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Meaning in the Pursuit of Pleasure

ABSTRACT: *Here I speak in favor of the view that life's meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure. I first present an argument for this view that is grounded in a traditional concept of meaning. To help ease remaining concerns about accepting it, I then draw attention to four things the view does not imply: (1) that we have a reason to take hedonistic theories of meaning seriously; (2) that meaning can be found in the deeply immoral, the deeply ignorant, or the deeply repulsive pursuit of pleasure; (3) that there is a significantly easier route to meaning than the pursuit of morality, the pursuit of knowledge, or the pursuit of art; and (4) that meaning can be found in pursuits that involve only baser aspects of human nature.*

KEYWORDS: ethics, value theory, meaning of life, hedonic ends, purposeful activity

1

In the recent literature on life's meaning, it is commonly accepted that activity directed at moral ends, activity directed at epistemic ends, and activity directed at aesthetic ends can be bearers of meaning. Provided they meet certain conditions, the thought goes, these types of purposeful activity can themselves be cases of meaning (not simply lead to meaning in the sense of having tokens that are causally responsible for tokens of it), and hence render the lives in which they appear more meaningful.

Otherwise put, it is commonly accepted in the literature that meaning can be found in the pursuit of morality, the pursuit of knowledge, and the pursuit of art. Thus Thaddeus Metz tells us that 'moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation' can all add meaning to one's life (2013: 13, 227–31; Metz 2019: 5; Metz 2011). A meaningful life, according to John Cottingham, is characterized by striving toward such things as 'truth and beauty and goodness' (2003: 33). Robert Nozick's examples of what makes for meaning are drawn from moral, intellectual, and aesthetic domains (1981: 567, 612, 625–26, 643–47). John Kekes counsels us to look for meaning not only in moral projects but also in aesthetic and intellectual ones (2000: 30). Though she is clear that there is more to meaning than the moral, the epistemic, or the aesthetic, Susan Wolf nevertheless takes activities like comforting an ill acquaintance, writing academic essays, and practicing the cello as her paradigm examples of what makes a life more

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meaningful (2010: 4, 42). And Iddo Landau emphasizes that meaning typically derives from our everyday efforts to be decent to others, to satisfy our curiosity, and to enhance our aesthetic sensibilities and capacities, even if these efforts are well below the level at which the our most gifted moral leaders, scientists, and artists operate (2017: 28, 206–7; see also Landau 2013).

By contrast, it is far from commonly accepted in the literature that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure—that activity directed at nonmoral hedonic ends, in other words, can be a bearer of meaning. Here I conceive of hedonic ends quite broadly: any mental state, sensory or intentional, that a subject could aim to achieve and that is essentially desirable to its subject counts (cf. Metz 2013: 60; see also Thalberg 1962; Feldman 2004: ch. 4; Goldman 2018: ch. 1). And when I say that such ends are nonmoral, I simply mean that their achievement does not entail moral value. There is a plausible distinction to be drawn between moral hedonic ends, such as the alleviation of others' wrongful suffering, and nonmoral hedonic ends, such as the enhancement of one's own comfort in situations where it is neither morally demanded nor morally forbidden. In order to make the contrast with the pursuit of morality clear, I exclude activity directed at moral hedonic ends from my talk of the pursuit of pleasure.

