

Death Prevents Our Lives from Being Meaningful

NICHOLAS WAGHORN

University of Oxford

nicholas.waghorn@bfriars.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: This article seeks to show that death prevents one's life from being meaningful on balance. Proponents of what has come to be known as the 'imperfection thesis' about life's meaning claim that it is sufficient for one's life to be meaningful that one relates to only a non-maximal conceivable value. In many, if not all, contexts, holding the imperfection thesis appears to be the sole reason for supposing that death need not prevent one's life from being meaningful. Counter to this, it is argued that there is good reason to believe that the imperfection thesis is false, that arguments in favour of the imperfection thesis fail, and that attempts to show that the imperfection thesis can counter the arguments against it in a principled way are unsuccessful. Given this, it can be concluded that the imperfection thesis is false, and so there is no reason for supposing that death need not prevent one's life from being meaningful.

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I

In this article, my aim is to consider the relationship between death (*qua* permanent annihilation) and the meaning of life. In particular, I wish to defend the view that avoiding death is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for having a meaningful life, at least in some respects. To effect this, I suggest some ways of undermining what's come to be known as the 'imperfection thesis' about life's meaning (cf. Metz, 2009a) where holding the imperfection thesis is, in certain circumstances, the only justification for believing that avoiding death is unnecessary for meaningfulness. If this undermining effort succeeds, the view that avoiding death is necessary for a meaningful life will be on firmer ground.

I'll begin by explaining some terms and their interrelation. Firstly, I take 'life' in 'the meaning of life' to pertain to the lives of individual people, rather than the lives of all people, or all biological organisms, or whatever. What I

understand by ‘meaning’ in ‘meaning of life’ is more difficult to explain. It’s a vexed philosophical question as to what constitutes meaning; due to limitations of space, I’ll leave the question of what it is at an intuitive level. To help a bit, let’s consider the paradigm of a meaningless existence—that of Sisyphus, who was condemned for eternity to roll a stone up a hill, only for it to roll down again each time it neared the top. Obviously, Sisyphus’ life lacks a certain value—the value of meaningfulness—and it’s that value, the value which is absent in Sisyphus’ life, that I’m interested in when I talk of the ‘meaning’ of life.

With regard to the question of life’s meaning, the imperfection thesis, broadly speaking, states that for the life of an individual to exhibit the value of meaning, it’s not necessary that this individual relate in any way (e.g. experience, participate in, engage with) to some kind of maximal conceivable value; relation to some non-maximal conceivable value can be sufficient. Let’s call the denial of this thesis the ‘perfection thesis’. We can make the characterisation of the imperfection thesis more specific by separating out three possible readings of it, which I place in order of the strength of their claims:

- (i) Relation to a non-maximal conceivable value can be sufficient for an individual’s life to have some meaning, i.e. any meaning at all.
- (ii) Relation to a non-maximal conceivable value can be sufficient for an individual’s life to be meaningful ‘on balance’.
- (iii) Relation to a non-maximal conceivable value can be sufficient for an individual’s life to have certain very great types of meaning, or even the greatest types of meaning.

For each of these versions of the imperfection thesis, there’s a corresponding perfection thesis. So for (i) above, we would obtain ‘Relation to a maximal conceivable value is necessary for an individual’s life to have some meaning, i.e. any meaning at all’ (and so, *mutatis mutandis*, we can obtain perfection theses corresponding to (ii) and (iii)).

I’m not interested in examining (i) or (iii); my aim is to suggest ways of undermining (ii). So if I talk about ‘the imperfection thesis’ in general, it from now on should be understood as covering version (ii) only, unless stated otherwise. If it can be shown that rejection of the imperfection thesis carries with it the necessary corollary that one avoid death, then, if (ii) is undermined in that way, this will show that avoiding death is required for an individual’s life to be meaningful on balance (I gloss this ‘on balance’ shortly).

So, does rejection of the sufficiency of relating to only a non-maximal conceivable value in order to have an on balance meaningful life have the necessary corollary that we must avoid death? I think for the most natural

understandings of the relevant relation and the relevant value, it might. We can see the plausibility of this (I do not now attempt to establish the requirement with certitude), by examining the motivations for rejecting the imperfection thesis itself. Briefly, the key motivator for the rejection of the imperfection thesis will be that, if one discovers a certain activity or state that is meaningful in virtue of its bringing one into relation with a meaning-conferring value, then—in that set of cases where that value can come in degrees and, furthermore, in that subset of that set of cases in which meaning comes in degrees commensurately to the relevant meaning-conferring value—*ceteris paribus*, one will have reason to want to maximise one's participation in that activity or one's exemplification of that state by avoiding relating to only a non-maximal conceivable degree of that value. Note that this *ceteris paribus* clause covers a lot; one may not want to maximise one's participation in a given meaningful activity because one has other meaningful activities in view, or because one is simply idle, or because moral constraints prevent one from doing so. Lay those concerns aside. The point is that, *absent all these other considerations*, one will have reason to want to avoid participating in meaningful activities or exemplifying meaningful states to only a non-maximum conceivable degree by avoiding relating to only a non-maximal conceivable degree of the relevant meaning-conferring value if one sees those activities/states as meaningful in the first place.

Suppose one finds meaning in the activity of being in a loving relationship with another. Then, absent extrinsic factors (such as the possibility that one might become bored with a given other if one spends too much time in his/her company, or that one's capacities for such a relationship might atrophy with age), one has good reason to want that loving relationship to continue, not stop at some arbitrary point. And given that death will intervene at some arbitrary point (unless some principled reason can be given why the point at which death falls is not arbitrary from the perspective of the continuing meaningfulness of the relationship), one has good reason to want to avoid death, where dying would end that loving relationship. It would be better—provided that all those extrinsic factors that might vitiate a relationship that doesn't end can be combated, even if the only being that could combat such factors would be an omnipotent God—for that relationship to never end. The value of the relationship to which one would have reason to relate, given the meaning one finds in participating in that relationship, would need to not be at only a non-maximal conceivable level, and this would require avoiding death, as one is better off from the point of view of meaning the longer one engages in that meaningful activity.

The considerations above give us cause to believe that (a) reason dictates that we desire, as far as meaning is concerned, not to relate to only a non-maximal

conceivable value, and (b) with regard to at least some of those values, relating in the relevant way will require avoiding death. I take (a), that reason dictates that we desire not to relate to only a non-maximal conceivable value when considering meaning, in those cases where meaning aggregates indefinitely in virtue of such a relation, to give us reason to reject the imperfection thesis, although I don't take myself to be giving a full-dress argument for that here.¹

Why? Well, the imperfection thesis (remember I'm only targeting version (ii) here) claims that, if we can relate to only a non-maximal conceivable value, our lives can nevertheless be meaningful 'on balance'. I gloss this as saying that our lives can contain a sufficient amount of meaning, compared with what they could contain, for us to call them meaningful. Now, suppose (as above) that meaning aggregates commensurately in virtue of one's relating to a given scalar value to a certain degree, and, moreover, suppose that this value is indefinitely extensible (that is, for any amount of the value that exists, there can always be more). If this is so, then any relation to that value when it is non-maximal will only bestow meaning on one's life of a comparatively negligible amount, as one's life could accrue infinitely more meaning, and any finite amount of meaning would be negligible compared with this infinite amount or any sufficiently large, arbitrarily chosen, finite amount. (Relevantly here, not avoiding death will mean that one's life only accrues a quantitatively finite amount of meaning.) But a life that contains only a negligible amount of meaning compared with what it could do cannot be called 'meaningful' on balance as it does not have a sufficient amount of meaning, *contra* version (ii) of the imperfection thesis.

