

It's a Wonderful Life: Pottersville and the Meaning of Life

Introduction

Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) tells what is now a familiar story of a suicidal banker, George Bailey (James Stewart), who is finally able to see the meaning of his life with a little help from a friend—an angel 2nd class who wants to make good. The film presents an attractive theory of the meaning of life, or so masses of holiday viewers seem to think. The theory is fairly straightforward: One's life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good. I think that something along similar lines is the correct view of the meaning of life. And I intend to defend such a view here.

The theory at the heart of *It's a Wonderful Life* is an objectivist theory of the meaning of life. It identifies the meaningfulness of one's life in the objective good that one causes. I will refer to the theory as the *good cause account* of the meaning of life. This view is distinct from subjectivist accounts of the meaning of life. Subjectivist theories hold that fulfillment or some other subjective state is what makes a life meaningful. On such a view one's life is meaningful if one finds it meaningful. Capra's film rejects this view: George Bailey realizes that his dismal assessment of the meaning of his life was wrong. The film assumes that there is a fact of the matter of whether his life was meaningful; he could not be wrong otherwise. I argue that the film is right to endorse the objectivist view.

However, the film also suggests a problematic refinement to the good cause account. We can call it the "Pottersville Test." The test suggests a way to identify the good of which one is the cause: imagine a world where you never existed. The difference in intrinsic value is the value of your life. I argue that this is a very bad test. It might sometimes help isolate the good effects of one's actions, but it is often very misleading. The principal problem is that it asks us to ignore the good effects of our actions if they have redundant causes. I will argue that this is a mistake and that we should reject the Pottersville Test.

This paper proceeds in several steps. I begin with a brief overview of *It's a Wonderful Life*. After the synopsis, I sort out some of the conceptual terrain, drawing a distinction between welfare and the meaning of life. I then develop a defense of the good cause account of the meaning of life in response to the problems facing the other theories I consider.¹ I argue against both subjectivist theories and hybrid theories—those that include both objective and subjective conditions. I show the relative virtues of the good cause account over two of the most compelling theories in the current literature, those offered by Erik Wielenberg and Susan Wolf.² After a defense of objectivist theories, I offer reasons to reject the Pottersville Test.

It's a Wonderful Life

It's a Wonderful Life opens over Bedford Falls where the townsfolk are praying for one of its most beloved citizens, George Bailey. The camera tacks back into to the starry heavens where the prayers are heard. A celestial committee dispatches an angel to scene. His name is Clarence (Henry Travers). He has the IQ of a rabbit. After 200 years of service he is yet to earn his wings. Since Clarence is a bit slow, he needs substantial debriefing. In the debriefing, we see the major events of George's life leading up to the present crisis. The narrative begins with a heroic rescue: George plunges into an icy lake to save his younger brother. The shock of the cold costs him the hearing in his right ear. This is but the start of a pattern where George suffers personal losses by helping others.

We learn that George has a life long ambition to escape from Bedford Falls—to go to college, travel the world and study engineering. He wants to build tall buildings in big cities: "I'm gonna build airfields, I'm gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high, I'm gonna build bridges a mile long." His ambition is grand. But it is repeatedly thwarted. Shortly before he is to leave town, his father dies, thereby leaving the family business in receivership. The chairman of the board, an evil banker named Potter (Lionel Barrymore), votes to dissolve the bank. Minutes before George is scheduled to leave for the train station, the board blocks Potter's proposal. They decide to allow the bank to stay open as long as George assumes the leadership position. Rather than allow his father's life's work to perish, rather than leave the townsfolk dependent on the greedy Potter, George decides to stay in Bedford Falls for a few more years. But just a few.

George plans to escape when his younger brother returns from college, four years down the road. But here too George is thwarted. While at college his brother married into a family of means, and he has been offered a position in the family business in Buffalo. If he accepts, he will not be able to take over the bank from George. Selflessly freeing his brother to pursue a better opportunity, George decides to stay at the helm.

George never does leave Bedford Falls, not even to go to war. He is ineligible to serve in WWII because of the deafness in his left ear. He almost leaves for a honeymoon after his wedding in 1929, but, once again, on the way out of town, duty calls. To stop a run on the bank, he uses all but \$2 of the \$2000 he saved up for a world tour. Broke, and responsible for a bank in crisis, George must once again stay home.

We see George happy only five times: when he bought his suitcase to go off to college, when his brother comes back from school, when he meets his wife, when he is leaving town on his honeymoon, and at the very end. It seems that he is happy only when he thinks he will soon be leaving Bedford Falls. Of course, he enjoyed the night he met his wife, but the proposal four years later was not an equivocally happy moment. Before embracing his fiancé, he cries: "Now you listen to me. [. . .] I don't want to get

marred, ever, to anyone. Do you understand that? I want to do what I want to do." But, of course, George never gets to do what he wants to do: get out of Bedford Falls.

Over the course of the next decade, George runs the family business and raises a large family. The townsfolk prosper. The Bailey Building and Loan extends credit to those seeking to leave the Potter owned slums. But on Christmas Eve it looks like George will go to jail and the bank will collapse. Hence, the prayers that open the film. George's uncle misplaced \$8000 on the day a bank examiner is scheduled to arrive. Knowing that his uncle will likely go to jail, George decides to take the rap. Facing jail time and failure, he succumbs to despair. It appears that his sacrifice was for naught. Why did he stay in Bedford Falls all these years? Angrily, he asks his wife: "Why do we have all these kids?" Frustrated, trapped, and miserable, George heads for the bridge.

Lucky for George, Clarence beats him to it. The angel second-class throws himself into the water, knowing that George will surely come to his rescue. Drying out over coffee, George confesses his despair, saying that that it would be better if he had never existed. Clarence grants his wish. George finds himself in the world without him, a world where Bedford Falls is controlled by Potter. The city has even been renamed "Pottersville." It is a den of vice, where everything is for sale. Pottersville is a capitalist nightmare, a crass village of greed. Bedford Falls desperately needed George.

Clarence's device works as planned: The trip to Pottersville makes apparent the value of George's life. He returns home a changed man. Hearing about his bad luck, his friends and fellow citizens donate buckets of cash. All is well in Bedford Falls. And Clarence gets his wings.

Preliminary Remarks on the Meaning of Life

I am approaching determining the meaning of life as a mode of evaluating human existence. When assessing the meaning of a life, we attribute a particular degree of a certain kind of value—that of meaningfulness. Lives that are below a threshold of this kind of value are meaningless, or worse, have negative meaning.³ Meaningfulness is an important kind of value that is conceptually distinct from several other ways in which a life might be good.⁴

We want our lives to be meaningful, to have positive meaning. Victor Frankl goes so far as to claim that the desire for meaning is the primary motivational force in humans. He calls it the "will to meaning."⁵ Most plausibly, this is what drives George to want to get out of Bedford Falls. His ambition is fueled by a desire for meaning. Meaningfulness is the kind of value that often comes into view upon deathbed reflection and moments of despair, where we wonder if our lives were worth living.⁶ We do not merely want to live happy lives, but meaningful lives as well.⁷ The kind of value we are concerned with in moments of despair appears to be distinct from that of prudential value, since the two concerns can come apart. We can imagine lives that are low in prudential value but high in meaningfulness.⁸

Sometimes, it is rational to hold the meaning of our lives in greater esteem than our own personal good. Achilles' choice illustrates the point. Achilles knew that if he did battle against the Trojans that he would die before the war was over, but that his name would live on for ages; however, if he stayed out of the fight, his name would be forgotten, but his life would be long and happy. He chose a short meaningful life over a long and prosperous one. He was not merely motivated by a desire for fame, but for significant achievement as well.⁹ Regardless of whether we think that glory on the battlefield is a "project of worth", given his values, his decision was eminently rational.¹⁰ It is perfectly rational to care about quality of our lives and not just our welfare.¹¹

Subjectivist Theories

Subjectivist theories of the meaning of life hold that what makes a life meaningful is purely a matter of how that life seems to the one who lives it. Richard Taylor provides the classic defense of such a view.¹² He develops a theory of the meaning of life through an additive procedure: First identify a clearly meaningless life. Then try adding to it. When you add something that makes the life meaningful, you will have found the sufficient conditions for meaningfulness.

Taylor's first step is to identify a clearly meaningless life. He picks Sisyphus, who is condemned to eternal, meaningless toil—each day he must roll a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down when he approaches the top. Clearly, in the myth of Sisyphus we find a meaningless life. He is grudgingly engaged in a pointless task.

In search of sufficient conditions for meaningfulness, Taylor suggests two general strategies for remedying the deficiency. We could either (1) give Sisyphus's activity a valuable result, have it result in an enduring accomplishment, or (2) we could change his attitude toward his task. Taylor rejects the first and defends second approach.

The first strategy might appear to be promising. It seems that Sisyphus's life is meaningless because his activity leads to nothing. Rolling a stone up a hill endlessly is a pointless task. Sisyphus is no better than a hamster running in a wheel. Accordingly, one might think that the meaninglessness of his life is solely a result of the meaninglessness of his project. If only the stone rolling had a purpose. Taylor asks us to imagine a revised version of the myth where Sisyphus is able to round the peak of the hill and assemble his daily rocks into a glorious cathedral. His stone rolling would now have a point. It would produce something of enduring value. Surely this would make his life meaningful. He would have left his mark on the world.

The problem, Taylor argues, is that this option is not available to us. Our accomplishments simply do not endure: "Our achievements, even though they are often beautiful, are mostly bubbles; and those that

do last, like the sandswept pyramids, soon become mere curiosities while around the rest of mankind continues its perpetual toting of rocks, only to see them roll down."¹³

To see why, we need not appeal to a cosmic time frame of billions of years. Sure, in a few billion years all human accomplishments will be obliterated when the sun burns out and sucks our solar system into a black hole. But we do not need to wait that long. How many human accomplishments last more than a few generations? How many fewer last for millenia? Not even one in ten thousand. Hence, we should give up on the futile attempt to achieve meaning through enduring accomplishments.

Taylor suggests another option. He asks us to imagine yet another version of the Sisyphus myth: In this version the gods give Sisyphus the desire to do nothing but roll stones. Now we find Sisyphus fulfilled. He has all the time in the world to do nothing but what he most wants to do. What joy! The gods, Taylor argues, have given Sisyphus an incredible gift—they made his life meaningful. Taylor claims to have identified a sufficient condition for meaningfulness, a condition that is happily within our reach: personal fulfillment.¹⁴ He offers a purely subjectivist theory. Whether one's life is meaningful is entirely a matter of how meaningful one finds it. There is no objective fact of the matter. Lives are not objectively any more or less meaningful than others.¹⁵ They all lead to the same result: Nothing. Hence, meaning is subjective. Feeling fulfilled is all we need to lead a meaningful life.

I think we should be suspicious of every step of Taylor's argument, but I will hold off on the details. Rather than assessing the soundness of the argument, we can see that the theory is wrong because of its implications. Pure subjectivist theories have absurd implications. Subjectivist theories of the meaning of life imply that one could live a meaningful life in Robert Nozick's experience machine—which generates a simulated world akin to the one in *The Matrix*.¹⁶ More specifically, subjectivist theories imply that a life devoted to curing cancer in the machine would be more meaningful than a similar life outside the machine if the person in the machine felt a higher degree of fulfillment. But this is absurd. It is pointless to devote oneself to curing cancer inside the experience machine. There are no cancer victims in the machine; there are only simulations.

Similarly, purely subjectivist theories cannot appropriately distinguish between actual lives. Taylor's theory implies that any two equally fulfilling lives are equally meaningful, even if one is devoted to curing cancer and the other is devoted to consuming vast quantities of excrement.¹⁷ But a grinning excrement eater does not live as meaningful of a life as a cancer researcher. It is absurd to suggest otherwise. Hence, we should reject the subjective theory. It is radically out of touch with our concept of meaningfulness.

It's a Wonderful Life gives us an additional reason to reject the subjectivist theory. The subjective theory implies that no one can be wrong about how meaningful or meaningless they find their life. If one finds it fulfilling, it is meaningful. But George Bailey's despair gives us excellent reason to reject

subjectivist theories. During his dark night of the soul, George mistakenly thought that his life was meaningless because the Bailey Building and Loan seemed about to fail under his stewardship. The bank's collapse would indeed have been a tremendous failure, and a prison sentence would have been humiliating. But George was wrong to think that his life would be rendered meaningless as a result. His merely thinking it so does not make his life meaningless. The trip to Pottersville helps George see his mistake.

If the subjectivist theory were correct, then George couldn't have been wrong; the trip to Pottersville was just a rhetorical move to get him to revise his assessment. But surely this is an inefficient route to the goal. An angel with the power to transport people to alternate universes could surely have directly changed George's view of his life, much like the gods did for Sisyphus fulfilled. Why not make that movie? The answer is clear: The angel does not simply cause George to be fulfilled; instead, he shows George that he was wrong. His despair was based on an incorrect assessment of the value of his life. We can be right or wrong about these things. George was wrong and so, conversely, is a Sisyphus feeling fulfilled by his meaningless task.

Hybrid Theories

Hybrid theories of the meaning of life try to capture the importance of both our feelings of fulfillment and their objective appropriateness. They have both subjective and objective conditions. One of the most plausible hybrid theories is that developed by Susan Wolf, who argues that one's life is made meaningful through active engagement in projects of worth.¹⁸ She calls her theory the *fitting fulfillment* view. To put it in slogan form, the view holds that meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness. The slogan emphasizes two important conditions: (1) subjective attraction, and (2) the objective value of the pursuit.

The first condition captures what is appealing about the purely subjectivist view. Fulfillment appears to be a necessary condition on living a meaningful life. But unlike purely subjectivist views, hybrid views do not hold that fulfillment is sufficient. Since this was the chief source of trouble for the subjectivist theory, the fitting fulfillment view escapes the main problems facing its subjectivist rival. Wolf's hybrid view is neither vulnerable to experience machine style objections, nor to the grinning excrement eater *reductio ad absurdum*. The fitting fulfillment view correctly implies that the grinning excrement eater lives a meaningless life. The project of devouring heaping piles of excrement is not a project of worth. It is not a fitting object of fulfillment.

At this point, the defender of the subjectivist theory might object that the fitting fulfillment view implies something equally counter-intuitive. Just as the critics charged that the purely subjectivist view cannot distinguish between more and less meaningful lives of equal levels of fulfillment, the fitting

fulfillment view also implies that the life of a cancer researcher is equally meaningful as that of the grinning excrement eater. This is because neither is engaged in a project of worth. No one can be. Curing cancer is no more objectively valuable than eating excrement. One might press this charge based on two types of considerations.¹⁹ First, one might argue that there is no objective value. This is the position of the nihilist.²⁰ I will put this line of argument aside for now and return to it in the next section.

Second, one might argue that curing cancer is no more objectively valuable than eating excrement, since the ultimate outcome of both is the same: The ultimate outcome is a cold, lifeless entropic universe.²¹ Bertrand Russell puts it succinctly: "all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and [. . .] the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins."²² The final outcome of all human actions is worthless. And the implication is that nothing can be good if the ultimate outcome is worthless. Hence, no human activities are any better than any other. Accordingly, the fitting fulfillment view faces the same problems as the purely subjectivist view.

Similar considerations lead Taylor to reject an objective component to the meaning of life. Taylor gives us good reason to think that the meaning of life cannot come from enduring accomplishments, since nothing we do will endure for long at all. But this does not give us any reason to think that all projects are of equal worth. Why would it? The argument against the fitting fulfillment theory contains a false premise. There is no reason to think that the value of an activity is entirely determined by how enduring its ultimate outcome proves to be. Certainly there is value in making someone laugh, even if they don't laugh forever. Surely there is value in providing a hot meal for the hungry, even if they are not satiated for all eternity. And surely it is good to cure cancer, even if humanity does not endure until the end of time. Something need not be permanent in order to be valuable while it exists. To think otherwise is to exhibit an irrational, arbitrary preference for the distant future.²³

Although the fitting fulfillment view escapes the worry about final outcomes, it is still not clear that we should accept the theory. Once again, *It's a Wonderful Life* helps us see a significant problem, this time for hybrid theories. In his moment of despair, George Bailey thought his life's work had come to naught. He felt like an abject failure. But, as noted above, he was wrong. The failure of the family bank would certainly be a significant loss; however, it would not sap his life of positive meaning. Just look at how much good George did for the people in his town. Although George could not see it, his life was indeed meaningful. This is why the trip to Pottersville was useful. It helps correct his incorrect assessment of the meaning of his life.

If George had not been shaken out of his mistaken evaluation, if the friendly angel had not given him a glimpse of Pottersville, his life would have been no less meaningful, though George would not have

realized it. Had he killed himself, he would have died without a sense of fulfillment. But this would not make his life meaningless; it was full of meaning either way.²⁴ George just could not see it in his moment of despair. Since, in this scenario, it is plausible to believe that George lived a meaningful life that was without feelings of fulfillment, the fitting fulfillment theory is wrong.

One might object that movie is a bit more complicated. It portrays George as living a life of fulfillment. Perhaps the overall amount of fulfillment in his life was high apart from this low moment. But if George had been frustrated for the bulk of his life, it is questionable whether we should think he led a meaningful life. Hence, the objection concludes, *It's a Wonderful Life* does not support an objectivist theory. Rather, it supports a hybrid theory.

In response, two comments are in order. First, whether or not *It's a Wonderful Life* is in full agreement with the objectivist theory is irrelevant to the truth of the theory. As we shall see, there is much to disagree with in the movie. Second, as a matter of interpretation, the movie does indeed portray George as living a life of frustrated ambition. He spent his entire life trying to get out of Bedford Falls. Shortly before his first attempt to leave town, he tells his father why he does not want to stay and run the bank: "I couldn't. I couldn't face being cooped up for the rest of my life in a shabby little office. Oh, I'm sorry Pop, I didn't mean that, but it's this business of nickels and dimes and spending all your life trying to figure out how to save three cents on a length of pipe. I'd go crazy. I want to do something big and something important." We have no reason to think that his opinion ever changed.

Each time he comes close to escaping, duty pulls him back. He was thwarted by his father's death, by his brother taking a job in Buffalo, and by the stock market crash. He could not leave for WWII because he is deaf in one ear. He could not even get away for a vacation! We have good reason to think that George, although clearly dedicated to his work, lived a life of quiet desperation. Nevertheless, his life was meaningful. We know this from the very beginning. George learns it after his trip to Pottersville. His father tried to explain it to him: "You know, George, I feel that in a small way we are doing something important. Satisfying a fundamental urge. It's deep in the race for a man to want his own roof and walls and fireplace, and we're helping him get those things in our shabby little office."

The cigar sign in the drug store window where George worked as a child was right. It says, "Ask Dad, he knows." Not only did George save his brother from drowning, prevent an accidental poisoning, and help the townsfolk become home-owners, he stood up to Potter and helped to make Bedford Falls a caring community. George lived a meaningful life that was nevertheless largely devoid of feelings of fulfillment.

Similar considerations give us good reason to reject any hybrid theory. No matter the subjective condition, we can imagine a similar scenario where a man like George lacks the subjective condition but nevertheless lives a meaningful life. Hence, there is no necessary subjective condition on the meaning of

life. We should reject both subjectivist and hybrid theories of the meaning of life. Any viable theory will be a purely objectivist theory.

Objectivist Theories

The fact that George was mistaken about the meaningfulness of his life prior to his visit to Pottersville supports an objectivist theory of the meaning of life. It is not the case that George's life suddenly became meaningful when he revised his assessment. No, his life was meaningful regardless of his subjective feelings of fulfillment. Hence, I do not see why we should include a subjective condition in the analysis of the meaning of life. Whether one's life is meaningful is an objective matter of fact. It is not constituted by one's reactions. It does not hinge on one's level of fulfillment. Fulfillment is one thing; meaning is another. We hope to be appropriately fulfilled, as Wolf notes, but why muddy the waters by blurring two distinct concepts?

It's a Wonderful Life suggests an objectivist theory of the meaning of life. George's life is meaningful because he is responsible for bringing about lots of good. That's what makes a life meaningful. Earlier I gave this theory the label "the good cause account." It holds that one's life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good. Due to limitations of scope, it will be difficult to work out a precise version of the view here. There are a variety of difficult details that fully fleshed out theory will have to specify. For instance, the theory will have to say whether the prevention of the bad counts in favor of meaningfulness. In addition, it will have to specify whether the results that count in favor of meaningfulness must be intentional, or if accidental and non-intentional effects are relevant. Most difficult, it must also specify the relative importance of various kinds of goods that matter, such as achievement, moral worth, perfectionist value, and aesthetic value. These issues are largely beyond the scope of this paper. However, to achieve a slightly more satisfying level of precision, it will help to contrast the general good cause account with another theory, that of Erik Wielenberg.

Wielenberg defends a theory that might be classified under the hybrid category, though it is objectivist at the core. He offers a neo-Aristotelian theory that holds that the meaning of life is to be found in intrinsically valuable activities.²⁵ Wielenberg's theory is objectivist in nature, since it holds that the value of a life is determined by the objective value of the activities one engages in. He suggests that we can determine the objective value of the activities through an isolation test: Ask whether the activity would be worth engaging in apart from its consequences. If so, it is intrinsically valuable. Here are some activities that he thinks pass the test: falling in love, experiencing pleasure, engaging in intellectually stimulating activity, and being creative.²⁶

I think that the principal problem with Wielenberg's theory is in its core formulation. The theory counts only intrinsically valuable activities as contributing to the meaningfulness of one's life, but this is

far too restrictive. Why should we exclude instrumentally valuable activities that have good results? Perhaps, under some strained description, George's activities at the bank were intrinsically valuable. But much of what counts towards the meaningfulness of his life is not in the activities themselves, but in their results: saving his brother (who in turn saved a troop transport full of men), preventing an accidental poisoning, or extending a loan. Running a bank may have some intrinsic achievement value, but it can also be of tremendous instrumental value. The trip to Pottersville helps us see the good that George is responsible for. This is what makes his life meaningful, not the intrinsic value of the activity of book keeping or jumping into an icy lake. The good cause account of the meaning of life is superior to Wielenberg's theory, since it appropriately includes all of the goods that make George's life meaningful. Wielenberg's theory fails because it is under-inclusive.

In reply, Wielenberg might complain that I haven't so much as raised an objection to his theory of the meaning of life as I have offered a theory of a different type of meaning. He proposes a distinction between two types of meaning: external meaning and internal meaning. As he defines it, external meaning is a matter of how much good one brings into the universe. In contrast, for a life to have internal meaning is "for it to be good for the person who lives it and for it to include an activity that is worthwhile."²⁷ His theory is a theory of internal meaning. It is somewhat unclear if this notion includes a subjective condition, but it appears to. This is why I said earlier that it might be best described as a hybrid theory. Either way, Wielenberg intends the notion to capture something of importance. He says that internal meaning is what we want when we want to do something with our lives. Since, he only intends to offer a theory of internal meaning, he might claim that my objection misses the target. I argue that his theory cannot account for the goods that contribute to external meaning, but this is not an objection to his theory, since it is merely a theory of internal meaning.

Perhaps Wielenberg has captured an important and distinctive kind of meaning. Regardless, I do not think that the notion of internal meaning captures what we want when we want to live a meaningful life. Like hybrid theories, it blurs feeling fulfilled with living a meaningful life. Yes, we want to be fulfilled and we want our fulfillment to be fitting. That is, we want our lives to be meaningful. The good cause account explains, in part, what makes fulfillment appropriate. It is not the mere engagement in intrinsically valuable activities. Rather, a life is meaningful in so far as one is responsible for goodness. As George's life shows, one can live a meaningful life by engaging in activities that are only instrumentally valuable. Hence, the good cause account is a superior notion of the meaning of life. It tracks what is of importance. If it fails to take internal meaning into account, then so much for the notion of internal meaning.

The good cause account is a purely objectivist theory. It holds that there are no subjective conditions on the meaning of life. But one might worry that purely objectivist theories have strange results. In

defense of the subjective condition of her hybrid theory, Wolf asks us to imagine a slight variation on the original Sisyphus myth: Imagine that unbeknownst to Sisyphus, his daily rock rolling scares off angry vultures that would have otherwise decimated a small village. In this scenario his life has good results.²⁸ The good cause account of the meaning of life would say that Wolf's Sisyphus leads a meaningful life. But clearly he does not. So, the objection concludes, we should reject the good cause account.

If the best, most precise, notion of the good cause account includes accidental outcomes in the calculation of the meaning of life, as it probably should, then the objection is right that the theory implies that Sisyphus's life would be at least somewhat meaningful. If his rock rolling prevents horrid vultures from spreading a disease or stealing young children from a vulnerable town, his rock rolling is of significant instrumental good. If his rock rolling merely amuses the townsfolk, then, here too, his rock rolling would be somewhat good. Perhaps, if the amusement was great enough, and the resulting mirth prevented a rash of suicides, the value of Sisyphus's toil would cross the threshold of meaningfulness. Yes, the theory has this implication. But I do not see the problem. Surely the good effects would make his life meaningful in this regard.

Frankl asks us to imagine an ape that is punctured repeatedly in order to manufacture a life saving serum.²⁹ The ape cannot hope to understand the significance of its life. There is nothing we can say to make it understand. But its life is indeed meaningful. Hundreds of people are saved as a result. Perhaps, Frankl suggests, much of our suffering is like this. It serves a purpose in the larger scheme of things, but like the medical ape, there is no way in which we can be made to understand our role.

I think that there is much wrong with this analogy. Perhaps our suffering does serve a larger purpose, perhaps not. I will put this aside. What matters is whether we are indeed casually responsible for significant good. If so, our lives are meaningful. The medical ape shows us this much. As with the medical ape, if Sisyphus were to learn that his life had this kind of instrumental value, he could appropriately take some solace in this fact. Nevertheless, if he were at all normal, it is not clear that he would feel fulfilled rolling his rock. His activity is too simple, too repetitive, and not sufficiently intellectually engaging to be fulfilling. Rock rolling is not the kind of thing that psychologically normal people can find very satisfying. But this does not show that the good cause account is wrong as a theory of the meaning of life. No, it merely shows that fulfillment requires a more complex kind of engagement than rock rolling, whatever the consequences might be. The lesson is just this: Merely knowing that one's actions have value does not make them satisfying to perform. Wouldn't housework be better if it did!

The mere fact that one's life is, to some extent, meaningful does not show that, all things considered, it is worth living, nor does the fact that a life is high in happiness, fulfillment, aesthetic value, perfection, or moral worth. Surely these all contribute, but there is no guarantee that any amount of one dimension of value will be sufficient to ensure that, given a synoptic preview of the life to come, one would choose to

be born. I suspect that Wolf's Sisyphus would refuse. Meaning is important, but it is not all that matters. It is not the only thing that makes a life worth living.

Earlier, in the discussion of hybrid theories of the meaning of life, I raised an objection to the objective condition. The objection concerns the very plausibility of objective value. As with hybrid theories, nihilists will have significant concerns with the good cause account. It has strong meta-ethical commitments to realism. Indeed, I assume that there is objective value in the universe. But it is beyond the scope of this project to defend such realism here. I will merely note that I see no compelling reasons to take nihilism seriously. For those who find my optimism hopelessly naïve, I will simply say that I think it is self-evident. Nothing more can be said in favor of objective value here. I acknowledge that the good cause account is off the table for nihilists. So be it.

The Pottersville Test

Although I think that *It's a Wonderful Life* gives credence to the objectivist theory of the meaning of life, it also proposes a problematic refinement. We can extract the refinement from the central episode, George's waking nightmare—the visit to Pottersville. The best way to get at the refinement is to imagine an alternate version of the movie. Imagine that instead of the dystopic Pottersville—the capitalist nightmare where everything is for sale—the world without George were far better than the actual world.³⁰ His mother had a different son a few years later who struck it rich and used his fortune to invest in Bedford Falls and its people. Rather than becoming a spinster librarian, George's wife married a man a bit less grumpy and far less prone to gloomy spells. She appears to be far happier in her alternate life. George's cab driver friend, Ernie was given a lower interest loan by another bank and uses the extra money to send his child to college. And so on. . . . Given a glimpse of this alternate universe, what would George think? There is no mystery: He would surely head for the first bridge. No responsible angel would allow suicidal George to see this world!

The inverted trip to Pottersville helps put the refinement in relief. The movie suggests that the meaning of life is directly proportionate to the good one is responsible for, but the good only includes the difference in value between the actual world and the nearest possible world where one did not exist. This notion closely tracks Wielenberg's notion of external meaning: "When a life has external meaning in this sense, the universe is better than it would have been had the life not have been lived."³¹ He asks us to imagine a life much like the inverted Pottersville, where had one not existed, the exact same good would have resulted from someone else's actions. In such a case, he argues, one's life lacks external meaning.

Although *It's a Wonderful Life* seems to suggest a theory of this sort, and Wielenberg thinks it deserves a separate category of meaning, I am not convinced that external meaning tracks anything of importance. I do not think that it deserves a special category of meaning, and I do not think it tracks what

we want when we want to live a meaningful life. If sometimes people have this in mind, they are mistaken to be worried about their counter-factual contribution. The theory of external meaning fails as a theory of the meaning of life for the same reason that the counter-factual theories of causation fail—they cannot account for cases of causal over-determination.³² To see why, consider a life of tremendous anti-meaning, such as that of Adolph Hitler.

Hilter's life has a high degree of negative meaning, perhaps the greatest in all human history. It is the opposite of meaningful. Horrendously evil lives lack meaning, and Hilter's life was horrendously evil.³³ Here is the problem: imagine that one day Hitler did something good; he gave a hot meal to a hungry homeless child. It might be the case that in the nearest possible world where Hitler did not exist, someone else rose to power in the Nazi party and carried out its genocidal mission with equal vigor and effectiveness. In such a case, the only difference between our world and the world where Hitler did not exist might be that the homeless child did not receive a hot meal. The difference in value between the actual world and this alternate universe is positive—a hot meal for a hungry homeless child. In such a case, the counter-factual based theory of external meaning implies that Hitler led a meaningful life. This is absurd. Hitler led a horrendously evil life of no positive meaning. We should reject the theory of external meaning and the Pottersville refinement for suggesting otherwise.

However, one might object, if there is nothing to the Pottersville refinement, then why would we expect George to be upset? Why would any angel worth his wings keep George away from the alternate universe? There is at least one good reason. One thing that the original trip to Pottersville did well is set George's contribution in relief. It made all the good that he was responsible for clear. However, a trip to the happier world would do the opposite. It would mask the good he is responsible for and, worse, it might highlight the bad. This certainly would not help make George see the value of his life. It would do nothing but upset him. Of course we should keep him away.

Further, since George cared for his mother, his wife, and the townsfolk, he might be tempted to wish himself never born if they would have been better off without him. However, I see no reason to think that the counterfactual difference erases George's actual contribution to the real world. His life was meaningful in the actual world, even though the world would have been better had he not existed. The example of Hitler makes this clear for negative meaning. The world might have been worse without him, but this does not mean that he lived a meaningful life. I see no reason to think the situation is any different for positive meaning. We should reject the Pottersville test.

Conclusion

Generations of viewers have been right to embrace the theory of the meaning of life at the heart of *It's a Wonderful Life*. The theory holds that one's life is meaningful to the extent that it is causally responsible for good. I call this the good cause account of the meaning of life. I argue that it is superior to both subjectivist and hybrid theories of the meaning of life.

The movie gives us good reason to reject purely subjectivist theories of the meaning of life. George Bailey's life was meaningful regardless of his subjective state. If he died in despair, never getting a glimpse of Pottersville, his life would have still been meaningful. We should not only reject subjectivist accounts, but hybrid theories as well. No subjective states are necessary for living meaningful lives. Any viable theory of the meaning of life will be an objective theory.

I have hence shown that the good cause account is superior to both the hybrid theory defended by Susan Wolf and the internal meaning theory of Erik Wielenberg. However, the film seems to endorse the Pottersville test, and I offer reasons to reject the refinement. It suffers from the same problem as counterfactual theories of causation, namely, it cannot account for overdetermined effects. Since the good cause account can, it is a superior theory of the meaning of life. One's life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good.³⁴

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Notes

¹ For an overview of the literature, see: Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life", *Ethics* (2002) 112: 781-814; Thaddeus Metz, "Introduction", *Philosophical Papers* (2005) 34.3: 311-29; Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life", *Philosophy Compass* (2007) 2.2: 197-217..

² Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life". *Social Philosophy and Policy* (1997) 14, pp. 207-25, Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Erik Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³ It's not clear what label we should give to the opposite of meaningfulness. We might call it anti-meaning or antimatter. Unless noted otherwise, when I say "meaning" I mean positive meaning.

⁴ Feldman (2006, pp.8-12) lists 5 ways in which lives can be good: morally, causally, aesthetically, exemplarily, and prudentially. Meaning is conspicuously absent from his list. See: Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

⁵ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p.99.

⁶ It is fairly common to motivate the concern this way. See: Wolf (2010, p.8) and Wielenberg (2005). The deathbed test suffers from similar problems as the crib test for isolating concerns about welfare: imagine looking into your child's crib. . . . On our deathbed, we might also regret not having enough fun. See Feldman (2006, pp.9-10) and Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.2-3, for a discussion of the crib test.

⁷ This is Wolf's (2010) central thesis.

⁸ Here, I assume our everyday notion of happiness, not some complex theory of eudemonia. No matter, I don't mean to assume or deny that self-interested concerns focus on the attainment of subjective happiness.

⁹ It is not clear whether a desire for posthumous fame is self-interested. When it is, we are likely confused.

¹⁰ Wolf (1997 and 2010) argues that meaning in a life is a result of active engagement in projects of worth.

¹¹ Kagan makes a distinction between me and my life. I think that this is best expressed in terms of different kinds of value. Our lives can have value for us, and they can also have instrumental, aesthetic, and moral value. See: Shelly Kagan, "The Limits of Well-being", in: E.F. Paul, F.D. Miller and Jeffrey Paul (eds.), *The Good Life and the Human Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Shelly Kagan, "Me and My Life", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1994) 94: 309-324.

¹² Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life, in: Klemke, E.D. and Steven M. Cahn (Eds.), *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). He later rejected purely subjective theories.

¹³ Taylor (2008, p.139)

¹⁴ Wolf (2010) calls Taylor's theory the "fulfillment theory."

¹⁵ There is an objective fact of the matter of about one's level of fulfillment. But the meaningfulness of a life is constitutively dependent on one's response to that life. This is why I call Taylor's theory a subjective theory. This usage is fairly standard in the literature.

¹⁶ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books, 1974), pp.42-5.

¹⁷ Wielenberg (2005) names the example the "grinning excrement eater."

¹⁸ Wolf (2010, p.9)

¹⁹ I want to put aside all issues concerning supernatural sources of meaning. It's not entirely clear to me that supernatural meanings help at all. Merely being part of God's plan does little for us, unless the plan is good. It appears that goodness is fundamental.

²⁰ By nihilism I mean any position that denies that there is objective value. One can be a nihilist in general or about a particular form of value. On this view, relativism is a form of nihilism, as are expressivism and emotivism.

²¹ Wielenberg (2005, p.16) calls this the "final outcome argument." I can only give it a cursory hearing.

²² Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship", in: Klemke and Cahn (2008), p.56.

²³ Paul Edwards, "The Meaning and Value of Life" in: Klemke and Cahn (2008), p.121. In addition, both Wielenberg (2005, p.29) and Wolf (2010) make this point. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd", in: Klemke and Cahn (2008), seems to raise a similar objection. Wielenberg decisively refutes the final outcome argument.

²⁴ The harmful effects of his suicide most likely would have a negative impact on the meaningfulness of his life.

²⁵ Wielenberg (2005).

²⁶ Wielenberg (2005, p.34).

²⁷ Wielenberg (2005, p.15).

²⁸ Wolf (2010, pp.21, 38).

²⁹ Frankl (1959, p.134).

³⁰ Some think that Pottsville might just be far more desirable than the small town. See Kamiya's (2001) tongue in cheek account.

³¹ Wielenberg (2005, p.15).

³² Counter-factual theories of causation hold that C causes E iff had C not occurred, then E would not have occurred. Such theories fail when there are redundant causes. Imagine that there was a backup shooter on the grassy knoll. Had Oswald not shot JFK, the backup would have. The problem is this: If there was a backup and Oswald went through with the assassination, counter-factual theories incorrectly imply that Oswald did not cause JFK's death. Since had he not shot JFK, he would have died anyway.

³³ For other horrendous evils, see: Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God", in: Charles Taliaferro and Paul J. Griffins (Eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003).

³⁴ I thank Chris Grau, Dan Shaw, and an anonymous reviewer for feedback on an earlier version of this paper.