



## Anti-Meaning and Why It Matters

**ABSTRACT:** *It is widely recognized that lives and activities can be meaningful or meaningless, but few have appreciated that they can also be anti-meaningful. Anti-meaning is the polar opposite of meaning. Our purpose in this essay is to examine the nature and importance of this new and unfamiliar topic. In the first part, we sketch four theories of anti-meaning that correspond to four leading theories of meaning. In the second part, we argue that anti-meaning has significance not only for our attempts to theorize about meaning in life but also for our ability to lead meaningful lives in the modern world.*

**KEYWORDS:** meaning in life, anti-meaning, well-being, harm, morality

There is a growing interest among analytic philosophers in the notion of meaning in life. It is not so much an interest in determining whether meaning is the sort of thing that people should care about or seek in their lives. After all, it seems almost tautological that it is more desirable to have a meaningful life than a meaningless one. The real issue is the *nature* of meaning. What is meaning exactly? What is missing in a life plagued by meaninglessness? And what must be added to a life to make it a meaningful one? A theory of meaning in life offers an answer to these questions. It tells us what constitutes meaning in life. Over the past several years, philosophers have begun to formulate and defend different theories of meaning.

Another trend in recent moral and political philosophy is an increased concern with the harms and burdens that we collectively impose on present and future individuals through our economic and lifestyle choices. Political and moral philosophers have raised alarms about the ways in which our political and economic choices adversely affect those living in developing countries. Environmental philosophers have written about the many harms and burdens that will befall future generations as a result of our consumptive lifestyles. Animal ethicists have lamented our inhumane treatment of animals. (See, e.g., Pogge 2008 and Lichtenberg 2014; Broome 2012; and Singer 2009.) A key challenge facing theorists concerned with these issues is to articulate the sorts of motives and reasons that might lead people to take responsibility for the harms they impose on others with whom they do not easily empathize. Another challenge is to explain how our individual contributions could matter despite being small in the grander scheme of things.

We are grateful for helpful feedback from Ben Bramble, Kirsten Egerstrom, Shelly Kagan, Iddo Landau, Sara Protasi, Duncan Purves, Melinda Roberts, Tina Rulli, Susan Wolf, three anonymous reviewers, and the editors of the *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*.



These two areas of concern—meaning in life and the harms and burdens we impose on others—are interestingly related, but the relation has been obscured by a conceptual oversight. There is a concept that, while almost universally unacknowledged, reveals a connection between these two issues and casts new light on our reasons for avoiding contributing to the harming of others. It is a concept well worth articulating. For lack of a better term, we call it *anti-meaning*.<sup>1</sup>

The simplest way to gesture at this idea is by way of analogy (cf. Metz 2002: 805–6). Think of badness or evil. St. Augustine may have thought of evil as the mere absence of good, but most of us think of evils and ills as having a sort of ‘positive’ presence, as adding something distinctively negative to the world. We recognize a difference between things that are bad and things that are neither good nor bad. Next, consider two ways that you might fail to benefit others. You might fail to affect them in any way at all, for better or for worse. Or you might harm them through your actions, rendering them worse off in some respect. Likewise, one can fall short of enjoying well-being in two different ways. Either one can be in a neutral state in which one merely lacks well-being, or one can be in a state of ‘ill-being’. In all of these cases, we can readily distinguish between the absence of some good (goodness, benefiting, well-being) and the presence of an opposing bad or evil (badness, harming, ill-being).

Now consider the case of meaningfulness. Meaning is the positive good at issue. In ordinary language, we call a life or activity ‘meaningful’ when it is sufficiently rich in the good of meaning and ‘meaningless’ when there is an utter lack of meaning. But what if a life does not merely lack meaning but is characterized by the presence of a directly opposing evil? Since there is no term in ordinary English for such an evil, we must coin one: ‘anti-meaning’. Anti-meaning is not the mere absence of meaning in the way that meaninglessness is. Rather, it is the negative polar opposite of meaning, just as evil, harming, and ill-being are the negative counterparts of good, benefiting, and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

Simply put, our goal in this essay is to examine what anti-meaning is and why it matters. The basic idea has been recognized by a handful of scholars, but none has systematically examined what anti-meaning would be given the truth of various popular theories of meaning or has explored its significance in any depth.<sup>3</sup> In part 1, we sketch four theories of anti-meaning that correspond to leading theories of

<sup>1</sup> We are not the first to discuss this idea. Thaddeus Metz has drawn attention to the same idea, which he calls ‘antimatter’ (Metz 2002: 805–7 and Metz 2013: 63–64, 233–36). Iddo Landau (2011: 316–17) discusses ‘the inverse of meaningfulness’. See also Nozick (1981: 612); Morris (1992: 49–50); Munitz (1993: 89–93); and Smuts (2013).

<sup>2</sup> It might be objected that *meaninglessness* is the directly opposing evil of meaning and that, therefore, it makes no sense to posit anti-meaning. We grant that lacking meaning is, in one important sense, the ‘opposite’ of having meaning. We are also open to the possibility that the absence of meaning is positively bad for a person. Yet, all of this is perfectly compatible with the existence of anti-meaning, which would be the opposite of meaning in a different sense that we have sought to illustrate through analogies. We assume that having meaning is good for a person and that having anti-meaning is bad for a person, but we remain neutral on the prudential status of meaninglessness. The issue of whether anti-meaning exists is independent of the issue of mere meaninglessness’ prudential status. (We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on this point.)

<sup>3</sup> Thaddeus Metz has gone the furthest in exploring this topic by articulating a theory of anti-meaning that corresponds to his novel naturalist theory of meaning (2013: 233–36). Here, we go beyond Metz’s pioneering

meaning. In part 2, we highlight various ways in which the concept of anti-meaning has theoretical significance and real practical significance for citizens of the modern world.