Note that this argument is neutral as to whether there *is* (as version (ii) of the perfection thesis assumes) a maximal conceivable value or not. In cases where value is indefinitely extensible, as here, some may wish to say that we can set the maximal conceivable value as infinite in amount, in which case this argument supports (version (ii) of) the perfection thesis. Others will say that, in such cases, there just is no maximal conceivable value, and so our desire to relate to more than only a non-maximal amount of meaning is impossible to meet. In this case, the argument would support the conclusion that there is no degree of value to which we can possibly relate that would be sufficient to make our lives meaningful; any given degree, insofar as it is non-maximal, will be negligible compared with another, vastly greater degree to which we could relate (and that latter degree negligible compared with some even greater degree, and so on). I may prefer this latter understanding of the argument, at least provisionally. There are complex matters to discuss here (which are dealt with at more length in Waghorn 2014, chs. 7 and 8), but I'll settle for suggesting

¹ I have attempted to give a more developed and nuanced discussion of such considerations elsewhere (Waghorn 2014, ch.7, Waghorn 2016, Waghorn 2021).

simply that it may be that the impossibility of meeting our desire for meaning in cases where value is indefinitely extensible is illuminating, as it explains why no possible answer to the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ seems *ultimately* satisfying. Nevertheless, whichever understanding of the argument one prefers, the critique of the imperfection thesis in this article won’t be affected, as proponents of both interpretations of the argument mentioned above can avail themselves of it.

Note also that my argument here doesn’t quite entail rejection of the imperfection thesis on its own; it needs the supplementary premise that those types of meaning (if there are any) which don’t aggregate indefinitely (either owing to the fact that the meaning does not aggregate commensurately with the degree of value or to the fact that the value itself is not scalar) that one can obtain will not bestow a sufficient amount of meaning on a life that relates to only a non-maximal conceivable value to make it meaningful on balance. I think this is plausible for at least two reasons: (1) provided that there are types of meaning which do aggregate indefinitely, and which contribute to the overall meaning in one’s life, the amount of meaning one could have had in one’s life will be infinitely greater than any finite amount that one does have, and so any meaning gleaned which does not aggregate indefinitely will be swamped and end up negligible, (2) I’m inclined to think that any type of meaning that doesn’t aggregate indefinitely will either rely on or be analysable into types of meaning which do. I won’t defend this second claim here, though.

My use of the phrases ‘compared with what they could do’ and ‘comparatively negligible’ a couple of paragraphs back needs unpacking. It suggests that we should take the notion of ‘being meaningful’ (though not necessarily ‘meaning’ itself) to be a comparative one. But what is the relevant comparison class? When I ask whether my life is meaningful ‘on balance’ with what other lives am I comparing mine? The foregoing considerations suggest that the opponent of the imperfection thesis will say that the comparison class we are rationally obligated to use is at least as broad as that of metaphysically possible lives that a person could have led. In the remainder of this section, I outline a rationale to support this claim.

As I’ve said, if we see x as a meaning-conferring scalar value, and meaning as accruing in commensurate degree from relating to x , then the greater the amount of x to which we relate, the more meaningful our lives are. So rationally we should want x to be maximised when we consider our relation to it. But it may not be possible to maximise x . What is the strength of possibility here? I will suggest one shortly, but note first that there are numerous such strengths. One particularly wide form of possibility is broadly logical or metaphysical possibility. There are also more restricted forms of possibility. These delineate what is possible given certain other factors—so nomological possibility tells us

what's possible given the laws of nature, and legal possibility tells us what's possible given the laws of the land.

Given that rationally we should want x to be maximised, it is by that token true that theoretical rationality indicates that we should regret the frustration of those desires by the placing of restrictions, or certain types of restriction, on the possibility of that maximisation ('to regret' I gloss as 'to regard as a legitimate reason for dissatisfaction' *passim*) when we are aware of those restrictions (though there may be times when practical reason dictates that we try to avoid allowing ourselves to feel regret). So, for example, before the Milwaukee/Recife Protocols were developed, it was surely the rational response for people to regret that it wasn't possible to survive rabies infection after onset of the disease. Now, my compendious *ceteris paribus* clause above is meant to cover all those restrictions, internally or externally imposed, that rationally we should regret. We rightly see the things covered by *ceteris paribus*, when looked at philosophically, as annoying things we would rather be rid of when we consider the issue of whether we would want a given meaning-conferring value to which we relate to be maximal in degree.

The proponent of the perfection thesis will say that we rationally should regret every restriction save the restriction imposed by metaphysical necessity in our desire that a meaning-conferring value be maximal in degree, and in so being, increase the meaning in our lives. So, it will be further said, the relevant strength of possibility is metaphysical possibility. If this is so, then the standard by which we can should judge our lives either with regret or with appreciation, when it comes to their being meaningful, is what is a metaphysically possible life for us (note that this is not to say that one may not use other comparison classes in certain situations for certain pragmatic reasons). I'm not convinced that one cannot rationally regret restrictions placed on one's life by metaphysical necessity (cf. Benatar 2017, 58-62). The matter is complex, and I have addressed issues bearing on it elsewhere (Waghorn 2014, ch. 7). But, so that I have someone to contrast the proponent of the imperfection thesis with, I shall simply take the advocate of the perfection thesis on his own terms, and, bracketing my reservations, allow that restrictions based on what's metaphysically possible place an upper bound on what one can rationally regret. That being said, it seems perfectly rational to regret restrictions associated with any narrower modality when these are placed on the capacity of meaning-conferring value to be maximised when I relate to it. Such restrictions on the maximisation of meaning-conferring value would prevent my life realising coherent possibilities which are states of affairs that I desire, and which could occur or have occurred for me. Now, unfulfilled coherent possibilities aren't *always* disqualified as objects of rational regret, for we intuitively believe we could rationally regret a modal restriction on

maximisation to that which is achieved by solely *actual* lives (the limit case of such restrictions) on the basis that this would exclude coherent possibilities that we desire (that is to say, we don't exclude *every* possible state of affairs as a candidate for rational regret on the basis that each is not actual); moreover, there will be many modalities the restrictions of which we will intuitively want to say we can rationally regret (such as in the case of medical necessity above, and other cases we shall see below) as they would exclude unfulfilled coherent possibilities that we desire, and which could occur or have occurred for us. So, it's incumbent on the proponent of an imperfection thesis to give some sort of account as to why desires for *any* coherent set of possibilities are disqualified as objects of rational regret by restrictions on the maximisation of meaning-conferring value, where these latter are attendant on a certain strength of modality narrower than metaphysical modality.

