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Well-being, Meaning, and Wasted Potential  
A Reply to Masny on the Significance of What Could have been

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I have been an unhappy philosophy student in Vienna. A political philosopher, who directed my study for a short period of time and showed great empathy with my uneasiness, told me that I am like a man in the space — walking in the dark, exploring the unknown, disconnecting with others, and perhaps with my head just above water.

Although it was not exactly the sort of thing that I wanted to be reminded of as an unhappy graduate student, she was, after all, correct in her diagnosis about me: I have been increasingly disassociated from my surroundings, from my old interests, and from the people who always have been there for me. I have been increasingly centered around my rigid interests and concerns. The thought that this is going to perpetuate is simply unbearable. Eventually, I tried to hold out and I tried to find my way out of the space. So, first and foremost, I owe my deepest gratitude to my parents and my old friends, even though their support often comes in distance.

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## **Abstract**

The value of life is a philosophically intriguing issue. In a recent paper, Michal Masny contends that the value of a life is partly determined by wasted potential. He argues for a Dual Theory of life that life's overall goodness is jointly determined by well-being and the degree to which one realizes her potential. In this paper, I argue that Masny's argument is based on an implausible equivocation between meaning and well-being. Once this equivocation is disambiguated, I then argue that the intuition underlying the Dual Theory can be best explained by the unbalanced distribution of well-being and meaning. I then suggest that the unbalanced distribution of meaning and well-being implies a narrative structure within a life. I then highlight the significance of this insight.

## **Kurzfassung**

Der Wert des Lebens ist ein philosophisch faszinierendes Thema. In einem kürzlich erschienenen Aufsatz vertritt Michal Masny die Ansicht, dass der Wert eines Lebens zum Teil durch verschwendetes Potenzial bestimmt wird. Er plädiert für eine duale Theorie des Lebens, nach der der Gesamtwert des Lebens durch das Wohlbefinden und den Grad der Ausschöpfung des Potenzials bestimmt wird. In diesem Beitrag argumentiere ich, dass Masnys Argument auf einer unplausiblen Äquivokation zwischen Sinn und Wohlbefinden beruht. Sobald diese Äquivokation entkräftet ist, argumentiere ich, dass die Intuition, die der Dualen Theorie zugrunde liegt, am besten durch die unausgewogene Verteilung von Wohlbefinden und Bedeutung erklärt werden kann. Ich schlage dann vor, dass die unausgewogene Verteilung von Bedeutung und Wohlbefinden eine narrative Struktur innerhalb eines Lebens impliziert. Anschließend hebe ich die Bedeutung dieser Erkenntnis hervor.



## 0. Introduction

Philosophers have developed sophisticated theories regarding what constitutes a good life. It is commonly believed that the goodness of life transcends the mere sum of temporal well-being. When we refer to well-being, we might be considering everything that actually occurs in one's life, such as pleasures and pains, the satisfaction of preferences, or the presence of various objective goods and bads. This is often termed the Conventional View.<sup>1</sup> However, these seemingly plausible lines of thinking have come under increasing philosophical scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Susan Wolf suggests that the ability and inclination to appreciate non-practical interests are invaluable to one's life, and thus, the value of life can depend on its meaningfulness. Jeff McMahan contends that we can perceive differently two people with equal levels of well-being but significantly different natural endowments. Population ethicists like Derek Parfit argue that the value of life also depends on its contributive value. It is nothing new that philosophers believe the value of life extends beyond mere well-being.

Recently, Michal Masny has developed a novel Dual Theory on the value of life, and he focuses on the dimension of wasted potential, i.e., the significance of what could have been for one's life.<sup>3</sup> Potential, a predominate feature to distinguish human with other sentient beings, received scant attention. What is innovative in Masny's Dual Theory is that it identifies two entirely different dimensions of life to determine its overall goodness — Things

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions on the conventional view that the goodness of life is equivalent with the sum of temporal well-being, see, for example, Dorsey (2015), Fletcher (2016), Hurka (1997), Temkin (2012). For the idea that normative ethics is only concerned with everything that actually happened within it, see Kagen (1998, 27-28).

<sup>2</sup> For other evaluative dimension on the goodness of life, see Wolf (1997, 2010), McMahan (1996), Parfit (1986).

<sup>3</sup> Masny (2023).

that have actually happened and things that could have happened but did not. The central idea is that when there is wasted potential in one's life with respect to counterfactual analysis, the badness of wasted potential overshadows the value of well-being that one actually possesses.

The purpose of my paper is to assess the Dual Theory that admits wasted potential as a distinct criterion of life's goodness. After a systematic review on well-being, meaning, and wasted potential, I then turn to the Dual Theory. I will argue against the Dual Theory in two steps.

*First*, I argue that wasted potential is not a distinct evaluative category from lost meaning. Recognising wasted potential as a separate evaluative category offers no improvement over existing theories of meaning, as it relies on an implausible equivocation of well-being and meaning in life. Once this equivocation is clarified, we can see that theories of meaning can adequately explain realised potential and that wasted potential is nothing more than wasted meaning.

*Second*, once we acknowledge the lack of distinctiveness between meaning and realised potential, the Dual Theory can best be understood in terms of both well-being and meaning in life. My aim is to show that the unbalanced distribution of well-being and meaning implies a narrative structure within a life. In light of this, I argue that the goodness of life depends on the balanced distribution between meaning and well-being. I then highlight the importance of this insight.

## **1. Preliminaries and Clarification**

Before turning to Masny's argument, let me clarify some basic assumptions throughout my discussion. *First*, this contribution is located within expanding the debates on value theory concerning the goodness of a life. I do not claim that the Dual Theory is true or



that we should reject the Conventional View. Rather, this paper accepts that wasted potential is an important factor when thinking about what a good life consists of, and it is not controversial to see realised potential as goods that we personally desire. The point I am disputing is whether wasted potential can be best understood as a distinct category from what philosophers have been debating, such as meaning. In terms of its philosophical interests, this topic is of great importance — As we will see, it clarifies our intuition that is often lumped together between well-being and meaning and how these two evaluative categories relate to one another.

*Second*, as others before me have assumed, I assume that welfare is equivalent to well-being and I will not argue this point here. I take existing theories of well-being as given and hold a neutral attitude towards them in my discussion.<sup>4</sup> Typical theories of well-being are hedonism, desire-satisfaction, and objective-list. Hedonism is the simplest form of well-being, and according to hedonism, the more pleasantness one can pack into one's life, the better one's life will be, and the more painfulness one experiences, the worse one's life will turn out. Desire-fulfilling views account for the fulfilment of non-instrumental desires and the failure of fulfilment of others. A life is better when it contains more fulfilled desires in various forms. Objective-list theorists usually give an essential list of items to explain well-being, and these items consist neither merely in pleasurable experiences nor in desire satisfaction. They usually include prudential goods such as important personal projects, knowledge, and valuable personal relationships.

*Third*, all my discussions assume the position of value pluralism, i.e., the position as opposed to value monism assumes that there are multiple final goods that contribute to our

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<sup>4</sup> See Fletcher (2006) for an overview of major theories of well-being. See also Kagen (1998, 29-35).

well-being and the meaning of our lives. However, value pluralism is not so well compatible with subjective theories of welfare and meaning (theories that typically reduce well-being and meaning to certain mental states) because subjective theories of welfare and meaning are frequently grounded in value monism. I do not claim that I can solve the tension here, and I will say more words on the subjective theories of welfare and meaning and monism in section 2. However, for the sake of accuracy, I assume that by accepting value pluralism in welfare and meaning, we assume that there are varieties of goods that ultimately contribute to welfare and meaning, and on a minimal level, some of such goods carry objective value. As we will see, if one rejects this assumption, theories of meaning risk collapsing into theories of well-being as they are eventually reducible to mental statism.

*Fourth*, as some readers might have noticed, if we want to talk about wasted potential, much of our discussion will be dependent on what actually counts as potential. Unfortunately, potential has received scant attention in philosophical literature. Vallentyne argues that the notion of potential itself is slippery in that the notion can be metaphysically and semantically understood in several different ways.<sup>5</sup> Potential can either be understood as empirical possibilities related to the fact about how the current individuals come into existence or as innate possibilities on how one could have chosen about her life.<sup>6</sup> However, for my purposes, I will accept Masny's suggestion that potential can be best understood as the individual maximal intrinsic possible well-being.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Masny's account refers to neither backward-looking empirical possibilities nor forward-looking innate possibilities but

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<sup>5</sup> See Vallentyne (2005, 412-413) for detailed discussions on how the notion of potential can be spelled out in different contexts and why it is metaphysically stable.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> For Masny's discussion of potential, see Masny (2023, 16-18).

counterfactual modal conditions on how a life could have been.<sup>8</sup> A counterfactual modal condition only refers to how a life could have been in a nearby possible world had some of the conditions changed. While there might be countless nearby possible worlds, this analysis aims at excluding non-identity problems where we have altered the modal conditions way too much and thus create an entirely different person. I will say more words on Masny's account of potential in section 3

*Finally*, a word on terminologies. When talking about *the Conventional View*, I consider well-being and the goodness of life synonymously, and life's overall value for the Conventional View refers to the sum of temporal well-being. I take welfare synonymously with well-being. After I argue that realised potential is ultimately reducible to meaning in life, I will consider take meaning in life synonymously with realised potential. For the sake readability, I refer the meaningfulness of life as its meaning, and I will use these phrases interchangeably.

## 2. Well-being and Meaning

Let me start with an introduction to the general question in ethics as to what a good life refers to. Almost everyone asks the question about whether they are living a *good* life. Yet, the philosophical point here is ambiguous. When we refer a life as "*good*", or look for the "*goodness*" of a life, we may be thinking of its *well-being* or *meaning*. To ask whether a life is good, our intuition is often lumped together between well-being and meaning. This is because, when we are talking about a good life, we might refer to:

- (1) A life with particularly high level of well-being; or

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<sup>8</sup> Counterfactual analysis and modal conditions are widely used in epistemology to track the knowledge conditions of forming justified true beliefs. See Pritchard (2005).

(2) A life with sufficient amount of meaning.

In what follows, I will focus on two issues with respect to welfare and meaning. *First*, there are a number of theories pertaining to well-being and meaning, and I will explain each of these theories in details. *Second*, I aim to show that meaning is a distinct evaluative category as compared with well-being. At least, once we have accepted the assumption of value pluralism that there are varieties of final goods contributing to well-being and meaning, meaning stands as a distinctive evaluative category of life, which does not collapse into well-being.

## **2.1 Well-being**

To disambiguate the equivocation in our intuition, let me begin with well-being. The life with high level of well-being is concerned with individual welfare or the sum of temporal well-being. With different theories of well-being, we can answer this question by simply thinking about the sum of temporal well-being. For instance, hedonism is a theory of welfare called *mental statism*, which states that the sole bearers of intrinsic prudential value are our mental states of pleasure and pain.<sup>9</sup> Pleasantness and painfulness are the only things that make the overall value of life better or worse. Asking a hedonist about how well her life is going means how much pleasantness or painfulness she has actually experienced in her life. The goodness of life constitutes a utilitarian calculation of pleasantness and painfulness.<sup>10</sup> A desire-fulfilling theorist might start to consider whether her own *non-instrumental desires and preferences* have been satisfied.<sup>11</sup> An objective-list theorist will think how many important personal projects that she has fulfilled and how good is her personal relationship with loved

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<sup>9</sup> For hedonist theories and mental statism, see Bramble (2013), Feldman (2004), Heathwood (2014), Kagen (1998, 29-30).

<sup>10</sup> For desire theories, see Arpaly (2022), Fletcher (2006, 8-12).

<sup>11</sup> Fletcher (2006, 27-30).

ones.<sup>12</sup> In a word, welfare or well-being concerns with the prudential value that is good *for* the agents.

But why is well-being primarily concerned with prudential value for hedonists and desire theorists while their claims seem compatible with things that are only instrumentally good for us? For instance, hedonists can surely accept that money, painkillers, or the satisfaction of vices contribute to well-being, and similarly, desire theorists also allow that our desires can be fulfilled in a hedonistic manner<sup>13</sup> However, interpreting these examples as the entirety of hedonism and desire theories is a misreading. Hedonists and desire theorists can rightly assert that these things are not fundamentally good for us because they are inappropriate means to pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Likewise, desire theorists will argue that these desires are ultimately detrimental to welfare and are not the source of welfare. For instance, think about achieving non-instrumental desires of creating artistic works while enduring the moments of displeasure in artistic work. Such experiences are neither pleasure in themselves nor do they satisfy any instrumental desires to gain pleasure, but they nonetheless contribute to well-being. Therefore, in theories of well-being, it is worth acknowledging that things contributing to well-being carry non-instrumental value, and we desire such things in a fundamental way.<sup>14</sup>

Theories of welfare are straightforward, but welfare is not the only thing that we seek in our life. Think about heroes who are altruistically oriented for instance.<sup>15</sup> A sergeant who

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 49-52.

<sup>13</sup> For discussions on the non-instrumental properties of pleasure and desires, see Fletcher (2006, 8-9, 27-29), Kagen (1998, 25-26).

<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise specified, I take hedonists' and desire theorists refer non-instrumental pleasure and non-instrumental desires hereafter.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of moral saints can be found in Wolf (1982) and Urmson (1958).

throws himself on a slipped grenade to save his fellow soldier and thus risks his own life does not improve his own well-being, but we think that such a life carries special prudential value.<sup>16</sup> A scientist who devotes herself to pursue important knowledge does not always benefit her own well-being. Yet, there are still countless scientists who are willing to work *for* the well-being of others, and we also find that such lives can be overall good. The most compelling counterexample to show that we routinely look for things beyond well-being, however, is Nozick's experience machine.<sup>17</sup> Nozick asks us to imagine whether or not we would be willing to enter a machine which can stimulate a wide array of fantastic experiences. These experiences are just as real as our lives outside of the machine. If all we care about is the mental state of pleasantness and desire fulfilling, Nozick's experience machine is indeed attractive.

But Nozick's thought experiment proves otherwise — It confirms our intuition that all we desire for a good life is not the mental state of pleasantness, desire fulfilling, or achieving a list of objective goods, as many people would hesitate to enter the machine considering all the actual experiences that would have lost.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that theories of well-being are false. It shows that theories of well-being are incomplete. The point here is an axiological one — Although many people would still think that we can live a life high in prudential value inside the experience machine, few people would think that life inside an experience machine is in anyway meaningful. More frequently, people sacrifice their own well-being for prudential goods of other people. For example, donating your kidney to your important ones

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<sup>16</sup> See Urmson (1958).

<sup>17</sup> Nozick (1974, 42-24) uses the thought experiment of pleasure machine.

<sup>18</sup> An additional defense for hedonism is from Feldman (2004) that pleasure does not have to be sensory hedonism but only attitudinal hedonism. See an objection from Olsaretti (2007) that Feldman only shows that such attitudinal conditions are necessary but not sufficient for what a good life consists of.

does not contribute to your well-being but it is certainly an action that carries tremendous meaning. Therefore, it is enough for us to say that people want something more than what merely contributes to their level of well-being.

As things should be clear now — The lack of explanatory power of well-being gives philosophers motivation to seek other normative dimensions to explain the goodness of life. A life in experience machine with pleasure is meaningless after all because it lacks meaning and experiences. Now that we know that there are intuitive differences among well-being and meaning, how do they exactly differ from one another? In what follows, I will explain why meaning can be cashed out as a distinctive normative dimension to explain the goodness of life.

## **2.2 Meaning**

Now I turn to the second question that equivocates well-being and meaning. A good life sometimes refers to a meaningful life. But what does it exactly mean to say that a life has meaning, as opposed to saying that a life has well-being? The notion of meaning is *gerrymandered* and there has not been a unified account of meaning in philosophical literature. Yet, many influential accounts share a great number of similarities.<sup>19</sup> According to Metz, typical accounts of individual life's meaning are supposed to answer questions, such as “What should an agent strive for besides obtaining happiness and fulfilling desires?”<sup>20</sup>, and “Which aspects of a human life are worthy of great esteem or admiration?”<sup>21</sup> Meaning is an

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<sup>19</sup> I refer to these accounts as those proposed by Taylor (1981) and Wolf (2010). See Metz (2001, 150-151) for further overview of accounts of meaning. In this paper, I only consider prudential meaning, and I do not consider questions such as meaning conferred by God or natural meaning for life or meaning of life in the universe. I narrowly focus on what makes an individual's life meaning for the agent.

<sup>20</sup> See Metz (2002, 802) for similarities between different accounts.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

evaluative dimension that encompasses non-instrumental goods which individuals can obtain by exercising various capabilities. This implies that the non-instrumental goods contributing to life's meaning are valuable in their own right. Intuitively, the more non-instrumental goods we possess, the more desirable our lives become, all things considered.

Philosophers usually explain meaning in life with respect to *subjectivism* and *objectivism*. For my purposes, it is enough to highlight the general characterisation of objective and subjective accounts of life's meaning. In this way, we will see how meaning differs from well-being as a distinctive normative notion. In general, we should understand meaning as what agents intentionally create, rather than what have been conferred upon agents as we have restricted our discussion with respect to meaningfulness for the agent.

Let me begin with the *subjectivist* account of meaning. The subjectivist account of meaning maintains that what makes an individual life meaningful varies among individuals as meaning depends essentially on dispositions to orient certain mental states to constitute life's meaningfulness.<sup>22</sup> In other words, certain mental states are constitutive of a meaningful life. For instance, some believe that the meaning of an individual life can be fulfilled through the freedom to choose one's path, which is essentially a mental state encompassing pleasure, desire fulfilment, life satisfaction, and value fulfilment.<sup>23</sup> Others argue that life's meaning is a function of inclinations, the attitude of desiring, and goal achievement from the standpoint of the agent.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, some philosophers contend that the meaning of life is derived from the fulfilment of important personal projects or other significant aspects, as long as they are

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<sup>22</sup> Metz (2002, 792), (2007, 201).

<sup>23</sup> See Martin (1993, 593-595) for the view that meaningfulness in life consists of mental states of various dispositions.

<sup>24</sup> See Darwall (1983) for the subjective standpoint of meaning for different agents.



vital to the individuals concerned.<sup>25</sup> In all these theories, subjectivist accounts of meaning share the common ground that what is meaningful for the particular individual life is about certain mental states, while the scope and content of such mental states may vary from one another.

Yet, subjectivists are not consistent about which mental states contribute to a meaningful life — Is it affection, cognition, judgment, volition, or some combination thereof? These inconsistencies present a theoretical challenge for subjectivism. One such challenge is posed by Richard Taylor. Taylor asks us to consider whether the life of Sisyphus is meaningful.<sup>26</sup> Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to eternally roll a rock up a hill, initially seems to have a meaningful life according to Taylor because the divine punishment instills in him a strong desire to achieve the goal of rolling the rock. As long as his actions fulfil this strong desire, his life appears meaningful, as the goal provides direction and motivation. However, Taylor quickly rejects this view, arguing that Sisyphus's desire to roll the rock is not formed by his own will but imposed by the divine.<sup>27</sup>

However, this shift still does not explain why subjectivist accounts of meaning fails, because rolling a rock for a lifetime out of someone's own desire is absurd *simpliciter*. After all, subjectivism would rightly recognize that a life can be meaningful in virtue of being alive, killing others, or watching a goldfish.<sup>28</sup> The subjectivists' accounts also do not differ significantly from well-being, as there is no principled reason for us to think that subjective mental states cannot be tracked by various theories of well-being. What hedonistic well-being

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<sup>25</sup> Nielsen (1981).

<sup>26</sup> Taylor (1970, ch. 18).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor (1992, 36); Wolf (2010, 87-88)

tracks is ultimately the non-instrumental pleasure that one experiences, and this coincides with the mental state of meaningfulness. As Bradley rightly observes:

“So it is not clear whether meaningfulness is really a distinct notion from well-being ... It might be that when someone is concerned about a lack of meaning in her life, she is really just concerned that it lacks some important component of well-being such as the ones we have already discussed.”<sup>29</sup>

That is, if all meaning and well-being care about is certain mental states of pleasure or desire fulfilling, we do not have strong reason to think that we should separate meaning from well-being. Is there another way for us to better account for the meaning of life, and at the same time, demarcates itself from existing theories of well-being? The objectivist account of meaning is attractive at this point. Susan Wolf convincingly argues for an objectivist account of meaning, and she nicely states that meaningfulness in life is attributed to the criteria of *subjective attraction* and *objective attractiveness*:

“(A) meaningful life must satisfy two criteria, suitably linked. First, there must be active engagement, and second, it must be engagement in (or with) projects of worth. A life is meaningless if it lacks active engagement with anything. A person who is bored or alienated from most of what she spends her life doing is one whose life can be said to lack meaning. Note that she may in fact be performing functions of worth. . . . At the same time, someone who is actively engaged may also live a meaningless life, if the objects of her involvement are utterly worthless.”<sup>30</sup>

This is by far one of the most convincing theories of meaning, and let me now unpack some of its central elements. Crucially, Wolf’s theory suggests that the two central elements for the meaning of life are individuals’ *active engagements* and the *worthwhile projects* that she pursues.<sup>31</sup> Let me now elaborate the two suitably linked criteria in relation to meaningfulness. To begin with, active engagements imply that individuals must not be bored

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<sup>29</sup> Bradley (2015, 67). I will come back to the point why meaning is not well-being later.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf (1997, 211).

<sup>31</sup> See Wolf (1997, 211-212) and Wolf (2010, 26, 31-32).

or alienated from what they are pursuing. Following Bernard Williams, Wolf defines active engagements with respect to categorical desires.<sup>32</sup> This means that individuals actively engage in things driven by categorical desires. We have categorical desires for things that are, in themselves, reasons for living. Categorical desires are not based on the premise that we will live, nor do we derive particular values from them. We have categorical desires because we find engaging in them worthwhile, and they are an integral part of living. We engage in such interests, desires, and projects because they provide us with a sense of fulfilment and value.

However, this is not the full picture of meaning. To add genuine meaning to our lives, our categorical desires must meet certain standards of objective value, independent of our personal preferences.<sup>33</sup> This means that not all subjectively valuable activities contribute to the meaning in our lives; only those projects deemed objectively worthwhile do. Typical examples of such projects include mastering skills in a recognised field, creating a painting, curing diseases, or building houses for others.<sup>34</sup> According to Wolf, these activities alone do not confer meaning to our lives.<sup>35</sup> Meaning is embedded in the modal conditions of the external world. What typically gives life meaning involves generating positive externalities in our relationships with others or within communities. For instance, saving your fellow soldiers from a grenade or creating artwork for public enjoyment involves intentional interaction with the external world, and it is this interaction that confers objective value to our activities. When

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<sup>32</sup> See Wolf (1997, 211-212). See also Williams (1981, 102-103) for discussions on why some desires are categorical. Similar lines of thought can also be found in Kagen (1998, 25-28) on why some desires are non-instrumental and fundamental for us.

<sup>33</sup> Wolf (2010, 35-45) explains why our interests must have some objective value independent of subjective attraction.

<sup>34</sup> For discussions on what counts as worthwhile projects, see Wolf (1997, 212; 2010, 5-8).

<sup>35</sup> See Wolf (2010, 129-130) for why some seemingly objectively valuable activities are not by themselves carry meaning.

the objective value meets agents' engagement, meaning is embraced. Conversely, mechanically repetitive movements or pathological activities, such as memorising dictionaries, rolling a stone, or writing terrible poems, do not add meaningfulness to life. That said, let me emphasise the objective view of meaning — “*Meaningfulness occurs when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness*”.<sup>36</sup> A life is meaningful to the extent that the individual pursues worthwhile interests with active engagement.

Having established that the meaning in life is contingent upon subjective attraction to objective attractiveness, we can easily grasp the idea that *meaning comes in degrees*. This implies that not all activities possess the same level of meaning, and not all individuals share the same enthusiasm for the same worthwhile activities. Therefore, meaning, much like well-being, must come in degrees — A life holds more or less meaning depending on how much one engages in their interests and how worthwhile those interests are. But what do we mean when we say that Jack's life is more meaningful than Mary's? What does it mean to say that one life has more meaning compared to another? I suggest that meaning must be related to how deep one engages with her interests and projects. For example, if one only superficially engages with many interests, these engagements confer little meaning. Conversely, if one becomes deeply involved in a project but ultimately alienates from their enthusiasm, the engagement can become more of a burden than a source of meaning.

Let us think of some examples of meaningful life to further validate the idea. All meaningful lives have some objective and subjective elements. The lives of Confucius, Shakespeare, Vincent von Gogh, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking are all remarkably meaningful. Such meaningful lives share some common features. I will focus on the subjective side here. These lives are remarkably meaningful because they have all been

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<sup>36</sup> Wolf (2010, 9) emphasised added and paraphrased.

deeply engaging with their worthwhile projects and rigorously pursuing their interests. In other words, they have been deeply engaging with a few worthwhile projects rather than superficially touching upon various fields. This is not to say that meaningful lives must be significant or impactful lives, or meaning lives are characterised by rigid pursuits. This means that a meaningful life inevitably leaves a “mark” in the world, for it is less intuitive to say that one never leaves a “mark” in the world after her deep engagements with her worthwhile projects. A “mark” can be in various forms and a “mark” concerns the objective side of meaning. *For one thing*, a “mark” can be some sort of achievement — A remarkable piece of art, or a significant scientific discovery. While we can think that one’s life has meaning when she engages her passion and succeeds in achievement, this is not what Susan Wolf’s theory of meaning emphasises. In her response to critiques raised by Arpaly and Haidt, Wolf suggests:

“Both Haidt’s and Arpaly’s discussions remind us of the fact that when people get deeply interested in something and come to care about it, they focus their attention on it, build activities around it, exercise and sharpen their skills in advancing, protecting, and celebrating it. Further, they invite and encourage others to share their enthusiasm, creating new relationships and social groups, and forging or reinforcing bonds in existing relationships through shared activities and the shared appreciation of a common object. Even if the object upon which the attention is focused is initially of no particular value, those who come to be engaged with it may build a network of valuable activities around it, involving the development and exercise of skills (the realization of one’s human potential), and the flowering and strengthening of positive human relationships.”<sup>37</sup>

What Wolf suggests can be best understood as leaving a “mark” in the external world. The “mark” here should be understood as further opportunities for things that is of value. The more meaningful a life is, the more significant the “mark” is. Consider the example of sports activities. Running a marathon, or kicking a soccer with groups of people running around and trying to pass it, by itself, carries no objective value, nor imposing extra constraints or rules

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<sup>37</sup> Wolf (2010, 128-129).

confer them any more value.<sup>38</sup> However, by engaging in these seemingly dull and worthless projects, agents embrace opportunities to enhance their dispositions in various fields, cultivate virtues and skills, establish valuable relationships, and create shared memories.<sup>39</sup> Through deep engagements, an activity inevitably leaves a mark that attracts both recognitions and popularities over time. Think about meaningful traditions which evolve and attract recognitions over time. One not only participates in meaningful activities, but also teaches it, advocates it, and writes about it. These “marks” are intrinsically valuable in its own right, and they are the yardsticks to determine how meaningful a life is.

Let me say one more word on how the “mark” thesis relates to the claim that meaning comes in degrees. I suggested that meaning comes in degrees, and meaning is not dependent on *how many* projects one engages with, but on *how deep* one engages with her worthwhile projects. As things should be clear now — When one deeply engages in worthwhile projects, one inevitably leaves intrinsically valuable “marks” in the world. Such “marks” can be a variety of achievements but this does not necessarily need to be the case. Most of the time, “marks” are further opportunities to embrace things that are of objective value. And it is necessarily the case that the more meaningful a life is, the more “marks” that are made in the external world. Such “marks” are measured in a qualitative sense that how deep one’s interest interacts with the external world. Think about athletes who create memorable events and encourage young participants. Meaning of such activities does not arise from the sheer number of events or participants. Meaning is dependent on how well they interact with one another through such activities. They are not measured in a quantitative sense by the number of worthwhile projects.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, paraphrased on Wolf’s sports example on page 129.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Let us take stock now. I have suggested that sometimes philosophers turn to the notion of meaning other than well-being to explain what a good life consists of. I have argued that Wolf's objective account of meaning provides convincing arguments to explain what a meaningful is like — Meaning is embraced when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness. I argued that meaning goes beyond mere achievement. Most of the time, meaning takes the form of embracing further opportunities that are of objective value. These are the yardsticks to how meaningful a life is.

### ***2.3. Welfare and Meaning: The Equivocation***

Now that we understand what well-being and meaning are respectively, we need to clarify why meaning does not collapse into well-being. Although we have made a *prima facie* case that meaning and well-being are distinct evaluative notions, there is a philosophical equivocation between meaning and well-being as to what constitutes a good life.

The equivocation of meaning and well-being arises from its very definition. There is a broad consensus that both meaning and well-being are evaluative notions of non-instrumental personal goods that are worth possessing in their own right.<sup>40</sup> This implies that those things which are constitutive of meaningful life or welfare, must be intrinsically valuable and worth having for their own sake. Further, well-being and meaning are constitutive of goods from the same pool. Based on this reasoning, all things else being equal, the more of these personal goods that one possesses, the more desirable our lives will become.

We can further press the reasoning by looking into the strong similarities shared by theories of welfare and meaning, both in their subjective and objective forms. In short,

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<sup>40</sup> For the arguments that well-being and meaning are both non-instrumentally or intrinsically valuable to possess in its own right, see Wolf (2010, 126-129), Metz (2002, 807-808), Kauppinen (2012, 371-372), Kagen (1998, 25-28; 2009, 281-284; 2012), Kekes (2013, 70-72).

theories of meaning easily find their counterparts in theories of welfare. For instance, hedonists and desire theorists often appeal to mental states of pleasure, desire fulfillment, satisfaction of various life values as yardsticks of well-being. In the same vein, subjective theories of meaning can easily suggest that meaning in life arises from hedonistic pleasure, satisfaction of various desires, or fulfilment of some life values. Moreover, objective-list theorists in well-being often appeal to important personal projects, knowledge, valuable relationships or personal autonomy as the source of well-being. In the same manner, objective theories of meaning suggests, as we have just argued in length, that a meaningful life must engage in projects that are of objective value at minimal. In a word, almost any theories of meaning can find their counterparts in theories of welfare, and vice versa. Such correspondence indicates strong lack of distinctiveness between well-being and meaning. Does this mean that meaning is not as distinctive as it appears to be, and, that both well-being and meaning are goods contributing to our welfare? Or so I will suggest.

These challenges are not sufficient for the claim that meaning collapses into well-being. They are claims that meaning overlaps with well-being in certain fields at best. To see how meaning and well-being overlap one another, let us first see how we can distinguish them at a theoretical level. *First*, consider how meaning and well-being can go against one another, as it is not always the case that one can acquire meaning in life by enhancing her well-being and vice versa. Consider the following two cases proposed by Arpaly that agents trade well-being for meaning:

***Endurance:*** Joseba is an excellent endurance athlete dedicated to ultra-marathons. Despite frequent severe pain and the high costs of his passion, he remains committed. He wins a race every few years, but his sport doesn't make him wealthy or famous, and many people think he is "crazy." Yet, for Joseba, successfully finishing races, the occasional victory, and the knowledge of his capabilities make every moment of pain worthwhile.



***Parenthood:*** Phirose knows that studies show parents are not generally happier than those without children. In fact, parents often experience more misery and drudgery, and fewer moments of pleasure. His own experience confirms this: "Why am I not surprised?" he thinks, reflecting on his years of child-rearing. Yet, he says he would choose to have children again if given another life because, for him, the rewards of parenthood outweigh the displeasures. Although good parenting involves much altruism, the choice to have children is typically not altruistic.<sup>41</sup>

Based on Arpaly's examples, neither Joseba's endurance for his excellence in sports nor Phirose's expectations in parenthood make sense for hedonists or desire theorists in terms of well-being, considering the relatively longer periods of displeasure they endure for the sake of brief moments of pleasure. According to subjective theories of well-being, we cannot conclude that Joseba and Phirose lead good lives. Can objective-list theorists provide more convincing arguments for Arpaly's examples? I do not think so. Objective-list theorists consider several factors as sources of well-being, such as knowledge, autonomy, important personal projects, and loving relationships. It can be argued that Joseba's life is good due to his achievement of important personal projects, and Phirose's life is good because of his establishment of a loving parental relationship. However, this view is also implausible because these lives are narrowly confined with a few interests or goals. Suppose that someone has many valuable friendships and completes significant personal projects but never experiences any happiness; does she still possess a high level of well-being? The amount of goods one enjoys does not always lead to an increase in well-being, as the absence of certain items on the objective list inevitably leaves a void in someone's well-being.<sup>42</sup> While Joseba's

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<sup>41</sup> See Arpaly (2022, 357-358) for both cases. Cases of Joseba and Phirose are paraphrased from the Arpaly and I do not claim originality here.

<sup>42</sup> See Kazez (2023) and Kagan (2009) on the discussion of why some goods are important at different stages of life and why some aspects of goods are essential to a human life. For instance, Hannah (2017) argues that childhood is intrinsically bad exactly because children lack the dispositions of practical reasoning and autonomy, and such intrinsic badness cannot be easily compensated by other hedonist goods or desire fulfilment at later stage of life.

and Phirose's levels of well-being may be relatively low, we nonetheless believe that Joseba's endurance is worth his displeasure and that becoming a parent is worthwhile for Phirose. This is because their activities carry meaning, and we feel that a life becomes better when it embraces meaning.<sup>43</sup>

The present discussion suggests that well-being and meaning can diverge, sometimes even opposing each other. It is not always the case that embracing meaning in life enhances well-being, and vice versa. In certain circumstances, meaning requires sacrifices of some pleasure and desires, while well-being would advise against such sacrifices. The intuition that sacrificing for a morally good cause or for deep interests makes a life overall better can be explained by the addition of more meaning in life. Indeed, we often face the choice of whether to trade well-being for more meaning. Therefore, this observation further supports the idea that meaning does not simply collapse into well-being.

*Second*, meaning and well-being are distinct because they each require different ways to aggregate. The discussion so far suggests that goodness of life is dependent on both well-being and meaning. On intuitive thought is that there is a certain threshold for a good life, i.e., we can aggregate the respective value of well-being and meaning to determine whether a life is overall good. This intuitive thought is built on the assumption that well-being and meaning share the goods that we desire non-instrumentally. However, even if meaning and well-being share the goods in the same pool, it does not necessarily follow that meaning and well-being can be aggregated by mere addition or subtraction.

The reason is that well-being and meaning require different methods of aggregation. To begin with, well-being tracks the “well-roundedness” or “comprehensiveness” of an individual's life. The idea of “comprehensiveness” was first introduced by Raz and further

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<sup>43</sup> Arpaly (2022, 364).

developed by Scanlon.<sup>44</sup> Raz posits that life is characterised by large-scale plans or intentions, with goals arranged hierarchically and comprehensively.<sup>45</sup> These goals encompass various plans and intentions, such as flourishing in professions, maintaining health, or being a morally good person, and they cannot always be balanced equally by an individual.<sup>46</sup>

Scanlon extends Raz's arguments to well-being, suggesting that most people have a modestly comprehensive version of well-being defined by careers, friendships, marriages and family relations, and political and religious commitments.<sup>47</sup> The comprehensiveness of well-being enhances the quality of our lives, as the various components of well-being reinforce one another. For instance, if someone cares about their health, they will strive to be mentally stable. If they are mentally stable, they are likely to excel in their profession. If they excel in their profession, they will naturally want to flourish in their other commitments, and so on. Therefore, the different components of well-being reinforce each other, and this comprehensiveness contributes to the overall goodness of life beyond merely the sum of its parts.

Similarly, Hurka proposes the idea of "well-roundedness" that, in addition to the sheer quantity of overall goods, the balanced distribution of each good also enhances the level of well-being, as Hurka writes:

"We think the best lives contain a certain balance between the perfections, and do not concentrate too much on one. To talk only of Leonardo would pitch the ideal too high, for what I intend is possible in all lives. We all can spread our activities between different goods, aiming at a well-rounded achievement rather than any narrow specialization. Even if our specific achievements are not great, their proportion can

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<sup>44</sup> See For the idea of comprehensiveness, see Salon (1996, 114-115), and for the idea of well-roundedness, see Hurka (1987, 728-735).

<sup>45</sup> Raz (1986, 293) on the idea of how achievement and goals have a hierarchical structures in our lives.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 293-295.

<sup>47</sup> Scanlon (1996, 114-120).

mirror that of Renaissance lives, and for many of us this proportion is, other things being equal, a good.”<sup>48</sup>

To illustrate Hurka’s idea, imagine two lives with the same total amount of good, but distributed in an entirely different manner. One person is what Wolf calls a moral saint, who is deeply altruistic, tries to be as morally good as possible, and subordinates all her personal interests to morality.<sup>49</sup> She does not have her own hobbies and she lacks senses of humour. All her pleasure can only be satisfied through morally good actions. Contrast this with a well-rounded life where another person achieves moderate success in all these areas, from morality to other personal interests. Suppose both lives contain an equal total quantity of goods. Which is better for the person living it? If only the total sum of goods matters, then both lives are equally good. However, intuitively, the well-rounded life seems better. When all else is equal, having a balanced amount of various prudential goods is preferable to excelling in one area while neglecting others.

I have been motivating the idea that it is not the quantities of good that matters for well-being. What matters for increasing the level of well-being is the “comprehensiveness” or “well-roundedness” that emphasises the balanced distribution of different goods across the spectrum. However, does the same norm of aggregating well-being extend to meaning? That is, whether it is preferable to have varieties of interests other than one deep interest to embrace meaning in life? The answer is negative. As we have argued before, based on Wolf’s idea, meaning is only conferred when agents actively engage with her worthwhile projects, and that meaning comes in degrees. That meaning comes in degrees is tracked by how deep one engages with her worthwhile projects, rather than how many projects that one engages

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<sup>48</sup> Hurka (1987, 732).

<sup>49</sup> See Wolf (1982) on why the image of moral saints carries unattractive features, and why it is not desirable to be a narrowly-concerned person. I think the example can be extended outside of morality.

with. What matters in aggregating meaning is agents' qualitative engagement. This distinction in the methods of aggregating gives us another reason to think that meaning and well-being are separated evaluative notions.

Let me now address one concern before concluding my chapter. So far, it may seem that I have endorsed a project-oriented or achievement-oriented view of meaning in life. However, according to Arpaly, this view is mistaken. She argues that not all things that add meaning to life are projects which we can work on.<sup>50</sup> For instance, she asked us to consider the difference between “I am working on my dissertation” and “I am working on my friendship”.<sup>51</sup> The former is the worthwhile project or interests that we typically think of but the later sentence implies that there is something going wrong. Valuable friendships certainly add meaning to life, but we do not work on friendships in the same way we work on a dissertation. Nevertheless, I do not think this is the correct way to interpret the condition of active engagements. There are various things that add meaning to life which we cannot actively engage with in the same way as we would with a dissertation, such as valuable friendships or personal values.

Actively engaging in these should be understood as actively realising our capabilities through various worthwhile interests, not merely achieving specific goals. For instance, while having a good friendship is not the same as working on a dissertation, making valuable connection certainly requires individuals to orient themselves in a correct way and form dispositions to respond to the morally relevant features of a friendship. These skills also require agents' active engagements in a way that realise our human capabilities.

In summary, I suggested that there is an equivocation between well-being and meaning, stemming from the fact that well-being and meaning are often seen as the same non-

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<sup>50</sup> Arpaly (2022, 368-369)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

instrumental good worth having for its own sake. This equivocation can be clarified once we recognise that meaning and well-being are distinct and that meaning does not collapse into well-being. Meaning and well-being cannot be easily aggregated as they track different normative considerations, even though they are grounded in the same pool of goods.

### 3. Wasted Potential and the Dual Theory

#### 3.1 *The Significance of What Could Have Been*

Let me now turn to Masny's argument on wasted potential and the Dual Theory. I will introduce Masny's Dual Theory in terms of its motivation, scope and the actual theory. Let me begin with Masny's initial motivation.

As we have seen from our previous discussions, philosophers frequently discover new category of value that does not fit well-being into the picture. Masny gives us an example of a French mathematician whose good ness of life is overshadowed by the badness of wasted potential, which I quote in length:

**Mathematician:** "Sophie Germain, a brilliant mathematician in nineteenth-century France. She was born into a wealthy Parisian family, had good meaningful relationships, and showed extraordinary talents in mathematics. Yet, much of her talents in mathematics were wasted through no faults of her own. Due to the deep social prejudices against women, she was misunderstood by her families, and she was denied a university education, and her manuscripts were ignored by her contemporaries. Germain's life contains deeply evaluative ambivalence that one respect is going well for her and another respect is going poorly for her, yet both concerning the prudential values of a life."<sup>52</sup>

**For one thing**, Germain's life is rich in all recognized aspects of well-being — Her pleasure of being born in a wealthy Parisian families, her fulfilment in good and meaningful relationships, and her satisfaction of various non-instrumental desires. **For another**, her life also contains deeply regretful elements that cannot be compensated by her high level of well-

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<sup>52</sup> Masny (2023, 8-10)

being — her unfilled potential in mathematics. Sophie Germain invokes what Masny calls *deep evaluative ambivalence*. The evaluative ambivalence refers to the phenomenon that orthodox ethical theory cannot account for. Once we aggregate the value of her well-being with the disvalue of her ill-being from her sorrow, unfulfilled desires or unfulfilled personal projects, the badness of wasted potential has lost its *axiological implications*. By axiological implications, Masny refers to the evaluation of overall happiness, suffering, quality of life, and other value-laden aspect of an individual. Let us now look at each theory of well-being and see why they cannot account for the evaluative ambivalence.

For example, hedonism can explain the substantial happiness and the profound sufferings she had. But hedonism can come in many forms and a hedonist does not necessarily endorse Germain's pursuits for her mathematic talents. After we aggregate all amount of pleasantness and sufferings that Germain experiences, it cannot explain the deep sorrow that we have toward the wasted intellectual.

Desire-fulfilling views can account for the fulfilment of *non-instrumental desires* and the failure of fulfilment of others. Yet, it does not tell us how to *discriminate* among different sorts of non-instrumental desires, or what kind of desire is *fundamentally good*. It accounts for Germain's frustration of desires to realise her talents in mathematics and numerous fulfilment of other desires. But again, after once we calculate the amount of positive and negative well-being in each instance, there is no deep sorrow that we anticipate in the case of Germain.

Objective-list can explain the apparent conflict of judgement on a life with uneven realization of close relationship and achievement of talents. However, object-list theories are vague and plural. Such theories suggest that "virtue, pleasure, knowledge, justice, or a combination of them is the source to a good life"<sup>53</sup>. It does not *fully* explain why we feel

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<sup>53</sup> Feldman (2004, 18-19)

deeply regretful for Germain's unfulfilled potential to be a mathematician, while she has numerous other resources on the objective list to lead a good life. Therefore, Masny's Dual Theory aims to motivate us to look at the value of life beyond well-being.

With these remarks in mind, let us return to Masny's main argument. The Dual Theory is proposed to accomodate the phenomena of evaluative ambivalences toward the overall value of life. The advantage of the Dual Theory is that it not only takes what had happed in our life into consideration, but also *what could have happened but did not*. The Dual Theory states that the overall value of life is jointly determined by the actual level of well-being and the degree to which one realises her potential. Wasted potential represents a distinctive evaluative category other than well-being, and it deserves a closer look.

### **3.2. What Counts as Potential?**

Having clarified the initial motivation for *the Dual Theory*, what needs to be further established is what exactly counts as *potential*. In short, Masny thinks that "one's potential is determined by the facts of one's individual, objective, and intrinsic maximal possible well-being".<sup>54</sup> This is wordy and not easy to understand but let us look at these elements one by one. *To begin with*, Masny argues that the concept of potential should be individual without some references to the *class* or *species* that one belongs to.<sup>55</sup> This is easy to grasp. Although human's potential is relatively stable as a specie, we should take potential as *an individual property for a particular individual other than a universal trait*. For instance, when Micheal Jordan wins the 6th NBA title, we would not feel sorry for ourselves because of unfulfilled potential to be an athlete. This potential solely belongs to Micheal Jordan and not the human specie.

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<sup>54</sup> Masny (2023, 18).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 16-17.



*Second*, Masny argues that our potential is an *intrinsic* property other than an *extrinsic* property. Our potential, or our natural endowment, is an intrinsic character and cannot be easily removed or improved without significant personal alterations.<sup>56</sup> Think about the case of attractive facial characteristics. One cannot easily change such endowment without significant alterations.

The remaining point is hard to understand but it is *crucial* for the Dual Theory. It states that potential is determined by facts of *one's maximal possible well-being* and such maximal possible well-being is an *objective* fact. The first part contains the notion of maximal possible well-being. Masny suggests that we should compare the notion of *maximal possible level of well-being* with *the level of well-being that one could have easily obtained*.<sup>57</sup> This seems hard to choose, but if we go back to the case of Germain, we can easily make sense of the choice here. The structural injustice imposed on Germain has made her maximal possible well-being almost impossible to achieve, because she cannot be a mathematician in the society that she lives in. At the first glance, we might be inclined to the judgement that Germain's *actual* maximal well-being should be the reference point but this cannot be true. Yet, despite all the prejudices and sexist attacks on Germain, we still feel that her life could have been much better with her realised potential. We make the judgement based on the facts of her maximal possible well-being rather than her actual well-being. It would be felicitous to say that Germain's best possible life can only be what she could have easily achieve in a sexist society. Therefore, with the absence of other competing explanations, we should accept that one's potential should be in reference with one's maximal possible well-being.

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<sup>56</sup> McMahan (2002).

<sup>57</sup> Masny (2023, 16).

In addition, the maximal possible well-being is *an objective fact*, rather than a *subjective-relative concept*. The reason is this. There are so many other women whose potential has been wasted in similar manner. Therefore, it would be preposterous to think that Germain is so special because all other women's value of lives could have been much better with realised potential. Therefore, taken all points together, Masny thinks that potential should be taken as individual objective maximal possible well-being.

### 3.3 The Dual Theory

Having clarified what counts as potential, the Dual Theory takes the following shape:

**The Dual Theory:** The goodness of life is jointly determined by the level of well-being and the degree to which one realises her potential, whereas the degree to which one realises her potential refers to how close one achieves to her objective intrinsic individual maximal-possible well-being.

The final question surrounding the Dual Theory is how we are going to combine the value of well-being and the value of one's realization of potential. How can this theory be realised in our familiar utilitarian forms? Masny has presented us with two basic models of the Dual Theory, which has elegantly conceptualized *the significance of what could have been in our life*.<sup>58</sup>

**The Additional Model:** The overall value of life equals to the sum of present well-being and the degree to which one realises her potential.

**The Subtraction Model:** The overall value of life equals to the difference of present well-being and the degree to which one fails to realise her potential.

Let me now explain these two models in details. The basic idea behind the two models is simple aggregation. For the Additional Model, it is a "glass half-full" view — Well-being or

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 18-20. Two models are presented by the original author.

realised potential each takes up half of the glass. One gets additional value to her life by releasing more potential.<sup>59</sup> Here is a case to make sense of the Additional Model.

**Teenager:** Penny is a teenager in her rebellion period. She hates to go to school, she does not have any hobbies, and everyday, she sits at home playing her computer games. But one day, she suddenly discovers that she can play the violin well. So instead of doing nothing at all, Penny starts to develop her enthusiasm and potential in musical instruments.

From Penny's story, what changes our intuition about the value of her life is not the change of her well-being, but her discovered potential in music instruments.

In contrast, the Subtraction Model is a "glass half-empty" view — One's maximal value of life is equivalent to half glass. The more unrealised potential one has, the more disvalue will be added to the overall value of life.<sup>60</sup> Here is another case to make sense of the Subtraction Model:

**Marathon:** Eve is capable of qualifying for the Olympic Games in marathon running but, instead of attending the Olympic Games, she participates in a low-key local race and wins it only by a slight margin than the amateur second-place finisher.

In such cases, we naturally feel that the overall value of Eve's life is shadowed by the wasted potential in marathon running.

The most obvious objection to the Dual Theory is the problem of "***Double Counting***". Here is how to understand *Double Counting*. When a person suffers from a loss in well-being, we can imagine that it comes along with penalties of unfulfilled potential. In a similar vein, when a person realises her sports or academic potential, it is not hard to imagine that it also comes along with additional desire fulfilment and pleasures. Since we can capture such elements by well-being *itself*, the two models are double counting the effects of one single life event.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 21.

I believe this objection misfires and fails to understand the Dual Theory. As it is understood, if someone has high well-being, she usually endows with high potential. On the contrary, a mice-liked man only requires little well-being and almost no potential to live. A mice-like life cannot be truly fulfilling even with fully realised potential. That being said, double counting should not be bizarre. On the contrary, it enhances the explanatory power of the Dual Theory by *further demarcating* a life with fulfilment and a life full of regrets and unfulfilled potential.

Let us pause for the moment and think about Masny's Dual Theory again. In the preceding discussions, I highlighted the initial motivation for the Dual Theory, its main components, and how the Dual Theory can be put into work through utilitarianism. The main idea is that the Dual Theory can accommodate the evaluative difficulty with respect to wasted potential. Is Masny's Dual Theory really persuasive?

In what follows, I will suggest that it is not. *First*, I question whether it is accurate to think that wasted potential is a distinctive evaluative category that philosophers before us have not explored. This concerns the initial motivation for the Dual Theory. I will argue that Masny rests his conclusion that wasted potential is a distinctive evaluative category on an implausible equivocation between well-being and meaning. Once we disambiguate this equivocation, there is no principled reason to think that wasted potential cannot be explained by the meaning of life. *Second*, I argue that the way in which Masny combines the value of well-being and realised potential is implausible. It is implausible that simply combine the value of well-being and realised potential when each of them requires distinct normative considerations.

#### 4. Is Wasted Potential a Distinct Evaluative Category?

A crucial part of Masny's Dual Theory is that wasted potential is a distinct evaluative category other than well-being. He also asserts that potential is distinct from other existing evaluative frameworks such as meaning or contributive value, while Masny did not provide arguments as to why this is so.<sup>61</sup> Is this assertion really plausible? Overall, Masny thinks that potential is individualistic, objective, intrinsic, and cannot be easily obtained unless agents exercise their own capabilities. On the other hand, Wolf puts forward the view that meaning is an essential element of a good life that one actively engages with her worthwhile projects.<sup>62</sup> How distinctive is realised potential from meaning? How plausible is it to seek another evaluative category other than meaning in life?

I suggest that realised potential is ultimately reducible to the meaning in life, and therefore, wasted potential is merely lost meaning in life.<sup>63</sup> An agent loses her meaning in life when they are prevented from engaging in their worthwhile projects through no fault of their own. To support my view, let us compare Masny's account of potential, focusing on its convergences with meaning. Previously, I introduced Wolf's objective theory of meaning — Agents embrace meaning when individual subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness. To elaborate, an agent must actively engage in their personal projects, which must possess recognised objective value independent of their subjective attraction.<sup>64</sup> Two things are at stake for Wolf's account of meaning. *First*, subjective attraction relates to what Bernard Williams calls "categorical desires" — Desires that provide reasons for our existence.<sup>65</sup> Agents must

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<sup>61</sup> Masny (2023, 7).

<sup>62</sup> Wolf (1997, 207; 2010, 5).

<sup>63</sup> I assume Wolf's objective theory of meaning here.

<sup>64</sup> Wolf (1997, 209; 2010, 35-45).

<sup>65</sup> Williams (1981).

have passions and are not alienated from their categorical desires. *Second*, by objective value, an agent's personal projects must be recognised with some objective value in the external world.

Back to the main argument. I have been trying to grip whether meaning in life is different from realised potential. Let us now unpack the general characteristics of potential and see how it converges with meaning. *To begin with*, potential is individualistic without reference to other beings in the same species. This is also the case for meaning. For an activity to create meaning, one must be truly passionate about the activities that she engages in and this passion is individualistic without reference to other beings in the same species. *Next*, the value of realised potential is objective other than subjective because realised potential makes a life objectively better. The case is similar with meaning, as meaning is embedded in the modal conditions of the external worlds, and whether an activity adds meaning to life is an objective fact. A meaningful life is better than a meaningless life when both lives possess the same level of well-being.

In addition, realised potential cannot simply be what agents could have easily achieved. Instead, realised potential should only be considered when agents actively engage with their interests or projects. This is also the case for meaning. Taken together, meaning in life and realised potential share the common characteristics of being both individualistic and objective, requiring active engagement from agents.

This brings us to a divergence between well-being and meaning. Masny argues that potential should be referenced to the maximal possible well-being that one possesses, whereas we do not make such a reference for meaning. As we previously argued, meaning in life refers to the "marks" that agents leave in the world, understood as various further opportunities to confer objective value. The objective value of meaningful activities is not constrained by the

maximal well-being of the agent. If anything supports Masny's claim that realised potential is a distinct evaluative category separate from meaning, this might be it. However, if we scrutinise meaning and potential respectively, we will see that realised potential and meaning in life coincide, and the intuitive divergence rests on another equivocation.

To understand this more clearly, we need to distinguish between meaning in life for the agents and meaning embraced by the given agents. For one thing, meaning in life for a given agent describes the kind of non-instrumental goods that are possessed by the agent. This means that meaning is an evaluative notion about the personal and prudential goods that our lives can possibly contain. Generally, the maximal possible meaning one can experience should be referenced to one's maximal possible well-being. This reference is based on the biological constraints of individuals.<sup>66</sup> It is natural to think that beings with higher capacities for well-being are likely to embrace more meaningfulness in their lives, and vice versa.

On the other hand, the meaningfulness created by an agent can go beyond their maximal possible well-being. The meaningfulness of their activities is embedded in the external world and is not constrained by the maximal possible well-being that an agent can possess. For instance, consider the meaningful lives of individuals like Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, and Stephen Hawking. Curie is remembered for her discovery of radium and polonium, and her contribution to cancer treatments. Her research carries tremendous meaning that goes beyond her maximal possible well-being because the value is embedded in the modal conditions of the external world, not within the agent. Her discoveries create further opportunities for other novel scientific breakthroughs, inspire more scientists, and

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<sup>66</sup> To see this point, think about the different capacities among different sentient beings. For example, compare human beings, mice, and mammals. All these beings are equipped with sentient capacities, but we naturally feel that being equipped with higher sentient capacities have more potential precisely because such beings are able to experience higher level of well-being. See Vallentyne (2005) and McMahan (1996) for similar discussions.

transform theoretical knowledge into life-saving cures. This implies that meaning is not constrained by well-being.