## 1. Four Theories of Anti-Meaning

So far, our characterization of anti-meaning has been wholly abstract and rather uninformative: anti-meaning is the evil whose polar opposite is the good of meaning. This tells us nothing about what an anti-meaningful life looks like in the real world or how to avoid living such a life. The remedy for this problem is to develop a theory of anti-meaning. Such a theory will tell us—ideally, in less abstract terms—what exactly constitutes anti-meaning in life.

Unfortunately, there is a serious methodological limitation facing any attempt to arrive at a plausible theory of anti-meaning. We lack terminology for this idea in ordinary language, and the concept itself is novel and unfamiliar. So we cannot rely on our linguistic or conceptual intuitions about anti-meaning to develop or test theories of the anti-meaningful life. Presumably, we have no such intuitions. Hence, asking questions of the form ‘But is a life or activity characterized by feature *F* anti-meaningful?’ will lead nowhere. This means that an investigation into the nature of anti-meaning cannot proceed in the straightforward manner in which many other philosophical topics are explored.

Despite this limitation, there is a way forward. In contrast to anti-meaning, the concept of *meaning* is an established part of our conceptual framework, and the philosophical investigation of theories of meaning is already well underway. The most promising strategy for developing a theory of anti-meaning, we propose, is *via* a theory of meaning. Given any substantive characterization of meaning, it can be asked what evil would be the polar opposite of that good. A plausible answer to that question will point in the direction of a theory of anti-meaning. This will be our methodology, which is inspired by Shelly Kagan’s recent investigation of ill-being (Kagan 2015). Implicit in this methodology are two defeasible working assumptions. The first is that, where there is meaning, there is the possibility of anti-meaning. The second assumption is that meaning and anti-meaning share a similar nature. That is, we assume that it is never the case that one type of thing (say, achieving one’s goals) generates meaning in a life whereas some very different type of thing (such as violating divine commands) constitutes anti-meaning.

In this section, we will examine four popular theories of meaning and ask what anti-meaning would be on each of them.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we will identify theories of anti-meaning that correspond to these theories of meaning. We will remain neutral as to which theory of meaning and anti-meaning is most plausible. Let us now see where this methodological strategy leads.

discussion by working out what anti-meaning would amount to on four of the leading contemporary theories of meaning and by explaining why it matters.

<sup>4</sup> For reasons of space, we are restricting our focus to a handful of popular ‘naturalist’ theories, though it is certainly worth asking what anti-meaning would be on various ‘supernaturalist’ theories of meaning.

## 1.1 The Objective Theory

One of the simplest theories of meaning in life is the objective theory. (For similar theories of meaning, see Singer 1995: ch. 10–11; Singer 1996: ch. 4; Wielenberg 2005; Smuts 2013; and Bramble 2014.) According to this view, your life is meaningful to the extent that you actively contribute to making the world a better place or to promoting ‘the good’. This theory is standardly called ‘objective’ because it treats meaningfulness as enjoying some independence from the subjective appraisal of the person whose life it is. The objective theory allows for the possibility that an activity or a life can be meaningful even if one fails to appreciate it or feels alienated from it. In a sense, this theory is incomplete until it is supplemented with a substantive theory of the good that tells us what sorts of actions, events, policies, and activities make the world a better place. Since there is a limitless supply of possible theories of the good, there are countless ways for the objective theory to be filled out. But whichever theories of the good are most plausible, the objective theory involves the simple idea that lives are meaningful to the extent that they make the world better in the relevant ways. It should be noted, however, that it is a common idea that meaning is achieved by participating in things ‘larger than ourselves’ (such as political movements, religious causes, etc.) that make the world better (cf. Singer 1993: 332–35; Wolf 2010: 18–25; Haidt 2010: 97–100; and Seligman 2011). Accordingly, when people talk about making a life more meaningful by promoting the good or making the world a better place, what is often meant is not that one necessarily has a great impact as an isolated individual—but rather that one participates in activities or projects that make a positive difference.

Meaninglessness on the objective view consists in the failure to promote the good or to make the world a better place. What about anti-meaning? If meaning is a matter of promoting the good, it is natural to think that anti-meaning is a matter of promoting the bad. The anti-meaningful life would be a life that is appropriately characterized as one that contributes to making the world a worse place. Intuitively, this theory of anti-meaning seems inescapable given the objective theory of meaning.

There are also strong theoretical reasons to recognize this theory of anti-meaning if we accept the objective theory of meaning. Imagine a CEO who is personally responsible for two aspects of her company’s operations: its generous efforts to battle poverty abroad and its rampant pollution of a nearby river, which is causing serious harm to local wildlife and residents. If the CEO is responsible for promoting much good *and* much bad in the world, how do we evaluate her life in terms of its meaningfulness? Clearly, we cannot say her life is *meaningless* since it contains substantial amounts of meaning in virtue of her contributions to philanthropic causes. At the same time, there is something deeply unsettling about categorizing her life as *very meaningful*. This assessment seems downright mistaken or at least grossly misleading.

Acknowledging the existence of anti-meaning allows us to explain why we do not consider the CEO’s life to be very meaningful. We can think of lives as locatable on a bipolar scale with ‘meaningful’ at one pole and ‘anti-meaningful’ at the other (Metz 2002: 806; Metz 2013: 63–64). On this picture, a life’s location on the scale

is a function of the meaning and anti-meaning it contains. This is a view on which one can offset the anti-meaning in one's life by engaging in meaningful activities. Of course, it is also one on which the meaning of one's life can be, in a sense, canceled out by anti-meaningful activities. If we understand the relationship of meaning and anti-meaning in this way, it is simply misguided to label the CEO's life as 'very meaningful'. It may contain meaning, but the meaningful and anti-meaningful elements of the life balance each other out, with the result that her life falls somewhere closer to the middle of the meaningful/anti-meaningful scale. Recognizing the existence of anti-meaning allows us to avoid seeing the life of the CEO as very meaningful without any further qualifications.<sup>5</sup> A similar point applies to the case of people who do much more to worsen the world than to improve it. Presumably, even a sadistic Nazi doctor like Josef Mengele promoted the good in *some* ways. Without the concept of anti-meaning, we would be left saying that Mengele's life was somewhat meaningful, end of story. That is an unpalatable result. If the objective theory of meaning is correct, there are good reasons to embrace the idea of anti-meaning and conceive of anti-meaning as involving the promotion of the bad.

## 1.2 The Subjective Satisfaction Theory

Subjective theories see meaning as grounded in individuals' attitudes or perceptions. One straightforward example is the subjective satisfaction theory, which states that a life or activity is meaningful to the extent that the individual in question takes satisfaction in it or derives a sense of fulfillment from it.<sup>6</sup> There are many ways to characterize satisfaction. Yet, at a minimum, it must involve feeling good about, and in response to, the activity in question. On this view, meaning is not directly affected by whether one's activities have any objective value or disvalue. In principle, a life that involves counting blades of grass or cooking methamphetamine could be just as meaningful as a life of artistic, intellectual, or moral achievement. It just depends on whether one feels fulfilled by what one is doing.

What would anti-meaning amount to on this simple subjective view? It should not be associated with a mere lack of fulfillment in one's activities. That would be meaninglessness. Nor, we think, should anti-meaning be automatically associated with the unpleasant feelings of boredom or alienation that can arise from this lack of fulfillment. Anti-meaning on this view would consist in an outright *dissatisfaction* with the life or activity in which one is engaged. If satisfaction or fulfillment is a form of felt attraction to activities one is engaging in, dissatisfaction is a kind of aversion or even repulsion for what one is doing. Felt dissatisfaction could take a wide variety of forms and spring from many causes. It might arise from the belief that one is doing things that are counterproductive, harmful to oneself or others,

<sup>5</sup> It also reveals that two very different kinds of lives fall on the midpoint of the meaningful/anti-meaningful scale. There are *meaningless* (and *anti-meaningless*) lives, devoid of both meaning and anti-meaning, and there are lives in which the meaning and anti-meaning balance each other out.

<sup>6</sup> This is modeled on what Susan Wolf calls 'the fulfillment view' (2010: 13–18). Similar subjective views are discussed in Taylor (1970); Ayer (1990: 189–96); and Klemke (2000: 195–97).

silly, or disgusting. To the extent that one's own identity is wrapped up with the activity, dissatisfaction might be bound up with shame or self-loathing. But there can also be cases in which one is simply repulsed by an activity without associating the activity with oneself.

As it was with the objective theory, so it is here: anti-meaning is needed to explain our judgments about certain sorts of cases. Imagine a person whose job is a source of deep dissatisfaction but who nonetheless finds deep fulfillment in hobbies that she pursues in her free time. Suppose that her episodes of dissatisfaction and satisfaction are roughly equal in terms of intensity, duration, and any other relevant features. If we understand meaning to involve feelings of fulfillment without recognizing the existence of anti-meaning, we would be forced to say that her life is, on balance, very meaningful since it contains substantial amounts of meaningful activity. Yet, as before, this seems inaccurate or misleading. Acknowledging anti-meaning is necessary to fully describe the situation.

### 1.3 The Aim-Achievement Theory

A different type of subjective theory is based not on the positive feelings that we have as a result of engaging in certain activities, but on the central *aims* that we set for ourselves. According to Steven Luper's version of this theory, 'Your life has meaning just if, and to the extent that, you achieve the aims that you devote it to freely and competently' (Luper 2014; cf. Ayer 1947: 226–27; Nielson 1981; and Hooker 2008). This theory is not purely subjective since adopting aims is not sufficient for having a meaningful life. We must actually *achieve* our aims. In some cases, an aim may concern only one's own mental states. Just think of the ascetic striving to rid herself of various desires. But typically our aims involve states of affairs that lie beyond the limits of our own psychology. The politician who devotes himself to initiating lasting and positive health care reforms in his society will only secure meaning from this if his actions succeed. Since success in this aim depends on consequences that stretch far into the future, the meaningfulness of the politician's life will partly depend on events that occur well after his death. Thus, in many cases, meaning on the aim-achievement theory will hinge on both subjective and objective factors. Nevertheless, the subjective elements of this theory are in some sense primary since they determine what the objective elements will be.

To explore what anti-meaning might be on such a theory, we must first gain more clarity on the relationship between aims, desire, and aversion.<sup>7</sup> Imagine two individuals racing across a room to reach an exit door. One of them believes that his long lost sibling is outside. The other believes that the building is on fire. These two individuals share a common aim of exiting the building. But their motivations are quite different. One person's aim is grounded in a desire for, or attraction to, some state of affairs (reuniting with his sibling). The other's aim is grounded in

<sup>7</sup>Our discussion in this section has been influenced by the insightful treatment of desire-fulfillment and ill-being in Kagan (2015).

an aversion to a state of affairs (dying in a fiery inferno). This case highlights the difference between *desire-based* and *aversion-based aims*.<sup>8</sup>

This distinction introduces different interpretive possibilities for the aim-achievement theory. On one interpretation, our lives have meaning to the extent that we achieve aims that are central to our lives, whether those aims are based in desire or aversion. Anti-meaning, if it exists at all, would consist in the failure to achieve one's central aims. A lack of any central aims entails meaninglessness, whereas frustration of such aims constitutes anti-meaning. On an alternative interpretation, meaning is derived only from the achievement of desire-based aims. In other words, the only way to achieve meaning in life is to devote your life to bringing about states of affairs that attract you and ultimately to succeed in this. If meaning is understood in terms of the achievement of desire-based aims, then presumably anti-meaning will arise only from a failure to achieve one's aversion-based aims. On this view, achieving your aversion-based aims or failing to achieve your desire-based aims has no effect on the meaningfulness of your life.

These two views of anti-meaning diverge in their verdicts about certain cases. Consider the case of Michael, who was born into a mafia family but whose central aim in life is to extricate himself from the family business and become a morally upstanding citizen. He is very attracted to the possibility of living a morally upright life but is also not averse to the alternative of maintaining his current immoral lifestyle. Suppose that Michael fails to achieve his goal. The first view will deem Michael's life anti-meaningful (since he failed to achieve his central aim), whereas the second will deem his life meaningless (since he merely failed to achieve a desire-based goal). Next consider Kay, whose central aim in life is also to be a morally decent person. Unlike Michael's, Kay's motivation springs not from a positive attraction to being morally decent but from an aversion to being morally indecent. Suppose that, over the course of her life, Kay succeeds in being morally decent. The first view will deem her life meaningful (for she has achieved her central aim), while the second view will deem her life meaningless (since achieving aversion-based aims helps one avoid anti-meaning but does not add meaning to a life). Thus, on the first view, Kay's life is positively meaningful, while Michael's is downright anti-meaningful. On the second view, they are in the same boat of living lives that are devoid of both meaning and anti-meaning. Depending on how the aim-achievement theory is interpreted, there are two very different ways to understand anti-meaning.

#### 1.4 The Hybrid Theory

We turn now to the most complex of the popular theories of meaning: the hybrid theory. This theory is so named because it combines elements from both the objective theory of meaning and more subjective, attitude-dependent theories of meaning. On this view, meaning obtains when, as Susan Wolf puts it, 'subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness' (Wolf 2010: 9). For present purposes, let us understand the hybrid theory to be the view that meaning consists in engagement

<sup>8</sup> Of course, many of our aims in life are 'mixed' in the sense of being based on a combination of desires and aversions.

in activities that meet two conditions: they are subjectively satisfying and objectively valuable. (Versions of the hybrid theory are discussed in Hepburn 1965; Kekes 1986; Wiggins 1988; Dworkin 2000: ch. 6; Raz 2001: ch. 1; Schmitz 2001; and Mintoff 2008.)

What would meaninglessness amount to on this hybrid view? Since there are two elements that must come together for the good of meaning to arise, it would seem that the absence of either element is sufficient for there to be a lack of meaning in a person's life. Let the person do good without being satisfied with the good that she is doing, and this will be a case where meaning is lacking. Or let her be passionate about something that is not a genuine good (something that either is lacking in value or that is positively bad). Again, it would seem that she must be missing out on meaning. In both cases, what is lacking is the proper combination of two essential elements of meaning. Both must be present and appropriately related in order for meaning to make its appearance within a person's life—or so the hybrid theorist claims. But a lack of meaning is not the same as the positive presence of anti-meaning.

If meaning arises from activities that are objectively valuable and subjectively satisfying, what is the negative counterpart of meaning? Consider nine combinations of properties that might characterize an activity or a life:<sup>9</sup>

1. Objectively valuable and subjectively satisfying (meaning)
2. Objectively valuable and subjectively neutral
3. Objectively valuable and subjectively dissatisfying
4. Objectively neutral and subjectively satisfying
5. Objectively neutral and subjectively neutral
6. Objectively neutral and subjectively dissatisfying
7. Objectively disvaluable and subjectively satisfying
8. Objectively disvaluable and subjectively neutral
9. Objectively disvaluable and subjectively dissatisfying

On the hybrid theory, (2) through (9) represent eight different ways that an activity or life might fall short of being meaningful. Which of these should we identify with anti-meaning?

One natural way of trying to locate anti-meaning on the hybrid theory is to consider the two essential features of meaningful activities in isolation, ask what their opposites would be, and then conjoin these things to arrive at a hybrid theory of anti-meaning. We have already undertaken the first two steps of this process in our earlier discussion of the objective and subjective satisfaction theories. The negative counterpart of a valuable, good-promoting activity or life is a disvaluable, bad-promoting one. The negative counterpart of a subjectively satisfying activity or life is a subjectively dissatisfying one. Bringing these two items together, the hybrid theorist might identify anti-meaning with activities that have objective *disvalue* and

<sup>9</sup>Granted, there are innumerable more possibilities than the ones we address here. An activity can be (dis)valuable and (dis)satisfying to varying *degrees* as well as *mixed* in the sense of being valuable/satisfying in some respects but disvaluable/dissatisfying in others.



are subjectively *dissatisfying*. This proposal, then, identifies meaning with (1) and anti-meaning with (9).

This first proposal has intuitive appeal and a certain elegance to it, but there is a potential problem. We value meaning in our lives as a good—indeed, as a *prudential* good. Meaningfulness is generally seen as something that renders our lives more desirable to have (cf. Campbell 2013). All else being equal, the person who leads a meaningful life is *better off* than the one who has a meaningless life. Presumably, our tendency to see meaning as a prudential good helps explain why we are so invested in the topic and why people often have a special concern to secure meaning in their own lives.

Once we focus on meaning qua prudential good, an interesting and perhaps worrisome feature of the first proposal emerges. Imagine that you face a choice between (7) and (9): either you will engage in activities that make the world worse and will find these activities deeply fulfilling, or else you will engage in those same activities but find them unsettling and dissatisfying. Which would you prefer? More to the point: which of these options would put you in the most desirable position and render you better off? Perhaps some people will think that self-interest favors the first option: ‘If I’m going to promote bad things one way or another, I might as well get some satisfaction out of it!’ But many of us disagree with this verdict. We think that a person who gets fulfillment from doing bad things is actually worse off and more pitiable than one who does bad things and is troubled by it. If the first proposal is correct, and if (7) is indeed prudentially worse than (9), we arrive at a bizarre result: there are cases in which one is better off engaging in an activity that is positively anti-meaningful than one that is merely meaningless.

This raises a question about the relationship between prudential value and meaning. On the one hand, it is possible that there is no deep connection between prudential value and meaning, which would allow for these two categories to diverge in such a way that the mere absence of meaning is sometimes prudentially worse than the absence of meaning and the presence of anti-meaning. This would suggest that a theory of meaning or anti-meaning—even if it is true and even if it neatly categorizes activities and lives as meaningful, anti-meaningful, or neither—does not carve up the world in ways that will interest us when we are taking up a self-interested standpoint.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, it could be that meaning and well-being always converge in the following way: meaning always has prudential value, anti-meaning always has prudential disvalue, and, all else being equal, an increase in meaning (or anti-meaning) always corresponds to an increase in prudential value (or disvalue). Call this the *convergence thesis*.

If the convergence thesis is true, as we ourselves have tacitly assumed, we can be confident that meaning and anti-meaning are features of our lives that we have special reason to care about—and are therefore worth theorizing about—precisely because they are intimately related to our overall well-being. Embracing the convergence thesis also provides us with an additional tool for theorizing about

<sup>10</sup> This appears to be the view held by Susan Wolf (2010), who claims that meaningfulness is an attribute of lives ‘that is not reducible to or subsumable under’ the attribute of self-interest. We suspect that Wolf is invoking some narrower notion of self-interest than we ourselves have in mind. For related discussion, see Metz (2012).

meaning and anti-meaning. Since the convergence thesis implies that anti-meaning always detracts from well-being, that thesis, in conjunction with our judgment that (7) is prudentially worse than (9), gives us reason to reject the first interpretation of the hybrid theory.

This invites consideration of a second interpretation, which springs from a particular view about why the combination of subjective satisfaction and objective value creates meaning. On this view, the meaning found in (1) consists in a certain fit or harmony that obtains when our attitudes are properly responsive to the value in our lives. What would anti-meaning be on this view? Presumably, anti-meaning will arise in cases where one's attitude is altogether inappropriate. (3) and (7) are prime candidates for anti-meaning. In the former case, one is subjectively dissatisfied with objectively valuable aspects of one's life; in the latter, one is subjectively satisfied with objectively disvaluable aspects. In both cases, there is a disharmony between one's attitudes and the evaluative reality of one's life. (Perhaps there is anti-meaning—if to a lesser extent—in (2), (4), (6), and (8) as well since there is also a mismatch there.) In contrast, mere meaninglessness would obtain when one has no relevant attitudes or when there is no objective value or disvalue. This second proposal has the virtue of corroborating our judgment that (7) is prudentially worse than (9). Both may be bad for a person insofar as they involve promoting bad states of affairs, but (9) at least has the 'good' of having one's attitudes appropriately attuned to evaluative reality. So, on this second interpretation of the hybrid view, (7) is the better candidate for anti-meaning. Here, as on the aim-achievement theory, how we understand anti-meaning depends crucially on how we understand meaning.

### 1.5 Summary of Theories

We have considered several ways of fleshing out the idea of anti-meaning. Roughly, they are as follows:

Theory	Meaning	Anti-Meaning
Objective	Promotion of the good	Promotion of the bad
Subjective Satisfaction	Subjective satisfaction in one's life	Subjective dissatisfaction in one's life
Aim-Achievement (1)	Achieving one's central aims	Failing to achieve one's central aims
Aim-Achievement (2)	Achieving one's central desire-based aims	Failing to achieve one's central aversion-based aims
Hybrid (1)	Subjective satisfaction in the good elements of one's life	Subjective dissatisfaction in the bad elements of one's life
Hybrid (2)	A harmony between one's attitudes and the value in one's life	A disharmony between one's attitudes and the (dis)value in one's life

This concludes our initial exploration of the nature of anti-meaning. We are now in a position to consider what theoretical and practical significance anti-meaning

has and to see how it illuminates a connection between the harmful effects that our activities can have on the lives of others and the meaningfulness of our own lives.

## 2. Why Anti-Meaning Matters

The concept of meaning enjoys a prominent place in popular culture and everyday life. A great many people actively strive to have meaningful jobs, pastimes, conversations, relationships, and ultimately lives. They are troubled by the thought that their lives are, or might turn out to be, meaningless. Even those who are unconcerned with the presence or absence of meaning in their own lives or are skeptical about the very idea of meaning should agree that the topic is significant if only because so many people take it seriously. Like religious and political beliefs, it is a subject that cannot be ignored.

Given the significance of meaning, the question naturally arises whether anti-meaning deserves the same sort of recognition and prominence. The idea of anti-meaning is new and peculiar enough that it might seem to be little more than a theoretical curiosity dreamt up by philosophers—one that has no real bearing on everyday life and can even be safely ignored by those who wish to theorize about meaning in life. We wish to suggest that this is hardly the case. Anti-meaning matters. It is a concept that deserves the attention of anyone who wishes to think seriously about meaning or hopes to live a meaningful life.

### 2.1 Anti-Meaning's Significance

Let us begin with anti-meaning's theoretical significance. If one is to theorize effectively about meaning in life, attention to anti-meaning is important for at least two reasons. The first is that the very process of developing a theory of anti-meaning often leads to greater clarity about the corresponding theory of meaning. As we found in our exploration of the aim-achievement and hybrid theories, the attempt to articulate a theory of anti-meaning can force us to clarify and deepen our understanding of meaning itself. The second and more important reason is that the overall meaningfulness of activities and lives is partly determined by the anti-meaning they contain. Recall the case of the CEO who is largely responsible for her company's philanthropic achievements and environmental misdeeds. Even on the assumption that the objective theory of meaning is correct, we would not judge her life to be very meaningful, despite the presence of significant meaningful elements. This is explained by the fact that a life's overall meaningfulness is a function of the meaning *and* the anti-meaning in the life. For an analogy, consider the pleasurable life. A life cannot be sensibly deemed "pleasant" if the pleasurable episodes are matched, or overbalanced, by painful episodes. The pleasurable episodes must dominate the painful ones. Likewise, a meaningful life is a life in which the meaningful elements substantially outweigh the anti-meaningful ones, or in which anti-meaningful ones are entirely absent. To be meaningful, it is not enough that a life is 'full of meaning'. It must also be the case that it is not full of anti-meaning.

Thus, it appears to be impossible to assess the overall meaningfulness of lives without taking anti-meaning into account.

This has as much relevance for the individual craving meaning in her own life as it does for philosophers of meaning. One cannot arrive at an accurate picture of the meaningfulness of one's own activities or life without attending to anti-meaning. Just as it would be a flattering self-delusion to gauge your own popularity by tallying up all of the people who like you while turning a blind eye to those who dislike you, it is similarly self-deceptive to assess the overall meaningfulness of your life by focusing only on the aspects promoting meaningfulness without any attention to those diminishing meaningfulness. Recognizing the existence of anti-meaning is necessary if we are to have an undistorted view of the overall meaningfulness of our lives.

Might one nonetheless care about meaning and have no real concern about anti-meaning or the overall meaningfulness of one's life? To the extent that people care about meaning, it stands to reason that they will develop a corresponding concern with the anti-meaning in their lives. This point is most convincing when we shift our focus to some of the theories discussed earlier. Imagine someone who cares only about the ways in which she manages to make the world a better place but cares nothing at all about the ways in which she makes it worse. Or someone who values activities that are subjectively satisfying to her but places no disvalue on activities that are dissatisfying to her. Or a person who cares deeply about whether she achieves her central desire-based aims but is not concerned about failing to achieve her aversion-based aims.<sup>11</sup> Or someone who wants her life to involve instances of loving the good and hating the bad aspects of her life but is wholly indifferent to whether her life also contains instances in which she loves the bad and hates the good. In each of these cases, there is something quite odd, if not irrational, about the individual's asymmetrical attitudes toward meaning and anti-meaning. As individuals come to appreciate what anti-meaning is, there is reason to expect that those who care about meaning will come to care about anti-meaning as well.

Even if one grants the rather abstract point that anti-meaning deserves attention alongside meaning, it might be thought that, as a practical matter, many of us can ignore anti-meaning since we are not the sort of people to be engaging in anti-meaningful activities. What remains to be shown is that this topic has some direct practical application to the lives of decent and well-intentioned people. To that end, let us examine a very concrete way in which anti-meaning enters the lives of many individuals living in the modern world.

Consider what Judith Lichtenberg has called "New Harms" (2010; 2014: ch. 4; see also Parfit 1984: ch. 3). Historically, the types and amount of harm that the average human being could inflict on others was fairly limited. But our situation has recently changed. People across the globe are now connected in numerous ways, many of which are positive and mutually beneficial. The development of new technologies and the exchange of goods, ideas, and forms of entertainment

<sup>11</sup> This is a special case since it seems impossible that one should fail to care about the achievement of one's own aims.

are no doubt among the blessings of our age. But some of these technologies and interactions have a range of bad effects on others around the world, and we as individuals often play a role in contributing to these harms.

Some harms result from our economic behavior. Buying clothing that was produced in sweatshops can contribute to the continued exploitation of workers. Buying meat, dairy, eggs, and other animal products from factory farms can contribute to the future mistreatment and unnecessary suffering of animals. Buying goods whose production or transportation required a sizable environmental impact helps to fuel similar impacts in the future. Other new harms result from the environmental impact of countless other choices that we make in daily life, including the amount and forms of energy we use and the amount and forms of waste we create. There is a growing consensus in the scientific community that the effects of anthropogenic climate change will be devastating, leading to much disease, suffering, and death. Since many of our activities contribute to global warming, we are also contributing to these future harms and to making the world inhabited by future generations a worse place than it might otherwise be.

What is distinctive about these new harms is that they tend to arise from the seemingly harmless actions of a very large number of individuals. The contribution of a single individual act to the harm that others will suffer can easily go unnoticed since, on its own, it might have only a small effect and since there is often great spatial and temporal distance between the act and the resulting harm. Indeed, in the case of negative environmental impacts, many of the harms that result from our choices may not be felt until long after we are dead. Even so, the new harms that we collectively impose on others are often substantial, and this has a bearing on the meaningfulness of our lives. By living in ways that contribute to the serious harming of others, it is quite possible that we are actually harming ourselves by generating anti-meaning in our own lives. To be clear, this is not to say that actions that contribute to new harms are bad only, or even primarily, because they are bad for us; after all, the phrase 'new harms' refers to harms imposed on others. But the fact that these actions have victims who suffer harm is perfectly compatible with their being harmful to the agents as well.