To put it another way, given that, if *x* is valuable and obtaining *x* to a certain degree will bestow meaning on one's life to a commensurate degree, one will want *x* not to be only of a non-maximal conceivable degree, *ceteris paribus*, and given that the only 'brake' on our desire for this so far is (for the advocate of the perfection thesis) the brake of metaphysical impossibility, then the proponent of a comparison class for meaningful lives more restricted than the class of metaphysically possible lives must give a reason for applying the brake sooner. That is, give a reason for saying that the rational individual need not regret certain restrictions on the maximising of the relevant meaning-bestowing value that are more stringent than those of metaphysical necessity. Some philosophers have sought to give such reasons; it is to the assessment of these reasons that the greater part of this article is devoted, beginning in section III. But first, a short section on some direct objections to rejection of the imperfection thesis.

II

A number of arguments have been advanced against rejection of the imperfection thesis; in this section I'll sketch two prominent ones and offer some brief rebuttals.

1. Probably the most popular argument is that, if we reject the imperfection thesis, then, supposing naturalism were to be true, and supposing (plausibly) naturalism to entail that we cannot relate to some kind of maximal conceivable value, no lives would be meaningful. Yet, the argument runs, many people intuitively feel that certain lives, such as William Wilberforce's, would be meaningful even if naturalism were true. I've already addressed this argument at some length elsewhere (Waghorn 2021) and so I won't spend much time on it now. I will content myself with saying that intuitions can be undermined by philosophical reflection, especially reflections on arguments for a conclusion

that contradicts the conclusion that those intuitions support. I've given such an argument above.

2. Some philosophers have wanted to argue that, when assessing whether one's life is meaningful, one needn't/shouldn't regret any restrictions on the maximisation of meaning-bestowing values that lie beyond our control. Their reasons for saying this rest on the view that meaning is a normative concept, and thus, if we're looking for ways to increase the meaning in our lives, those matters which lie outside our control are not relevant to our considerations when judging our lives for meaningfulness. But, as both Thaddeus Metz (Metz 2016, 142) and David Benatar (Benatar 2017, 60) have observed, a state of affairs can be an evil, and can detract from the meaning of our lives, even if it's unavoidable—if I suddenly discover that a bomb is due to go off in less than a second's time in a hospital a mile away I spent ten years building, the hospital's inevitable destruction reduces the meaningfulness of my life even though I couldn't have avoided it. This is indicative of the fact that we can see meaning as being an evaluative concept rather than a normative one, and evaluations as to how well someone's life is going in exemplifying a given concept needn't restrict themselves to considering states of affairs which are in the power of that person to bring about or to prevent (again, cf. Metz 2016, 142).

III

The most sustained and carefully developed attempt to defend a specific imperfection thesis, whereby there are certain restrictions on our capacity to maximise meaning-conferring value which we rationally need not regret, has been given by Metz (Metz 2009a, Metz 2016, chs. 8 and 13) In his discussions, Metz carefully works through alternative attempts to defend the imperfection thesis, and finds them wanting. I find his arguments that these also-rans fail sufficiently convincing that I won't take time to discuss them here in any depth (except by way of introducing Metz' own preferred view). Rather, I will seek to critique the version of the imperfection thesis that Metz thinks is the most promising and ultimately endorses; if I can show the arguments in favour of this most carefully worked-out version of the imperfection thesis to be flawed, denial of the imperfection thesis will be on firmer ground. Note that Metz is most interested in defending the version of the imperfection thesis which is a counterpart to version (ii) of the perfection thesis, concerning meaningfulness on balance, so that's the version I will have in view here.

Metz distinguishes between individualist and social versions of the imperfection thesis; the former says that one's life is meaningful if one obtains a sufficient amount of the meaning-conferring value available to one, the latter that one's life is meaningful only if one obtains a sufficient amount of the

meaning-conferring value available to one where sufficiency is understood in terms of some group-based standard (so one sees how one fares in comparison with some group of which one is a member). What constitutes the relevant group varies from theory to theory.

Having rejected individualist views as non-starters, Metz favours a version of a social view. I'll pass over the first two versions that he considers, drawing on Kurt Baier's work, where the group in question is the group of actual human beings, and so the comparison class is that of actual human lives, as I've subjected such views to critique elsewhere (Waghorn 2021). I will note, however, that Metz draws the conclusion, from the failure of Baier's comparison with actual human beings, that meaningfulness is not an inherently comparative notion. His motivation for this is to say that it is metaphysically possible that the life of every actual human being is meaningful, which, on Baier's view that the comparison class for meaning is that of actual human lives and that meaningfulness is only obtained by those actual humans who are above average in their acquisition of meaning, is impossible. But to say that it is metaphysically possible for all actual human lives to be meaningful doesn't entail that 'meaningful' is not a comparative notion, as the comparison class need not be that of actual lives (cf. Mawson 2020, 8). For example, if we allow the comparison class to be metaphysically possible lives, 'meaningful' can still be comparative, but every actual human life could turn out to be meaningful (or, indeed, meaningless).

Having passed over views on which the comparison class for whether a life is meaningful is the class of actual human lives, let's start our discussion proper with Metz' attempt to develop Baier's intuition that a human norm fixes the standard by which we count a life as meaningful, to wit: (α) 'A human's life is meaningful iff it has at least as much meaning-conferring value as is characteristic for human life'.²

This is a significant move. Metz reasonably understands 'characteristic' here as referring to dispositional, rather than actual, features of human life, where these dispositions allow for the possible manifestation of some states of humans (most relevantly here, states pertaining to accruing of meaning-conferring value), given the obtaining of certain circumstances. So, when judging whether a human life is meaningful, the lives of other actual humans are not relevant, but rather what is possible for a human life, given certain biological, psychological, and maybe even social conditions—or, we might say, restrictions. So we've moved here from using actual human lives as a comparison class to using possible human lives, where that modality—or set of

² I alter Metz' locution somewhat, but I don't think anything turns on this. Note that Metz expresses the relation to meaning-conferring value as 'having'.

modalities—is qualified as being what is biologically, psychologically, and (maybe) socially possible for a human.

I won't spend too much time on this proposal, not least because Metz himself isn't interested in endorsing it. I merely record my agreement with one of his criticisms of it; that we often judge what's characteristic of human life by a more comprehensive scale. Metz' example is childbirth, which is characteristically very painful, and, in that respect, bad—nevertheless we wouldn't want to say that the pain of childbirth is only bad in those cases of it which are more painful than is characteristic. I'm not sure about this specific illustration—it may be that we say that labour pain is only bad *qua* labour pain when it's worse than the pain characteristic of labour, but we can still say that labour pains are always bad *qua* pain, as they are (much) worse than the pains that humans characteristically experience. A different example that Metz draws from Nagel on the way death is characteristic of human life avoids this complication of sortal relativity: 'Normality seems to have nothing to do with it, for the fact that we will all inevitably die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer. Suppose that we were all inevitably going to die in *agony*—physical agony lasting six months. Would inevitability make *that* prospect any less unpleasant?' (referenced in Metz 2009a, 212-3). To this I add the following: it seems both metaphysically and nomologically possible that we discover a race of aliens on whose planet the selection pressures are so oddly disposed (perhaps the environmental conditions were carefully engineered by a more advanced, but crueller, race) that they evolved to lead very painful and degrading lives (e.g. eating nutritious food is painful to them, but is selected for, as not eating it is *agonising*). Would we say that those who achieved the tiny amount of meaning-conferring value that is characteristic of such lives actually do lead meaningful lives, when we look at their wretched existences? I'm inclined to think not.

IV

In response to worries about (α), Metz seeks a scale that doesn't appeal to a human norm, but is more comprehensive, although still fixed by reference to facts about the human species. I suspect the proponent of the perfection thesis can say that in decoupling the scale from a human norm we can no longer non-arbitrarily fix this more comprehensive scale at a point short of metaphysical necessity; I will seek to show this by following the moves Metz makes from here.

The next version of the imperfection thesis (inspired by Baier) he considers is the following: (β) 'A human's life is meaningful iff it has near the maximum amount of meaning-conferring value that a human life on earth could have'.

Here the comparison class obviously is possible lives, namely the set of possible lives that humans could live on earth. When we compare a given human's life with the members of that set, then if it falls in, say, the top ten percent of lives in terms of the amount of meaning-conferring value that it has, it meets the criteria for being meaningful. Metz likes this view, thinking that it just requires a few tweaks to be satisfactory. For example, the restriction of the location of human life to the earth seems arbitrary; surely leading a life on this specific planet (as opposed to a suitably terraformed alternative or a space station) is not particularly relevant to judging the meaningfulness of human life? Indeed, if human colonists on Mars lived twice as long as those on earth without increased senescence, Metz thinks, this possibility would be a relevant one, not to be dismissed out of hand when judging if a given human life was meaningful. Hence, he expands the location to 'the physical universe'. He also wants to specify the 'could have' in (β) more precisely; that is, he wants to specify what strength of possibility we are working with here, and he selects nomological possibility. With these tweaks in place, we advance to (γ) 'A human's life is meaningful iff it has near the maximum amount of meaning-conferring value that a human life in the physical universe could have, given the laws of nature'.

Metz will go on to consider some more tweaks to (γ), but, before considering these, I think it will be helpful to question whether the restrictions he packs into (γ) are any less arbitrary than the restriction to the planet earth in (β). Why, for example, limit ourselves to just the *physical* universe if it's either possible or actual that the universe contains non-physical states or entities, and why restrict the strength of possibility to nomological possibility, rather than widening it out to, say, metaphysical possibility? Why stop at these arbitrary points, given our desire to maximise meaning-conferring value, all things considered?

When we look at the reasons Metz gives for stopping at these points, it's worth considering their context within some of his surrounding remarks. Metz' position is made more delicate by the fact that in his main discussions of the imperfection thesis, he tends to think of the imperfection thesis within the context of naturalism about life's meaning (this view, hereon 'naturalism'¹ to distinguish it from metaphysical naturalism, is, roughly, the view that reference to supernatural entities such as God or the soul is unnecessary in determining what constitutes meaning and makes lives meaningful—the denial of this is 'supernaturalism'¹). But, as Metz concedes (Metz 2009a, 193), the imperfection thesis and naturalism¹ are logically distinct doctrines. Given this, it muddies the conceptual waters to hear Metz say 'Working within a naturalist^[1] mindset . . . I . . . develop [an imperfection thesis] that I believe should be weighed up against the perfection thesis in future work' (Metz 2009a, 194). Elsewhere we also have: 'At least if the last two objections that I have made to supernaturalism^[1] and its

central motivation, the perfection thesis, are sound, then the natural question to ask is: “Which less than perfect values, to be found in the natural world, comprise meaning in life?” (Metz 2016, 146), where the second of these objections doesn’t tell against the perfection thesis (and thus support the imperfection thesis) if one is a naturalist¹.

Given the fact that discussion of versions of the imperfection thesis and discussion of supernaturalism¹ vs. naturalism¹ are logically distinct, one should try to assess versions of the imperfection thesis on their own merits, rather than against the background of either naturalism¹ or supernaturalism¹. The argument I sketched earlier gives reason to reject the imperfection thesis, irrespective of whether one is a naturalist¹ or a supernaturalist¹. It may be that, if one rejects the imperfection thesis, then if one further holds naturalism, one might say that no-one’s life is meaningful and thus naturalism¹ is false, but that’s a perfectly respectable view.³

Now let’s return to Metz’ reasons for the restrictions he maintains in (γ). Take the restriction to nomological possibility first. Here’s the reason Metz gives for this restriction: ‘[I]t strikes me as not only in line with Baier’s intentions, but also plausible from a naturalist^[1] viewpoint, to suggest that the relevant sort of possibility is nomological, as opposed to, say, logical or metaphysical. Most naturalists^[1] believe that meaning in life is a function of certain conditions of a world as known by science, with remotely possible worlds being irrelevant’ (Metz 2016, 154-155). Now, obviously I don’t think Metz believes that being in line with Baier’s intentions is conceptually relevant here (Metz’ citations from Baier are just statements of his position, and as far as I can tell Metz does a much better job of developing the ideas in them than Baier does himself), but why is Metz attempting to justify a restriction in the imperfection thesis, a doctrine logically distinct from naturalism¹ to which both supernaturalists¹ or naturalists¹ could sign up, based on what’s plausible from the naturalist¹ viewpoint? If this justification is, for various reasons, not one a supernaturalist¹ can agree with, this just places a price tag on (γ); moreover, it may then be that any reasons the supernaturalist¹ has for disagreeing with the justification can be formulated into an argument against (γ).

Furthermore, when Metz says that most naturalists¹ ‘believe that meaning in life is a function of certain conditions of a world as known by science, with remotely possible worlds being irrelevant’, he is merely making a sociological claim. It doesn’t matter that most naturalists¹ believe this, it matters *why* they believe this, that is, if they have rational arguments for doing so. It’s also noteworthy that the belief that meaning is a function of certain conditions of a world known by science with remote possible worlds being irrelevant is just the

³ A view that Metz discusses (Metz 2016, ch. 13), offering two arguments against it; unfortunately I have no space to respond to these here.

belief that we should restrict ourselves to nomological necessity, and so appealing to this belief is not to give a reason for the restriction but merely to repeat it. For all that's been said, why shouldn't some naturalists¹ legitimately wish that, say, the nomologically necessary laws of thermodynamics did not hold (which is metaphysically possible⁴), and that we had a different physics, allowing us to transhumanistically live for ever without having to worry about the universe ending in a big freeze? Such metaphysically possible but nomologically impossible lives would be ones in which meaning is derived from purely natural entities, and a naturalist¹ opponent of the imperfection thesis has been given no reason to suggest that these are irrelevant when considering which comparison class we use to decide whether a given life is meaningful. No reason has been given for setting the restriction of strength of possibility as nomological rather than, say, narrower, at merely biological or psychological, or wider, at metaphysical. We could say that we set it at nomological possibility as all members of the set of humans cannot break natural laws, but this seems *prima facie* unconvincing, as both broader and narrower modalities set restrictions that all members of the set of humans cannot overcome—metaphysical necessity (broader), obviously, but also technological necessity (narrower)—no human can get from London to Alexandria in 20 minutes. My inclination is that any attempt to specify the rationale for nomological laws as the stopping point rather than some other will amount to saying that we must stop at the laws of nature because they are the laws of nature. But let's go into this a little deeper.

Metz has said that states of affairs/conditions which are outside our control (that is, which cannot be prevented, changed, or brought about), and states of affairs/conditions that are not realisable or achievable⁵ can both affect the meaningfulness of my life. This seems right; if it's not possible for my life to realise lots of things I would have liked it to realise due to my being born or suddenly made blind, deaf, and with severe hypoesthesia, this would seem to affect the meaningfulness of my life. But Metz seems to want to understand 'possible' in the previous sentence as a narrower kind of possibility than nomological possibility (such as physical, biological, or medical possibility). For elsewhere he says that value judgements, such as those of meaningfulness, must be grounded in what is available to human beings (Metz 2016, 245), and

⁴ In saying this, I assume that natural laws aren't metaphysically necessary (or, for dispositionalists, that the properties which ground such laws are not necessarily instantiated). Metz would, I think, agree with this (Metz 2016, 123—provided he takes conceivability to be indicative of metaphysical possibility).

⁵ As I understand Metz 2016, 148 (and I can't see any other way to understand him here), these are distinguished on the basis that, although I may not be able to control a given state of affairs, it's still possible that it is realisable by me—it could be delivered to me by sources outside my control.

this only coheres with the idea of unachievable conditions affecting meaningfulness if we understand the former modality ('available') to be (at least as broad as) nomological modality, and the latter ('unachievable') to be narrower than nomological modality.

But we need a reason for believing that the broader sense of modality here is nomological, rather than, say, metaphysical. If Metz is willing to say that what is biologically impossible for me, or physically impossible, or medically impossible, can affect my life's meaning, why shouldn't what is nomologically impossible for me? Note that it would be question-begging at this stage to claim that this is because we are comparing our lives with those of other human beings, as the comparison class is not with human beings and what they actually realise (neither Metz nor I think that this is the correct comparison class), but with human beings and what they can possibly realise, and it is the modal character of this 'possibly' that is precisely the matter in question.

One could claim that it might be, say, physically impossible for me to realise a condition, but, if it's nomologically possible that I do so, then some other human can, and if some other human can realise the condition, then my inability to realise it adversely affects my life's meaning. But, if it's nomologically impossible for me to realise a condition, then no human can realise it, and so my inability to realise it does not adversely affect my life's meaning. But again, the problem here is that 'can' is used in the sense of nomological modality, and so the answer becomes question-begging. We need some substantive way of specifying why nomological modality is the strength of modality to use here. I can see only two ways of doing this.

Firstly, it might be that, if it's physically impossible for me to realise a certain nomologically possible condition, I can (but again, what is the strength of this 'can'?) become *aware* that other human beings actually realise it, and become aware of what I'm missing out on, which isn't true for nomologically impossible yet metaphysically possible conditions. But this once again keys the comparison class to what human beings actually realise, which isn't what we want. Suppose some dreadful plague hits humanity, which removes everyone's ability to see, to hear, and to touch (this condition could be hereditary as well). It then becomes physically impossible, though not nomologically impossible, for every human's life to realise certain meaning-conferring values, and so no one can be seen to realise them. But that doesn't stop each human from having the meaning in his or her life reduced by the effects of the plague, even though they can't become aware of other human beings who do actually realise the values that they are missing out on.⁶ For they can at least *conceive* of what they

⁶ We can avoid the problem of memories of experiences of pre-plague human attainments by stipulating that the plague has a peculiar effect on memory—it destroys only these memories, but leaves all knowledge, etc. intact.

are missing out on, based on their abstract knowledge of natural laws (just as we can know that a human can live to 125, even though none ever have). Moreover, if I'm unable to realise a certain value that I desperately want to realise, it's of no comfort to me that no other human can realise that value either, due to nomological constraints. By analogy with physical impossibility, if a paralysed person desperately wants to do ballet, it's of no comfort to him if everyone else were suddenly to be paralysed.

Secondly, one could say that conditions which are nomologically possible for me, even if they are medically impossible, could be had by me in the future *in theory*, whereas nomologically impossible yet metaphysically possible conditions could not. But this assumes that a condition which is nomologically impossible cannot be had by me in future, and there are many reasons why one might not grant this. One might believe in some supernatural/non-natural force or being which could bring about events outside the order of nature (this power need not involve violating natural laws; cf. Cover 1999, 342-344).⁷ Indeed, contingent naturalists of a Humean bent who allow for entities to come into existence uncaused cannot rule out the metaphysical possibility of such a being who can bring about such events coming into existence. Any imperfection thesis, being logically distinct from naturalism¹, should allow for these possibilities (unless its proponent wants to undertake the task of arguing for naturalism, the metaphysical impossibility of uncaused events, etc.). Moreover, there is considerable debate, both philosophical and scientific, on whether the laws of nature can change (see Beauchamp 1972, Armstrong 2016, 24-7, 100-1, Tahko 2015, and Sartenaer, Guay, and Humphreys 2021, and the references therein). If they can, then it's metaphysically possible that a condition that's nomologically impossible for me now could be had by me in the future in theory (and to read 'nomologically possible' in (γ) as 'nomologically possible under any metaphysically possible set of laws' would be to collapse the notion to metaphysical possibility).

There are deeper, conceptual, problems with the claim that it is legitimate to see unfulfilled nomological possibilities as sources of dissatisfaction but not unfulfilled metaphysical possibilities because only the former could be available to one in the future. Suppose a man has a condition that's not medically possible to cure, but is nomologically possible to cure; consequently, he dies early, leaving his projects unfinished. We judge his life less meaningful as a result of this, but not because, in the actual world—that is, the actual set of circumstances he was in (for example, his temporal location and physical condition)—it was nomologically possible that he be cured in the future; it

⁷ It's not clear that a full-blooded naturalist might not want to make allowances for the metaphysical possibility of such events—again, cf. Cover 1999 on 'anomalous events'.

wasn't.⁸ It's rather because there's some nomologically possible world in which he lived a life in which he was cured (or didn't develop the condition). But then we're concerned with what obtains at possible worlds, not what obtains in the future, and, given the metaphysical contingency of the laws of nature (or of which dispositional properties are instantiated), nomologically impossible conditions can obtain in possible worlds, and so the justification for restriction to nomologically possible worlds fails. It's notable that recently, in Benatar and Metz 2021, 86-7, Metz himself seems to use this notion of 'available' *qua* 'available in a world' rather than 'available in the future', although there he offers no basis for a restriction to nomologically possible worlds other than a hunch (which, in fairness, he admits is inchoate) that the absence of a good merits being described as unfortunate the more available it is to us. But even if this is true, this doesn't show that nomologically impossible states are *not* properly described as unfortunate (even if to a lesser degree—although they may aggregate to a vast misfortune), for they are *metaphysically* available to us (for a different reply to Metz, see Benatar's in Benatar and Metz 2021, 92-3). More recently still (Metz 2022), has developed his hunch and now offers a substantive argument for the following availability principle: 'the closer the world in which one could access a benefit, the more reasonable are emotions such as sadness [. . .] when one does not have it, whereas the farther the world in which one could access a benefit, the less reasonable are such emotions' (Metz 2022, 47). He supports this principle by saying that adherence to it explains our intuitions about how we would feel in certain cases. Take three: (i) Had you gone to the shop you visit daily and bought your usual ticket, you would have won the lottery, (ii) Had you gone to a shop some distance away for the first time and bought a ticket, you would have won the lottery, (iii) Had you bought a lottery ticket, it would not have won, as the draw was prior to your purchase. Metz claims his principle 'best justifies' (pg. 49) why we believe we would be increasingly less disappointed in not winning the lottery as we move from case (i) to (iii).