It is not just that many prominent contributors to the literature expect the pursuit of pleasure to satisfy the same conditions that any other type of purposeful activity must satisfy in order to be a bearer of meaning. It is rather that many prominent contributors appear unwilling to allow this type of purposeful activity as a meaning-bearer at all, as if there is something about its being directed at the hedonic ends at which it is directed that precludes it from realizing meaning, in the way that their being directed at entirely trivial or worthless ends might be thought to preclude certain other sorts of activity from realizing meaning. Nowhere, for example, does Metz (2013, 2019) countenance the possibility of hedonic endeavors adding meaning to one's life. Moreover given his account of meaning as firmly linked to the pursuit of ends 'beyond one's own pleasure' (Metz 2013: 9, 35–36), he seems positively committed to denying this. In considering how meaningfully to respond to the pain and suffering our lives inevitably include, Cottingham (2003) never even hints that we might turn to any kind of pleasure pursuit; his only suggested antidotes to the regrettable side of life are nonhedonic in their aims. We are rightly dubious of the meaningfulness of a life devoted to maximizing 'the sum total of [one's] pleasures', Nozick (1981: 594) suggests, the implication being that the pursuit of pleasure, unlike the pursuit of morality or knowledge or art, is incapable of the sort of limit-transcendence he puts at the heart of meaning. And the only varieties of the pursuit of pleasure that Wolf discusses are ones that she plainly regards as meaningless, such as recreational pot-smoking and mindless indulgence in one's favorite sit-coms (2010: 11, 43).

Indeed, among the most prominent contributors to the recent literature, Kekes and Landau appear virtually alone in their acceptance of the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure. Kekes suggests that erotic projects and connoisseurship are among the many particular sorts of nonmoral activity that can yield meaning in life (2000: 29), which seems to imply acceptance of the view. And Landau is more or less explicitly committed to the view when he tells us that people can endow their lives with meaning by 'avoiding or decreasing their own suffering and increasing their own pleasure' (2017: 218).

One will search these contributors' work in vain, however, for anything like a compelling argument for the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure. Both Kekes and Landau seem to regard the view as something more like a point from which reasoning about meaning proceeds than one to which such reasoning leads. On the other hand, one will also search in vain the work of the many other prominent contributors who reject that view for a compelling argument for its denial: for those contributors, denial of the view also seems more like a point from which the reasoning begins than one to which the reasoning leads us.

My aim in what follows is to add my voice to that of Kekes and Landau by speaking in favor of the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure. I think it is important to do so because the more prevalent the failure to accept their correct view, the greater the risk to important things beyond merely getting at the truth of the matter. The more prevalent the failure to accept the view, for example, the greater the risk to our inclination to adopt any of an entire class of practical routes to meaning in life. Also, the more prevalent the failure the greater the risk to our disposition to be encouraging to others whose lives consist largely of the adoption of those practical routes. More simply put, the more prevalent the failure to accept the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure, the more regrettably narrow we are likely to become in our own routes to meaning, and the more regrettably narrow-minded we are likely to become about others' routes to meaning.

I begin in the next section by presenting something for which, as I have just noted, one will search the literature in vain: a compelling argument for the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure. The argument I present is grounded in a traditional concept of meaning, and as such should hold considerably broad appeal. To help ease remaining concerns about accepting the view in question, I then draw attention to four things it does not imply—one about hedonistic theories of meaning, another about deeply disvaluable pursuits of pleasure, yet another about easier routes to meaning, and a final one about pursuits that fail to involve characteristically human aptitudes and emotions.

2

In keeping with a familiar, more general distinction, we can distinguish between conceptions and concepts of life's meaning (Metz 2001, 2013: 18–19; Kauppinen 2012: 352–55). Whereas conceptions of meaning are substantial theories about what meaning consists of, or about its implications in the light of what it is taken to consist of, concepts of meaning are simply ways of understanding meaning as an explanandum—ways of understanding what theorists of meaning are theorizing about when they offer their various conceptions of it.

It is plausible that there are multiple concepts as well as conceptions of meaning at play in the recent literature. Although my argument for the view that meaning can be

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found in the pursuit of pleasure is not grounded in a specific conception of meaning, it is grounded in a certain concept of meaning that I should be clear about here.

The concept, which was plausibly situated 'at the very heart of the classical moral philosophy initiated by Socrates' (Taylor 1999: 13), is a traditional one because of its endurance throughout the history of philosophy. Aristotle put the concept front and center when he sought to explicate the happiest form of life, the life of εὐδαιμονία, in terms of τὸ ