. Rather, significance is value-neutral. I have pointed out that if causing harm could confer meaning upon a life then that would give us reason for

---

Footnote 14 (continued)

strictly speaking, have that same value nor does it always seem in all instances to be desirable. In other words, meaningfulness seems to be choice and praiseworthy in (roughly) all cases while importance does not.

choosing and praising said action. This turned out to be counterintuitive. But would causing harm to make one's life *significant* prove counterintuitive? I don't think so; if one desired to make one's life significant, causing harm or sowing destruction appears to be a legitimate way of doing so.

I should also like to draw attention to the fact that the distinction I have made between meaning and significance also dovetails with, and perhaps helps round off, the literature's exploration into anti-meaning, i.e., that which, according to a theory about meaning in life, is disvaluable (Campbell & Nyholm 2015; Landau 2011, pp. 316-317; Metz 2002, pp. 805-807; 2013, pp. 233-236; Morris 1992, pp. 49-50; Munitz 1993, pp. 89-93; Nozick 1981, p. 612; Smuts 2013). Anti-meaning helps us understand the intuitive difference between different classes of meaningless lives. While non-moral meaningless lives (e.g., Sisyphus, the grass cutter, the grinning excrement eater, etc.) appear to be quintessentially meaningless lives, moral monsters seem more than just merely meaningless, and describing their lives as 'anti-meaningful' appears to capture that. However, describing moral monsters as anti-meaningful lives does not explain why we find it intelligible to describe those same lives as meaningful too, or even why some take said lives as meaningful. In understanding significance as I have here clears up this quagmire; anti-meaningful lives can still be significant lives.

One final point to consider is how I understand the interface between meaning and significance; are these utterly distinct values such that significance should be discarded from the concept of meaningfulness (or from the conditions of what makes one's life meaningful), or is significance an essential aspect of leading a meaningful life?<sup>15</sup> Let me be clear: my view is that significance is not an input into meaning in life, and nor is meaningfulness an input into significance. Rather, I take these values as being two distinct evaluative dimensions - both of which exist on a spectrum - in which they share a particular input (i.e., other persons' welfare) but differ as to how that input plays a role for them. For meaning, only positive impacts on others' welfare increases it (while negative impacts decrease it), while both positive and negative impacts upon others' welfare increases significance. In other words, though well-being plays an important role for these evaluative dimensions (much like well-being does for morality), how well-being plays that role differs from evaluative dimension to evaluative dimension. So, on the view I have sketched out here, all other things being equal, the more one positively impacts the well-being of other welfare subjects the more meaningful one's life is but also the more significant one's life becomes.<sup>16</sup>

To conclude, I have provided a diagnosis and explanation for why someone would mistakenly hold the pre-theoretical intuition that the life of a moral monster is

<sup>15</sup> An alternative position, as sketched out by Irving Singer (2009, pp. 101-148), is that meaningfulness is an essential aspect of significance: when what makes one's life meaningful benefits other people who share the same values as the person whose life it is. For example, "the baseball players who pitches a no-hitter will have accomplished something meaningful, but it is a significant achievement only to the extent that his skill warrants the approbation of people who know the game and delight in seeing it played perfectly" (I. Singer 2009, p. 139).

<sup>16</sup> I thank the reviewer for raising this issue.

meaningful. I argued that said pre-theoretical intuition is best understood as tracking significance rather than meaning. It was an understandable mistake given how both evaluative dimensions overlap, causing one to think they are one and the same. I contended such a proposal fits better with our intuitive understanding about the role praise and choice have with regards to meaning in life; if immoral actions did confer meaning we would have reason to both praise immoral lives and choose them for ourselves.

## 4 Conclusion

In this article I explored the relationship between meaning and morality. It turns out there isn't one. Broadly, I contended two points. First, that the irrelevance thesis - that morality is unnecessary, insufficient, nor contributes towards meaning in life - is the most plausible view about the relationship (or lack thereof) between meaning and morality. I advanced this position by examining our divided pre-theoretical intuitions about a class of lives I called moral monsters (i.e., lives which are characterised by immoral actions and cause great harm) and whether they could be meaningful. Some people think such lives are meaningless and take their intuition as evidence that morality is a component for meaning, while others think such lives are meaningful and take that as evidence that morality is irrelevant for meaning. My aim was to show: (a) why the life of a moral monster was meaningless but for reasons which were not due to morality, and (b) explain why someone might understandably mistake moral monsters as living meaningful lives.

For the former, I argued that the reason someone might think morality has a relationship with meaning is because moral actions often produce good consequences, such as promoting or protecting others' well-being. Given morality is pro-social and often altruistic, acting morally is often the most direct way of making others better off (and inversely, immorality is anti-social and often selfish, so immoral actions often harm or minimise others' well-being). However, as I argued, holding that moral actions confer meaning is to confuse the effect with its cause. Moral actions are not solely defined by the outcomes they produce, and so we can pull apart moral actions and welfare improvements. Doing so revealed that moral lives which either do not make others better off or worse off were intuitively meaningless. The moral life and the meaningful life, while highly correlated, are distinct evaluative dimensions.

For the latter, I argued the reason why someone might think moral monsters live meaningful lives is because they have confused significance with meaning. Significance, I proposed, is measured by impact upon others' well-being whether for good or ill. In this way, we could see that the life of a moral monster, while meaningless, is still significant. To add further plausibility to the distinction between meaning and significance, I considered two additional data points which my proposal neatly dovetailed into. First, I considered the intuition that meaningful lives are both praise and choice-worthy. I noted that, if immoral actions did confer meaning, then it would make lives characterised by immorality worthy of praise, but also a legitimate option if we wished to live a meaningful life. Such results, however, were counterintuitive.



What was intuitive, however, is that immoral actions do appear to be the types of actions which can confer significance upon a life. Second, I considered how significance fills a gap in the literature about anti-meaning (i.e., that which a theory about meaning in life states is disvaluable). Anti-meaning helps us understand the difference between bonafide meaningless lives and those of moral monsters, but does not explain why anti-meaningful lives can still be intelligibly described as meaningful. The evaluative dimension of significance clears up this paradox: anti-meaningful lives, while by definition are not meaningful, can still be significant.

**Acknowledgments** I thank my supervisors, Guy Fletcher and Michael Cholbi, and my examiners, Michael Hauskeller and Filipa Melo Lopes, for their comments and criticisms. I also thank Kenneth Nichols, James Matthews, Mara Nejjzin, Alessandro Barbieri, Lilith W. Lee, Jenny Zhang, Olivia Coombes, Thomas Stephen, Dylan Balfour, Robbie Wilson, Mattias Appelgren, Lukas Slothuus, Aleksandra Kliš, Benedikt Buechel, and especially Rory Wilson. My deepest gratitude to the anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments and objections. This article of was written with the support of the James Forrester PhD Scholarship, provided through the Carlyle Circle at the University of Edinburgh.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organisation or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Ayer, A.J. 1990. *The Meaning of Life*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Baggini, J. 2004. *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*. London: Granta Books.
- Benatar, D. 2017. *The Human Predicament*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bramble, B. 2015. Consequentialism About Meaning in Life. *Utilitas* 27 (4): 445–459.
- Brogaard, B., and B. Smith. 2005. On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life. *Philosophical Papers* 34 (3): 443–458.
- Calhoun, C. 2018. *Doing Valuable Time: The Present, the Future, and Meaningful Living*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, S. M., and S. Nyholm. 2015. Anti-meaning and Why It Matters. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (4): 694–711.
- Cholbi, M. 2015. On Marcus Singer's 'On Duties to Oneself. *Ethics* 125 (3): 851–853.
- Cottingham, J. 2003. *On the Meaning of Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Denis, L. 1997. Kant's Ethics and Duties to Oneself. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (3): 321–348.
- Eagleton, T. 2007. *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Edwards, P. 2000. The Meaning and Value of Life. In *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed., ed. E.D. Klemke, 133–152. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eisenberg, P.D. 1968. Duties to Oneself and the Concept of Morality. *Inquiry* 11 (1): 129–154.
- Foot, P. 1985. Utilitarianism and the Virtues. *Mind* 94: 196–209.