Metz' availability principle is ambiguous, though—when it refers to emotions being 'reasonable' it does not distinguish (as we did earlier) between practical and theoretical rationality. Which disambiguation we should select is underdetermined by the intuitional data. Metz also does not explain *why* we might have the emotions we intuit; examining this more closely indicates which

⁸ If we worry that the statistical nature of laws might allow for this (although this moves nomological modality much closer to metaphysical modality), then we can always alter the example so that, given this man's temporal location and physical condition, it's nomologically impossible for him to obtain a cure as he could, say, only do the research to create one in an abandoned laboratory on a remote planet, which he would have to travel faster than light to reach before his condition killed him.

disambiguation we should prefer (where the disambiguated principle can then be seen to be correct but irrelevant to our discussion hitherto). It seems to me that emotions such as sadness or regret serve both (1) a theoretical and (2) a practical purpose: their negative affect both (1) alerts us to an evil and (2) impels us to seek to avoid that evil in future. If that's so, it's unsurprising that we regret an evil less when its corresponding good is less available—the less the emotion can play its practical role, the less useful it is to undergo it (indeed it might be actively unhelpful, distracting us from what we can change). One can certainly see how evolution might select for this pragmatically-sensitive disposition to undergo emotions. An emotion such as sadness, therefore, might be theoretically rational insofar as it is appropriate to the misfortune it is directed at, but practically irrational insofar as allowing ourselves to indulge in it will not be pragmatically optimal (think of doctors who have to develop a 'gallows humour' to stay sane, or the cliché 'no *use* crying over spilt milk'). Hence we can develop practically rational but theoretically irrational emotional responses to incidents, which become second nature to us (and thus form our everyday intuitions). Reading 'reasonable' in Metz' availability principle as 'practically rational' but 'theoretically irrational' preserves both our *prima facie* intuitions about cases (i)-(iii) and also the claim which I have been arguing for, that lack of availability of a good does not lead us to conclude either that its absence is not (or is less of) an evil, or that regretting its absence is not (or is less) mandated by *theoretical* reason.

Moreover, this interpretation of Metz' principle also has the advantage of explaining our intuitions about how much grief we would feel about, say, our dog's passing as compared with that of a stranger in another country whose death we only heard about on the news. We would be liable to feel sadder about the former, but we don't think this tracks how sad we *should* be, nor how bad the respective misfortunes are. It also makes sense of the great sadness many have felt about their impending death, especially in the past when life-extending technologies were inconceivable (cf. Metz' own reference to Nagel in section III).

There may be good pragmatic reasons to take our intuitions at face value here, as Metz does, but these should neither govern what we take to be theoretically reasonable nor be taken to reflect reality, lest we allow our uncritical *prima facie* reactions, bequeathed to us for evolutionary reasons, to govern our more carefully considered philosophical analysis—especially when there are arguments, such as those I have given, to make us reconsider those *prima facie* intuitions. This is no less true in the present case than in discussions of free will or of impartiality in ethics.⁹

⁹ For alternative objections to Metz' availability principle, see Benatar 2022 (130–131).

In any case, restriction to nomological possibility in (γ) seems unintuitive. (γ) doesn't appear to be necessarily true, as we can conceive of worlds whereby the natural laws might be such that people live utterly wretched and short lives (perhaps they are a small collection of some type of Boltzmann brains, to avoid counters that people couldn't evolve in such a universe) by nomological necessity. Surely we wouldn't want to say that inhabitants of such worlds who are marginally less wretched (but still utterly miserable and frustrated) are leading (very) meaningful lives?

Aside from Metz' restriction of modality to nomological modality, we also see the arbitrariness problem for (γ) when we consider Metz' restriction of the location of meaning to the physical universe. But why *the* physical universe, rather than just *a* physical universe, or a wholly/partly non-physical universe? Metz gives no reason at all for this restriction, and thus no reason at all to think that we should not compare human lives in this physical universe with those in a wholly/partly non-physical universe, or another physical universe in which humans still exist, but the laws of nature are so disposed as to give their lives far more meaning. So even working within a naturalistic¹ mindset, these restrictions are arbitrary.

V

The shadows of this arbitrariness problem can be found in Metz' admirably honest subsequent consideration of criticisms and refinements to (γ), his preferred view. In assessing (γ), he suggests that there might be certain very rare human beings ('superfreaks') whose talents and abilities are so much greater than the norm that everyone else's lives fail to near the amount of meaning-conferring value that they can accrue, and so count as meaningless. Initially Metz considered the response that such human beings would be nomologically impossible, but later seems less sure (compare Metz 2009a, 208 with Metz 2016, 155)—rightly so, as there doesn't seem any reason to believe that such human beings would need to break any laws of nature to exist and exercise their abilities. And his alteration of (γ) in the face of the superfreak challenge from setting the standard for meaningfulness at 'the maximum amount of meaning a human could have' to 'the maximum amount of meaning a human is likely to achieve', aside from merely being an *ad hoc* addition to avoid the counterexample (Metz gives no other reason), doesn't, as he rightly recognises, avoid the problem. For it may be that, as we will discover in the future, humanity will prove to be capable of so much more meaning than its members currently accrue now that the lives of this current generation (and its predecessors) will turn out to have been meaningless on balance after all.

In response to this Metz is prepared to bite this bullet: maybe our lives will turn out to have been meaningless after all, just as we might judge the lives of our primitive ancestors to be meaningless in comparison with our own. But we shouldn't underestimate the significance of Metz' concession here. For Metz' main argument against rejection of the imperfection thesis is that there are some lives, such as Wilberforce's, which we intuitively think are meaningful if naturalism is true (see section II, 1., above). But Metz' biting of the bullet entails that our intuitions are defeasible in the light of discoveries within a naturalistic worldview about what humans are capable of. So at the very least it's epistemically opaque to us whether Wilberforce's life is meaningful (on naturalism¹), in which case we can't claim that the intuition that Wilberforce's life is meaningful despite relating to only a non-maximal conceivable value is so obvious that it constitutes even a burden of proof for the opponent of the imperfection thesis to shoulder. Moreover, if our intuitions concerning the meaningfulness of lives like Wilberforce's are defeasible in light of naturalistic scenarios, why shouldn't they be equally defeasible in light of supernaturalistic scenarios?

The problems are sharpened when we consider transhumanist scenarios. The only transhumanist scenario that Metz considers is one in which scientists can genetically manipulate a human such that he gains a longer life, more intelligence, and better health, but is no longer human. But it doesn't seem nomologically impossible that scientists might be able to do all this and the individual remain a human. If this latter is so, (γ), with or without its *ad hoc* addition, looks even less likely to allow the lives of most humans to be meaningful. However, to stick with Metz' own understanding of the transhumanist scenario (where the genetically manipulated individual ceases to be human), he hypothesises that, if it is plausible, then, when considering the relevant maximum amount of meaning-conferring value as a standard that one must near, we might not wish to key this to facts about our species (as the transhumanist's creation will no longer be human). This seems right to me; I believe that I'm essentially a person, but not essentially human,¹⁰ hence what seems relevant in determining the standards for meaningfulness are facts about persons, not just humans. Consideration of transhumanist scenarios leads Metz to consider a final revision of his preferred imperfection thesis: (δ) 'A human person's life is meaningful iff it has near the maximum amount of meaning-conferring value that a being born human in the physical universe could have,

¹⁰ This is controversial, hence my reference to the less radical transhumanist scenario which would allow those undergoing transhumanist intervention to remain human. As an aside, we may wish to alter 'human' or 'person' in our formulations to simply 'being of the essential kind I belong to'; this would defer any controversy, and also generalise the thesis so that it could be used by alien beings, supernatural beings, etc.

given the laws of nature'. Again, this seems *ad hoc*. But, more importantly, it raises an obvious question—if the standards for meaningfulness are no longer keyed to facts about our species, why the restriction to beings which are born human, thus excluding from our comparison class the lives of other beings which, like us, are persons? Why would the lives of extremely long-lived and talented aliens, or of angels, or God, not be relevant insofar as they are persons, even though none of these were born human?

Metz' reasons for upholding this restriction are worth quoting at length: '[S]ome who believe that a meaningful life is possible in a world lacking a perfect, supernatural realm believe . . . that we are in God's presence. Awareness of being in God's presence is not enough for a naturalist^[1] to hold the perfection thesis or supernaturalism^[1], i.e., is not sufficient to think that a maximally conceivable condition possible only in a transcendent realm is the relevant standard to use when judging whether a human life has avoided being meaningless on balance. And so, even if a naturalist^[1] were acquainted with (or could merely imagine) beings lesser than God but greater than us, she should not think that these beings set the relevant standard for whether our lives are meaningful, if the amount of meaning they can acquire were in no way available to us' (Metz 2016, 158).

The problem, once again, is that Metz is merely making a sociological claim. It's not in itself relevant that some (how many?) naturalists¹ are theists, what matters is whether they hold their combination of views on the basis of good reasons, and what those reasons are—and we are not given these reasons. The closest we get is when we're told that one shouldn't think that 'greater' beings set the relevant standards for our lives being meaningful if the amount of meaning they can acquire is not 'available' to us. But, as before, the modal strength of 'available' is either left unspecified or unjustifiably restricted—the amount of meaning acquired by 'greater' beings may be metaphysically possible for us, and so 'available' in that sense. If we understand 'available' in a more restricted sense then we return to the problem of the arbitrariness of the restrictions in the original version of (γ).

VI

Given the argument of section I against the imperfection thesis, the failure of objections to rejecting it, and the failure to establish a plausible imperfection thesis, it seems we should reject the imperfection thesis. That said, Metz has made some comments that may be relevant in assessing the argument in section I, and has recently advanced a new consideration supporting version (ii) of the imperfection thesis. Let me deal with these in order.

Regarding the argument of section I, Metz accepts that our desires reach to perfection, but thinks this has no bearing on our views of meaning in life: ‘There are some who argue that wishing is rational, in the sense that it ought to cohere tightly with our judgements (Adams 2006). If that were true, then persistent wishing to make a major difference to the world or to live forever would need to have some kind of bearing on one’s views of meaning in life. I deny that, however; a wish is just a wish (Metz 2009[b])’ (Metz 2016, 247-248).¹¹ But even if desiring *need* not be rational, it *can* be, and the latter such desiring will have this bearing, as will, *a fortiori*, desiring mandated by reason. By ‘a desire/wish being rational’, Metz means that it’s not a desire/wish for a impossible state of affairs, and that we also desire/wish for any necessary requirements for that state of affairs to obtain. Again, it’s not clear what form of modality Metz associates with ‘impossibility’ here;¹² if it’s metaphysical impossibility then the desires motivating rejection of the imperfection thesis can be rational (even if we can also have other desires which, in Metz’ special sense identified above, are not ‘rational’), and if it’s nomological possibility then, without further justification as to *why*, this restriction seems as arbitrary as it does earlier in this discussion. As an aside, I take it that Metz believes that if desiring is not ‘rational’ (in his special sense) then such desiring need not have bearing on life’s meaning—but this is only (implicitly) asserted, not argued for (and some of his own discussion in his case of *My Wife* in Metz 2009b seems to militate against this assertion), and I see no reason to grant it (see above).

Regarding his new consideration in favour of version (ii) of the imperfection thesis, Metz doesn’t think we have the high standards suggested here for meaning when it comes to other values—for example, people less virtuous than Jesus (to use Metz’ example) can be called morally good, one doesn’t have to be plugged into a pleasure machine for eternity to have a life that can be correctly called happy, or be able to split planets like Superman to be called strong (cf. Benatar and Metz 2021, 56-7). So why should meaning be any different?

¹¹ In this context Metz uses ‘wish’ rather than ‘desire’, which I think is unfortunate. In the essays he cites, both the one from Adams and his Metz 2009b (and in the Parfit he cites in the latter) ‘wishes’ are distinguished from ‘desires’ insofar as they take as their objects events in the past. But the argument against the imperfection thesis is not restricted to attitudes about the past. Note that some accounts of desires distinguish them from wishes based on attainability (Velleman 1992, 17—though the modal strength of ‘attainable’ is left unspecified here). But then such an account must be defended, and it’s often an objection to such accounts of desires that they cannot make room for desiring the impossible (cf. Schroeder 2004, 16–17).

¹² In Metz 2009b, 30, he suggests nomological modality, but only in the context of x being necessary for y to exist, which differs from the context here. Elsewhere in the paper he treats modality more in metaphysical terms (for example in his suggestion that one can wish for the impossible regarding personal identity; such an impossibility would plausibly be understood as metaphysical).

The ‘values’ that Metz refers to here are a heterogeneous bunch; they may all be adjectives, as he points out, but (predicate) adjectives can nevertheless function in very different ways, depending on the property to which the predicate adjective pertains. I think ‘meaningful’, ‘happy’ and ‘virtuous’ all operate differently—I leave ‘strong’ out of consideration, as I have doubts about whether it counts as a value at all, though it might be valued in certain contexts. Equally, ‘virtuous’ might be a value concept in a broad sense of ‘value’, but in a narrower sense within which ‘meaning’ fits, it isn’t, and ‘happy’ in certain uses is not a value concept at all, and in other uses is a value concept in that narrower sense alongside ‘meaning’.

The perfection thesis advocate’s contention has been that the relevant comparison class when we ask if someone’s life is meaningful is the class of all metaphysically possible lives. This is because meaning is said to derive from relating to a meaning-conferring value, and, to the extent that we see that value as a good, we will want that value to which we relate to be maximised as far as possible (cf. section I). So the extent to which this occurs will be measured by how far those possibilities become a reality for us, and if they aren’t realised maximally, our lives won’t count as meaningful.

Regarding morality, when Metz talks of being a morally good or virtuous person, he is surely using morality in a normative sense, and he has elsewhere indicated his belief that our judgements about when to apply normative concepts can be guided by the principle of ‘ought implies can’, which suggests restrictions on when we’re prepared to call someone morally good which aren’t applicable to when we’re prepared to call someone’s life meaningful, as Metz considers ‘meaning’ to be fundamentally an evaluative, not a normative concept (Metz 2016, 142). In addition, our assessment of whether someone is morally good depends on whether he acts rightly in a given set of circumstances, and this doesn’t seem to be extensible in the same way that meaning-conferring value does (cf. Metz 2016, 126 in support of this point): if in A’s life he is put in thirty such circumstances and acts rightly each time, and in B’s life she is put in three hundred such circumstances and acts rightly each time, A and B are both equally morally good. If it’s just the proportion of morally good vs. morally bad acts one commits within one’s life that guides ascriptions of moral goodness, then clearly the standards for moral goodness differ from those for meaningfulness, even by Metz’ lights. Finally, it may be that we casually say that someone is morally good if they tend to do better than the average person, and we don’t judge them according to a perfect moral agent like Christ, but this overlooks that those most attuned to the demands of morality and who exemplify saintliness best most often explicitly say that they do *not* consider themselves to be good people, as they compare themselves, not with others, but only with what they should be like. Moreover, their standard

often increases the more saintly they become; a particular example of a standard concerning a matter being elevated the more progress is made, raising the baseline (a generalisable and important phenomenon that requires further discussion elsewhere).

When to call a life ‘happy’ is the most difficult point here, as happiness is such a vexed concept. In one sense, happiness isn’t a value term at all, i.e. when we talk about it descriptively as a psychological state. In another sense, it *is* a value, insofar as it’s constitutive of, or at least partly constitutive of, the concept of well-being.¹³ Elsewhere, Metz notes that he’s inclined to accept that judgements of happiness are absolute, and not relative, which he doesn’t believe is so for judgements of meaningfulness, so he clearly thinks that the way we set the standard for a life being meaningful is different from the way we set it for a life being happy, militating against his point above (Metz 2021, footnote 17). My inclination is that, insofar as we consider happiness descriptively as a certain psychological state, Metz is correct that judgements of happiness are absolute: happiness derives from undergoing a certain psychological state, and to the extent we undergo that state, our lives are happy. There is no reference here to a comparison class (if everyone else were to undergo that psychological state but with far more intensity than mine, it would not mean that I wasn’t in fact descriptively undergoing that psychological state, i.e. that I wasn’t happy); just a sufficient proportion of our life spent enjoying that state is enough to call a life happy on balance. Simply being happy is nothing to do with desire or with valuing anything *qua* exemplification of that state (whereas meaning conceptually makes reference to being related to a value that it is possible to recognise), and so it doesn’t involve the same maximisation requirement that meaningfulness does. In this sense the standards for calling a life happy or meaningful differ due to the concepts involved, and so our uses of the standards, as with morality, aren’t comparable.

That said, there’s another sense of ‘happy’ in which we do understand it as a value, and as a value that we desire our lives to exemplify—the sense in which it is partly or wholly constitutive of well-being. In this sense of happiness, where we ask whether someone’s life is, on balance, going well (that is, how much well-being it contains), I think we do have a comparative standard. For, if my life is going well to a certain degree, but everyone else’s life is going well to a much greater degree, my life is not going well on balance. Whether a life is

¹³ The subject is even more vexed than this, though, as we must then consider the accounts we are giving of happiness in its descriptive sense (hedonism, life satisfaction, emotional state, or a hybrid view), and the accounts we are giving of happiness as partly or wholly constitutive of the value of well-being (hedonism, desire theories, or objective list theories); cf. Haybron 2020. A proper account of the standards we use to judge a life to be happy needs to work through all of this.

going well is an evaluative question, not a purely descriptive one. Furthermore, to the extent that we desire happiness *qua* (part of) the value of well-being we will, *ceteris paribus*, want to maximise it in just the way that we would wish to maximise meaning-conferring value. So the true comparison class, as with meaning, would be (at least as broad as) metaphysically possible lives, in which case, *pace* Metz, we do have the same high standards for happiness *qua* well-being as for meaningfulness. Note that this doesn't mean that we can't use actual lives as a comparison class if we wish and sometimes, even often, do, nor that lives that are not going well on balance cannot be full of well-being, nor even that those lives might be happy in the descriptive sense. So a newborn baby who died after one minute of a happy life led a life that was happy on balance in the descriptive sense, but did not lead a happy life in the value sense of a life that went well.

Conflation of happiness in its descriptive sense and happiness in its value sense may give the illusion that the right comparison class for deciding if a life is happy in the latter sense cannot be as broad as that of metaphysically possible lives. We must also be wary of saying that, if the comparison class is (at least as broad as) metaphysically possible lives, then any life that doesn't near the maximal conceivable happiness is *unhappy*. There's a difference between not being happy and being unhappy, and a difference between life going badly and life not going well. Given that, *ceteris paribus*, we wish our happiness *qua* well-being were maximised, we will find ourselves frustrated in this regard, and, in our more reflective moments, we will realise just how frustrated we are—by our finitude in both the shortness of our lives and the qualitative imperfection of them (cf. Benatar, 2017, ch. 4).

VII

So, after all this, what are we to think about death? If we were able to hold version (ii) of the imperfection thesis, we would not see death as threatening our ability to live a life that is meaningful on balance. But I believe there are good reasons to be suspicious of that version of the imperfection thesis. As we have seen, *ceteris paribus*, we have reason to want to avoid relating to only a non-maximal meaning-conferring value in cases where that value aggregates indefinitely and the meaning it confers aggregates commensurately. Plausibly, there are many cases of meaning-conferring value in which that value and the meaning it confers aggregate indefinitely diachronically; if this is so, then in those cases our deaths—insofar as they end that diachronic aggregation for us—will mean we can relate to only a non-maximal value, leaving us with the result that the meaning our lives can attain is only negligible, given the restrictions imposed by our deaths on what they can attain compared with what they could obtain.

Thus, if we will die, our lives will not be meaningful on balance. The proponent of version (ii) of the imperfection thesis wishes to appeal to restrictions to the comparison class of meaningful lives that would make that class narrower than the class of all metaphysically possible lives. Such an appeal could block the danger death poses to our lives being meaningful on balance; perhaps all lives in the restricted comparison class will be ones in which death occurs. But attempts to justify such restrictions either lead to counterintuitive results or are insufficiently justified. Given this, the conclusion that our deaths mean that our lives are not meaningful on balance stands, and so some way of avoiding death is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for our lives to be meaningful on balance. If this is not forthcoming, we have good theoretical reasons to regret our deaths as an evil that threatens the meaningfulness of our lives. That being said, I have not sought to discuss whether we have any practical reasons either for or against feeling, or allowing ourselves to feel, that regret.¹⁴

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