Can we distinguish realised potential in a similar way that we demarcate meaning in a life and meaning embraced by a life? *For one*, we can recognise that realised potential contributes to the overall value within a life. It is naturally to think that a life goes better with more realised potential. *For another*, the value of realised potential can also go beyond the agent's maximal possible well-being. This is especially the case for significant scientific achievement that creates further opportunities for other individuals.<sup>67</sup>

With this helpful dichotomy in mind, let us return to the initial inquiry — Is there a strong divergence between meaning in life and realised potential in life? The present discussion suggests that we can read realised potential in line with meaning in life. I have suggested that realised potential and meaning in life both come in subjective, individual, and objective forms. Moreover, meaning in life and the value of realised potential can both be applicable to the agent concerned and to the external world. Therefore, there is no principled reasons here for us to think that we should take realised potential as an entirely new evaluative notion from meaning in life.

These similarities strongly indicate a lack of distinctiveness between meaning and realised potential. But why do meaning in life and realised potential coincide with each other like this? Perhaps, the best answer here is that they are different theories addressing the same moral phenomena related to well-being and prudential goods. When one engages in something that interests her and develop a sense of fulfilment, one naturally developed her

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<sup>67</sup> Similar views can also be found in Kauppinen (2012, 346) that “In particular, we can see that in particularly meaningful lives, the goals achieved have lasting rather than fleeting value, both within a life and beyond it.” Here Kauppinen also thinks that meaning can be enhanced with the passage of time.



skills, dispositions, and potential in certain fields. For instance, suppose that our theory of meaning in life says that things make a life meaningful are important knowledge, virtue, and beauty. It follows that she has to be knowledgeable, virtuous, and beautiful to make her life meaningful, and all she needs to do is to realise her potential to be knowledgeable, virtuous, and beautiful. In contrast, if a life lacks what meaning in life typically requires, such a life is usually characterised by wasted potential that the agent fails to realise her potential in these aspects. Thus, both meaning and realised potential address the same moral phenomena that are closely related to our well-being. In light of the lack of distinctiveness, realised potential in life is not fundamentally distinguishable from meaning in life, and I am for the view that realised potential is ultimately reducible to meaning.

Turning back to the initial motivation of wasted potential, following Masny's interpretation, the evaluative ambivalence in Germain's life cannot be explained by well-being, because the badness of wasted potential cannot be fully explained if we aggregate the value of well-being and the disvalue of her wasted potential. Once we see the point that wasted potential is nothing more than lost meaning, the evaluative ambivalence is just the unbalanced distribution of well-being and meaning. That is, we naturally hold ambivalent attitudes to a life when it is high in well-being but lacks meaning, and vice versa, while the value could have been distributed in a well-rounded manner. As I pointed out before, consider two lives with identical sum of well-being and meaning. We naturally feel that the life with a more balanced distribution between well-being and meaning is better than a life that is narrowly focused on excessive meaning or well-being.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, introducing wasted

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<sup>68</sup> One objection says that why a life cannot be good in some way and bad in other way, and why we have to define a life's overall goodness and its overall badness? I think this objection also supports the view that meaning and well-being are underpinned by different normativities. That is, a life can be good with respect to well-being but it can be bad with respect to meaning. This shows that meaning and well-being cannot be simply aggregated.

potential as an evaluative notion actually provides so significance improvement to existing theories of meaning.

## 5. Can We Account for the Value of Life?

I argued that wasted potential is lost meaning and our intuition of evaluative ambivalence towards cases like Germain can be best explained by the unbalanced distribution of well-being and meaning. I now turn to the Dual Theory itself. Its core idea is to account for the modal conditions of a life, i.e., how a life could have turned out in a nearby possible world. However, is the Dual Theory really convincing? I suggest that it is not.

Germain is again a case in point. I am convinced (and imagine Masny would agree) that realised potential is different from well-being, and we can only make sense of Germain's tragedy by realised potential.<sup>69</sup> The difference to which Masny calls attention begins to bite when he puts forward two models of combining well-being and realised potential. It bites even deeper when we ask whether the Dual Theory explains the overall value of life at all.

*To begin with*, the yardstick to determine the degree to which one realises her potential is the maximal possible well-being that the agent can possibly achieve, but it is indeterminate which world should we compare. For instance, consider the multiple possible worlds that Germain could have been in. In world (i), Germain can achieve her maximal possible well-being by being a brilliant mathematician. In world (ii), Germain does not value much about her mathematical skills but she values more of an ordinary life by possessing the best culinary skills in town. In world (iii), Germain possesses athletic talents rather than intellectual excellence. And in world (iv), perhaps, Germain does not have any specialized interests in

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<sup>69</sup> From now, I take realised potential as meaning in life, and wasted potential as lost meaning in life. I will use these phrases interchangeably.

anything and all she wants to do is to lead a well-rounded life where she can enjoy the well-being brought by the additional hobbies she engages in.

In all these worlds, which world should be taken seriously as the absolute *sine qua none* for the so-called individual maximal possible well-being? Is it really plausible to combine the respective value of well-being and realised potential into the hodgepodge of life's value? It is one thing to consider that well-being and meaning are grounded in the same set of goods. And so, well-being and meaning *can* theoretically be aggregated, yet, quite another thing that well-being and meaning require distinct normative considerations. Therefore, it is simply indeterminate which world we should take as the yardstick with the maximal possible well-being, because individuals' engagement with their worthwhile projects, and the comprehensiveness of well-being are diverging in each case.

If all the Dual Theory requires us to do is to consider the degree to which one realises (or fails to realise) her potential, we might end up in unpleasant situations where we are punishing an agent for leading a life that is not *best* for her, but only *best* for its high net value. Call the problem "*undesired world*". This point can be seen from those counterintuitive cases generated by the Additional and Subtraction Models. That is, the Dual Theory unduly punishes the agent for not realising the maximal potential, or the Dual Theory unduly neglects the significance of well-being. Consider the following two cases:

***Amateur Runner:*** Eve is capable of qualifying for the Olympic Games in marathon running but, instead of attending the Olympic Games, she participates in a low-key local race and wins it only by a slight margin than the amateur second-place finisher. Although she never participates in Olympics, her life is nevertheless well-rounded and she enjoys her hobbies and social life.

***Olympic Runner:*** Eve is an excellent marathon runner and she has made it to the Olympic final. She enjoys the sense of achievement in marathon running but has limited interests and social life. Her life is specialized and she enjoys less hobbies and social life.

How should we judge these two different lives with the Dual Theory if we apply the maximal possible well-being? In the case of *Amateur Runner*, even though Eve has not accomplished her full potential into Olympics, she nonetheless has a life worth living, and she has embraced meaning through various worthwhile projects. However, the Subtraction Model will unduly punish Eve for her unfulfilled potential, and thinks that her life is shadowed by the badness of her unrealised potential. In addition, in *Olympic Runner*, we actually lack the intuition that Eve is leading her best life with all her realised potential, as she could have easily accepted that there are other important value in life besides winning an Olympics. In all these cases, taking maximal possible well-being as the absolute yardstick to determine overall goodness of life is incompatible with our direct intuitions as to what a meaningful life is like.

In addition, as Masny himself points out, the Additional Model can find that a life with "no positive ingredients of well-being (pleasures, loving relationships, achievements, etc.) and a small amount of negative ingredients of well-being (e.g., intermittent pain)" worth living.<sup>70</sup> In a similar manner, the Subtraction Model can find a life with "a negative well-being level never overall worth living."<sup>71</sup> These are very counterintuitive conclusions and they stem from the "undesired worlds". It seems that there is an inescapability of the "Gettier Problem" here, i.e., philosophers can always manipulate the case to an extent that aggregating the value of well-being and realised potential leads to unwelcoming conclusions.<sup>72</sup>

Where does this conclusion lead us? Does this mean that the Dual Theory is actually false? Without dismissing the Dual Theory, I think utilitarian methods adopted by Masny has overlooked the *narrative structure* of a life. I take narrative as a "generic telling of a

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<sup>70</sup> Masny (2023, 19)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> See Pritchard (2005) for the Gettier problems.

connected temporal sequence of particular events and actions related with agents.”<sup>73</sup> By narrative structure, I refer to the view that how good a person’s life is depends on its being a story with a particular narratives and whether the narrative structure of the temporal moments cohere with one another in the agents’ life.<sup>74</sup> As Velleman points out:

“Intuitively speaking, the reason why well-being isn’t additive is that how a person is faring at a particular moment is a temporally local matter, whereas the welfare value of a period in his life depends on the global features of that period. More specifically, the value of an extended period depends on the overall order or structure of events—on what might be called their narrative or dramatic relations.”<sup>75</sup>

Based on Velleman’s argument, a life’s shape matters because how good a person’s life is actually depends on how the story of a life is told, which matters independently from the value of well-being and meaning. However, I suggest that the degree of meaning that an agent possesses strongly implies the trajectories of how a life is going. For instance, consider two lives with identical goodness of life (either by well-being alone, or the sum of well-being and meaning), one life can still be better than another depending on how good a life can be told in coherent narratives. For instance, think about a life that is characterized by the coherence of achievement goals in the long run, and a life with disruptive narratives that singer wakes up losing her beautiful voice. Even if the two live share the same temporal sum of value, the narrative structure makes the former better than the latter. This means that how meaning and well-being distributed also matter.

How does the Dual Theory relate to the narrative structure? I suggest that meaning implies the narrative structure within a life. And so, well-being and meaning should not be simply aggregated because meaning implies the narrative structure within a life. We can see the point by appealing to the degrees of meaning. That is, the more meaningful a life is, the

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<sup>73</sup> Clark (2018, 374)

<sup>74</sup> For narrative structure view and how it relates to the shape of life, see Dorsey (2015), Velleman (2015), Portmore (2007), and Kauppinen (2012).

<sup>75</sup> Velleman (2000, 64).

more likely that a life coheres and connects with its interests, goals, and achievements in the long run. With these helpful remarks in place, let us think about the case of Germain. Her life is characterised by the badness of wasted mathematic potential, which makes her life less meaningful than it could have been. The lack of meaning also indicates a less coherent and disconnected narratives between her goals and structural injustices she faced. The inconsistency between her goals and structural injustice makes her life story rights disturbing. The lack of narrative structures of a life is reflected by the uneven distribution between meaning and well-being. When we see a person high in well-being, we naturally would feel good for her and imagine that her life would be in a good trajectory.

Let us take a step back and think about the revised Dual Theory at hands. I argued that the Dual Theory runs into trouble when and because it tries to aggregates well-being and meaning in life, which are underpinned by diverging normativities. A generally overlooked aspect of the Dual Theory is that the unbalanced distribution of well-being and meaning is often characterised by the lack of narrative structure of a life, i.e., a life that does not cohere and connect its temporal well-being, goals, interests, and achievements. Once we see that meaning implies the narrative structure, we can avoid the unpleasant conclusions derived from simple aggregation of value.

## 6. Further Issues

I suggested the Dual Theory implies the narrative structure of a life. One important implication of the Dual Theory, on Masny's version, is that it gives new explanations to *the Shape of Life Thesis* and *the Badness of Death*. I summarize these implications as follows:

***The Shape of Life:*** An improving life is *typically* better than a deteriorating life when and because these lives differ in terms of the degree to which one's potential is realised.<sup>76</sup>

***The Badness of Death:*** The badness of death is not only characterised by the loss of well-being, but also characterised by wasted potential. Therefore, the tragedy of premature death is far greater than late death.<sup>77</sup>

Let me explain why accepting the narrative structure view can enhance our understanding in these two phenomena respectively. *To begin with*, the Shape of Life Thesis in philosophical literature typically argue that an improving life is better than a deteriorating life with respect to the temporal distribution of well-being. The tricky part is to find a justification for such intuitions. Masny's Dual Theory can rightly explain this point by realised potential, i.e., that an improving life is usually characterised by realised potential and vice versa. But this is not *always* the case because while majority of lives are characterised by late breakthrough, young athletes and mathematicians are usually characterised by early breakthrough. For instance, gymnastic athletes usually win their medals before they are even 20, while philosophers usually publish the first important paper in their early 30s.

However, this is not the only way to look at life with early breakthrough such as athletes. By incorporating the Dual Theory with the narrative structure view and meaning in life, we can give a unified explanation to the Shape of Life Thesis — An improving life is better than a deteriorating life because an improving life implies more meaning added to life, and has more coherent narratives with respect to personal interests and goals.<sup>78</sup> To test the robustness of the explanation, let us think about lives with early breakthrough. It is

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<sup>76</sup> Masny (2023, 28-29).

<sup>77</sup> Masny (2023, 31-32).

<sup>78</sup> Similar views can also be found in Kamm (2003) on why Ivan Ilyich could be justified with how the narrative structure displays a negative and deteriorating shape.

implausible to say that such lives are bad *simpliciter* because they have a deteriorating shape of realised achievement or goals over the course of life. Yet, I believe that it is plausible to say a deteriorating shape of life is *always* bad because deteriorating shape of life is characterised by lost meaning.

Think about Olympic medalists who do not know the purpose of life after winning the medal.<sup>79</sup> Their lives are in an inverted “V” shape, with much realised potential at an early stage and much lost meaning at a late stage. Often, their lives are characterised by the disruptive narratives of losing life-long goals. However, as we have just pointed out in Wolf’s account of meaning, meaning in life is not just about achievement or achieving goals. Rather, it is about wholeheartedly engaging with your interests. Retired athletes or medalists can write about sports, coach peers, advocate for activities, and encourage future athletes. Life’s realised potential, or meaning, should not be seen as an equivalence to achievement. Rather, meaning is something that we can achieve to foster future opportunities and such meaning is not constrained by our biological potential for sports.

Once we see this point, it implausible to *always* define individuals who had early breakthrough with a deteriorating life shape. While it is typical the case that their potential to significance achievement is defined at an early stage, it is still possible that these individuals embrace more meaningful activities through the course of their lives, even though their physical conditions do not represent the maximal possible well-being. They can embrace more meaning and create further opportunities over the course of their life.

*Second*, it is simply wrong to think that a premature death is *always* worse than late death. Think about the death of an infant, whose life certainly has lots of opportunities and

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<sup>79</sup> For instance, see McClendon (2016) that Olympic medal winners indeed found trouble look for the meaning in life after their winning.



potential to come, and a mid-aged philosopher, whose life is characterised by success and coherent achievement along the way. By Masny's view on wasted potential, an infant's death is *always* worse than death at a later stage because the former has too much potential yet to come, while a mid-aged life has realised some portion of potential (if not to the full degree). But this view is simply unconvincing because I think that our intuition cannot distinguish which incident is more unfortunate.

Wasted potential, as wasted achievement or goals, is not the only way to look at the badness of death. Similarly, by incorporating narrative structure and meaning, we can recognise that the badness of death is characterised by the sudden loss of meaning and disruptive narratives in life. For instance, we naturally feel a good life ahead of an infant with respect to common-sense well-being and potential, but such plots are suddenly disrupted. Likewise, we naturally feel a great success ahead of a mid-aged philosopher, and we might have coherent and well-anticipated thought about how the life will go next. The badness of death could be rightly explained by the disruptive narratives of her career. After all, an infant's potential is rather uncertain but we have a more stable trajectory for a mid-aged life. This explanation rightly captures how we feel the badness of death at different stages of life in each case.

In closing, let me address one more issue that might have otherwise caused confusion. Does my view imply that we should abandon utilitarianism in assessing the goodness of life? Is there any desiderate to connect well-being and meaning in life? Theories of capabilities should be right in point here and I will briefly explain how it relates to our discussion of well-being and meaning.

Theories of capabilities rightly track the intuitions here about how crucial items in our capabilities can actually be transformed into our realised potential, and thus making our life

meaningful. For instance, following Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, I understand capabilities “as a set of interrelated opportunities to choose and to act.”<sup>80</sup> This means that the capability of an individual refers to a variety combinations of alternative functionings that she can achieve.

On the other side of capability, there is functioning which refers to the active realisation of one or a combination of capabilities. Examples of capabilities include bodily health and integrity, imagination and thought, emotion and practical reason, as well as affiliation with communities.<sup>81</sup> It should be noted that the notion of freedom to choose has already been embedded in the notion of capabilities in that individuals are free to choose to realise her one or more capabilities.<sup>82</sup> In addition, functionings can be distinguished between active functionings and basic functionings. For instance, enjoying music and lying peacefully in the grass are instances of basic functionings, while winning Olympic medals or having breakthrough scientific discovery are apparent active functionings. To achieve the instances of active functionings, the agent should employ one or more capabilities to endorse her functionings. Therefore, the capabilities approach can be used as means to assess the value of life and theorising about basic justice in terms of welfare redistributions. It can account for the key question — “What is each person capable to do and what can person potentially become?”<sup>83</sup> It measures the overall value of life not as hedonism or mere satisfaction of certain desires, but as individuals’ engagements with different sets of capabilities.

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<sup>80</sup> For the definitions of capabilities, see Nussbaum (2011, 20), and Sen (1974, 387-389) for further explanations of the capabilities approach.

<sup>81</sup> Nussbaum (2011, 20-21).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Nussbaum (2011, 24).

In what way does the capabilities approach track the realised potential or meaning in life? The capabilities approach takes potential or meaning in life ultimately as various central capabilities. Yet, it does not see unrealised capabilities as disvalue of life *per se* in that individuals have the ultimate freedom to choose and develop particular capabilities of her choice. It sees the disvalue of life as impedance, obstacles, or inaccessibility of opportunities to achieve various capabilities that lead to functionings. The capabilities approach rightly distinguishes well-being and meaning. While an agent can achieve high level of actual functionings, it does not necessarily follow that such functionings count towards meaning in life. For instance, think about a slave who achieves high working efficiencies under conditions of hunger, and a devout religious practitioner who endures hunger by fasting. While the two individuals exercise the same functionings, it does not follow that they have the same overall value of life because their realisation of capabilities diverges significantly. In other words, the individuals might bear the same level of well-being due to their actual physical functionings. Yet, they diverge with respect to how meaningful their lives are, and such meaningfulness is embraced by realising their potential in various capabilities.

The upshot of the Dual Theory is more nuanced as Masny rightly anticipates, and I think that this theory should be taken seriously. Nevertheless, wasted potential is a misleading term that often equivocates agents' engagement with her worthwhile interests with some sort of achievement or goals. Instead, we should see potential as a term that represents human capabilities and meaning in life. Once we see this point, the Dual Theory can better guide us on how to live *well*.

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