- Fotion, N. 1965. We Can Have Moral Obligations to Ourselves. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 43 (1): 27–34.
- Frankfurt, H. 1982. *The Importance of What We Care About*, 80–94. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fuhrer, J., and F. Cova. 2022. What Makes a Life Meaningful? Folk Intuitions About the Content and Shape of Meaningful Lives. *Philosophical Psychology* 36 (3): 477–509.
- Hills, A. 2003. Duties and Duties to the Self. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 40 (2): 131–142.
- Igleski, V. 2016. Living a Meaningful and Ethical Life in the Face of Great Need: Responding to Singer's *The Most Good You Can Do*. *Journal of Global Ethics* 12 (2): 147–153.
- Kading, D. 1960. Are There Really 'No Duties to Oneself'? *Ethics* 70 (2): 155–157.
- Kahane, G. 2022. Meaningfulness and Importance. In *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*, ed. I. Landau, 93–108. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kauppinen, A. 2016. Meaningfulness. In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-being*, ed. G. Fletcher. London: Routledge.
- Kekes, J. 2000. The Meaning of Life. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy volume 24: Life and Death*, 17–34.
- Kipke, R., and M. Rütter. 2019. Meaning and Morality: Some Considerations on a Difficult Relation. *Social Theory and Practice* 45 (2): 225–247.
- Klein, N. 2017. Prosocial Behavior Increases Perceptions of Meaning in Life. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12 (4): 354–361.
- Korsgaard, C.M. 1993. The Reasons We Can Share: An Attack on the Distinction Between Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Values. *Social Philosophy & Policy* 10 (1): 24–51.
- Landau, I. 2011. Immorality and the Meaning of Life. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 45: 309–317.
- Louden, R.B. 2013. Meaningful But Immoral Lives? In *On Meaning in Life*, ed. B. Himmelmann, 23–44. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Martela, F. 2017. Meaningfulness as Contribution. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 55 (2): 232–256.
- Metz, T. 2002. Recent Work on the Meaning of Life. *Ethics* 112: 781–814.
- Metz, T. 2012. The Meaningful and the Worthwhile: Clarifying the Relationships. *Philosophical Forum* 43 (4): 435–448.
- Metz, T. 2013. *Meaning in Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mintoff, J. 2008. Transcending Absurdity. *Ratio* 21: 64–84.
- Morris, T. 1992. *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Mothersill, M. 1961. Professor Wick on Duties to Oneself. *Ethics* 71 (3): 205–208.
- Munitz, M. 1993. *Does Life Have a Meaning?* Buffalo: Prometheus Books.
- Muñoz, D. 2020. The Paradox of Duties to Oneself. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98 (4): 691–702.
- Nietzsche, F. 1887/2006. *On the Genealogy of Morality* (C. Diethe Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nozick, R. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Prinzing, M., J. De Freitas, and B.L. Fredrickson. 2021. The Ordinary Concept of a Meaningful Life: The Role of Subjective and Objective Factors in Third-Person Attributions of Meaning. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 17 (5): 639–654.
- Prinzing, M., K. Le Nguyen, and B.L. Fredrickson. 2023a. Does Shared Positivity Make Life More Meaningful? Perceived Positivity Resonance is Uniquely Associated with Perceived Meaning in Life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 125 (2): 345–366. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000418>.
- Prinzing, M., C.A. Sappenfield, and B.L. Fredrickson. 2023b. What Makes Me Matter? Investigating How and Why People Feel Significant. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 18 (6): 995–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2023.2168562>.
- Purves, D., and N. Delon. 2018. Meaning in the Lives of Humans and Other Animals. *Philosophical Studies* 175: 317–338.
- Rand, A. 1957/1999. *Atlas Shrugged*. New York: Plume.
- Rand, A. 1964. *The Virtue of Selfishness*. New York: Penguin.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1946. Existentialism is a Humanism. In *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. W. Kaufmann, 483–311. New York: The World Publishing Company.
- Schnell, T. 2009. The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe): Relations to Demographics and Well-Being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4 (6): 483–499.
- Singer, P. (1995). *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*. Australia: Australian Print Group.

- Singer, I. 2009. *Meaning in Life: Volume One, The Creation of Value*. United States: MIT Press.
- Singer, M.G. 1959. On Duties to Oneself. *Ethics* 69 (3): 202–205.
- Singer, M.G. 1963. Duties and Duties to Oneself. *Ethics* 73 (2): 133–142.
- Smith, Q. 1997. *Ethical and Religious Thought in Analytic Philosophy of Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smuts, A. 2013. The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51 (4): 536–562.
- Svensson, F. 2017. A Subjectivist Account of Life's Meaning. *De Ethica* 4 (3): 45–66.
- Taylor, R. 1970. The Meaning of Life. In *Good and Evil*, ed. R. Taylor, 319–334. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Temkin, L. 2017. Has Parfit's Life Been Wasted? Some Reflections on Part Six of on What Matters. In *Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity?*, ed. P. Singer. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, J.L. 2018. Can Only Human Lives Be Meaningful? *Philosophical Papers* 47 (2): 265–297.
- Timmermann, J. 2006. Kantian Duties to the Self, Explained and Defended. *Philosophy* 81 (3): 505–530.
- Van Tongeren, D.R., J.D. Green, D.E. Davis, J.N. Hook, and T.L. Hulsey. 2016. Prosociality Enhances Meaning in Life. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 11 (3): 225–236.
- Wielenberg, E. 2005. *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiggins, D. 2002. Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life. In *Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, 3rd ed., ed. Values Needs, 87–137. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, S. 1982. Moral Saints. *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (8): 419–439.
- Wolf, S. 2010. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Wolf, S. 2016. Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of the Good Life. *Foundations of Science* 21 (2): 253–269.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.