Each theory of anti-meaning that we have considered implies that, under certain conditions, actions contributing to new harms can create anti-meaning. This is most obviously true on the objective theory, which associates anti-meaning with making the world a worse place. If increased harm makes our world worse, the objective theory of anti-meaning implies that acting in ways that contribute to new harms detracts from the overall meaningfulness of one's life. Take next subjective satisfaction and aim-achievement theories. Since anti-meaning on these theories depends on the attitudes of the subject, neither of them guarantees that contribution to new harms will generate anti-meaning. Yet, how many of us experience guilt and discomfort about some of our daily habits and consumer choices? To the extent that we are both aware of and troubled by the fact that some of our activities are contributing to harm that will be suffered by others, we will experience dissatisfaction with our activities and, according to the subjective satisfaction theory, accrue anti-meaning in our lives in a way that might be avoided were we to find less harmful alternatives. Likewise, most of us, as morally decent

people, are averse to harming others and strive to avoid this. If we fail to achieve this aim, the aim-achievement theory (on both interpretations) implies that this pushes our lives toward the anti-meaningful end of the spectrum. Lastly, consider the hybrid theory. On the first interpretation of this theory, our lives contain anti-meaning only if we are doing bad things (e.g., harming others or the environment) and feeling dissatisfied about this fact. On the second interpretation, anti-meaning is generated when we are satisfied with activities that cause harms and other evils. Either way, anti-meaning may be averted either through an adjustment of one's attitudes or by ceasing to engage in harmful activities.

Thus, a survey of some promising theories of anti-meaning indicates that, under certain conditions, our contributions to new harms can detract from the meaningfulness of our lives and might even render some of our lives anti-meaningful on the whole. This suggests that anti-meaning matters in a very real and pressing way for many individuals living in a globalized and technological world like ours.

## 2.2 An Objection

One worry about our suggestion that contributing to new harms can generate anti-meaning concerns the size of the impact. It might be thought that the average individual's contributions to new harms are ultimately negligible and not sufficient to introduce anti-meaning into our lives (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong 2005).

We offer two points in response. First, it is far from clear that a single individual's contributions to new harms can always be dismissed as negligible. To draw upon the case of environmental harms, John Nolt (2011) estimates that the harmful effects of the emissions of the average American are equivalent to the serious suffering and/or deaths of one or two future people. John Broome suggests that the lifetime emissions of the average person living in a rich country may shorten lives by an amount that adds up to six months of life (2012: 65). Such effects do not strike us as inconsequential.

Second, even if the causal effects of an individual's contributions to new harms are negligible, there is reason to believe that participating in aggregative harms can generate anti-meaning in our lives. To appreciate this, consider the popular view about meaning that was mentioned above. It is widely thought that meaning in life can be achieved through participation in something larger than ourselves that matters in a way that the small-scale activities of our own lives do not. Individuals often take great pride in the fact that they played some role—even if only a very minor role—in the fight to end an unjust war, or to defend the civil rights of some oppressed group, or to get their favored political candidate elected, or to promote any number of other causes that are perceived to be noble and good. The fact that one's own causal contribution to these grand collective projects was relatively minor and may have played no significant causal role in bringing about the desired outcome is not typically thought to undermine the meaningfulness of the participation. Instead, it is thought that being a small part of something grand and worthwhile is precisely the sort of thing that can bring great meaning

into our lives. There may be objective value in such participation, and it is also something that can figure in an individual's desire-based aims and lead one to feel subjective satisfaction. Hence, it is not difficult to see how one's participation in worthwhile collective projects might count as meaningful on the leading theories of meaning.

Once we allow that our participation in worthwhile endeavors can create substantial meaning in our lives, we see no reason why a corresponding point would not hold in the case of anti-meaning. If participating in collective enterprises that are good and worthwhile can bring great meaning into our lives even if our particular contributions have only a minor causal impact, then it would seem, by parity of reasoning, that participating in collective enterprises that bring about serious harms and evils can generate substantial anti-meaning in our lives, despite the limited nature of our individual causal contributions.

### 2.3 Implications

The connection between new harms and anti-meaning reveals some important insights. First, it shows that our relationship to certain other groups—for example, distant strangers living in impoverished conditions, future people who will live with the environmental consequences of our behavior, animals in factory farms—is not as asymmetrical as is often supposed. For instance, it is commonly remarked that our relationship to future generations is one-sided in the sense that we can affect them but they cannot affect us. One might have similar thoughts about other vulnerable groups that seem to be in no position to repay us, with gratitude or retaliation, for how we impact their lives. But this overlooks the relationship between meaning and harming others. By acting in ways that harm members of these groups, it is quite possible that we are adding anti-meaning to our own lives and are thereby harming ourselves.<sup>12</sup> This shows that the asymmetry between various vulnerable groups and us is not quite so stark or simple after all.

The connection between new harms and anti-meaning also reveals a strategy for motivating people to care about the harms they impose on others. Rather than exclusively relying on people's ability to empathize with distant strangers, unseen animals, and not-yet-existent people, we may also appeal to their concern to lead a good life. Why avoid contributing to new harms? Plausibly, the strongest reason is that there is something regrettable and morally bad about contributing to the harming of others. But we should also avoid contributing to these harms because doing so generates anti-meaning in our lives: it threatens to make our lives the opposite of meaningful, and that is bad for us. (Acting with this motivation need not be like returning a lost wallet only to get a reward, which is compatible with seeing no independent reason to return the wallet. On the theories we have considered, recognizing something as bearing on meaning or anti-meaning tends to involve recognizing its independent importance.) Of course, such self-interested

12. Samuel Scheffler (2013) has recently argued that the meaningfulness of our lives depends on future generations in another way. He proposes that the *existence* of future generations is a necessary condition for the meaningfulness of many activities of the current generation.

considerations are not the only reasons we have to avoid harming others. But they are reasons that matter.

Another interesting point about the relation between anti-meaning and the new harms lies in the fact that people often appeal to meaning in order to justify or excuse their contributions to new harms. Driving an extra fifty miles each week to get to violin lessons, taking international vacations, firing up one's pottery kiln—these activities, even if they have some harmful consequences, might be thought justified by the meaningfulness of mastering the violin, experiencing other cultures, and creating pottery. An appreciation of the new harms and their role in generating anti-meaning may serve to lessen or mitigate the force of these justifications.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, the connection between new harms and anti-meaning suggests that living a meaningful life in the modern world can present a great challenge. Since it is often difficult to know that we are contributing to new harms and, once we do know, to summon the motivation to avoid such behavior, it can also be difficult to gauge and limit the amount of anti-meaning in our lives. An individual might need to pursue meaningful projects actively just to 'break even' and avoid living a life that is anti-meaningful on the whole. In this way, new harms raise serious new challenges for those of us who are striving to live meaningful lives.

### 3. Conclusion

Everyone knows about meaningfulness and meaninglessness, and yet virtually no one knows about anti-meaning. What we have sought to do in this essay is to raise awareness about this new and unfamiliar topic. We have articulated the basic idea, examined various theories, and illustrated how the concept of anti-meaning brings concerns about finding meaning in life into direct contact with concerns about the adverse impacts that our activities can have on present and future inhabitants of our world. We have suggested that contributing to the new harms of the contemporary world is the sort of thing that threatens to diminish the meaningfulness of our lives. Is this a reason for despair? We hope not. Our hope is that greater awareness of anti-meaning will instead inspire us to find alternative ways of living that do not bring harms and evils upon others and upon ourselves.

STEPHEN M. CAMPBELL  
BENTLEY UNIVERSITY  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA  
[s.campbell80@gmail.com](mailto:s.campbell80@gmail.com)

SVEN NYHOLM  
EINDHOVEN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
[s.r.nyholm@tue.nl](mailto:s.r.nyholm@tue.nl)

<sup>13</sup> We are grateful to Susan Wolf for this point.



## References

- Ayer, A. J. (1947) 'The Claims of Philosophy'. In E. D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 219–33.
- Ayer, A. J. (1990) *The Meaning of Life*. New York: Scribner's.
- Bramble, Ben. (2014) 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life'. *Utilitas*, forthcoming.
- Broome, John. (2012) *Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Campbell, Stephen M. (2013) 'An Analysis of Prudential Value'. *Utilitas*, 25, 334–54.
- Dworkin, Ronald. (2000) *Sovereign Virtue*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Haidt, Jonathan. (2010) 'Comment'. In Susan Wolf (ed.), *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 92–101.
- Hepburn, R. W. (1965) 'Questions about the Meaning of Life'. In E. D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 261–76.
- Hooker, Brad. (2008) 'The Meaning of Life: Subjectivism, Objectivism, and Divine Support'. In N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds.), *The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 184–200.
- Kagan, Shelly. (2015) 'An Introduction to Ill-Being'. *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 261–88.
- Kekes, John. (1986) 'The Informed Will and the Meaning of Life'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 47, 75–90.
- Klemke, E. D. (2000) 'Living Without Appeal: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life'. In E. D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 186–97.
- Landau, Iddo. (2011) 'Immortality and the Meaning of Life'. *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 45, 309–17.
- Lichtenberg, Judith. (2010) 'Negative Duties, Positive Duties, and "New Harms"'. *Ethics*, 120, 557–78.
- Lichtenberg, Judith. (2014) *Distant Strangers: Ethics, Psychology, and Global Poverty*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Luper, Steven. (2014) 'Life's Meaning'. In Steven Luper (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Life and Death* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 198–214.
- Metz, Thaddeus. (2002) 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life'. *Ethics*, 112, 781–814.
- Metz, Thaddeus. (2012) 'The Meaningful and the Worthwhile: Clarifying the Relationships'. *Philosophical Forum*, 43, 435–48.
- Metz, Thaddeus. (2013) *Meaning in Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mintoff, Joe. (2008) 'Transcending Absurdity'. *Ratio*, 21, 64–84.
- Morris, Thomas. (1992) *Making Sense of it All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Munitz, Milton. (1993) *Does Life Have a Meaning?* Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Nielson, Kai. (1981) 'Linguistic Philosophy and "The Meaning of Life"'. In E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Kahn (eds.), *The Meaning of Life: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 203–19.
- Nolt, John. (2011) 'How Harmful Are the Average American's Greenhouse Gas Emissions?' *Ethics, Policy and Environment*, 14, 3–10.
- Nozick, Robert. (1981) *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Parfit, Derek. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pogge, Thomas. (2008) *World Poverty and Human Rights*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Raz, Joseph. (2001) *Value, Respect, and Attachment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Scheffler, Samuel. (2013) *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schmidtz, David. (2001) 'The Meanings of Life'. In L. Rouser (ed.), *Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion, Volume 22; If I Should Die: Life, Death, and Immortality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 170–88.
- Seligman, Martin. (2011) *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Singer, Irving. (1996) *Meaning in Life. Vol. 1, The Creation of Value*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Singer, Peter. (1993) *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Singer, Peter. (1995) *How are We to Live?* Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books.
- Singer, Peter. (2009) *Animal Liberation*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. (2005) 'It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations'. In Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Richard Howarth (eds.), *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics* (Bingley: Emerald Group), 293–315.
- Smuts, Aaron. (2013) 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life'. *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 51, 536–62.
- Taylor, Richard. (1970) *Good and Evil*. New York: MacMillan.
- Wielenberg, Eric. (2005) *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiggins, David (1988) 'Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life'. In G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 127–65.
- Wolf, Susan. (2010) *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.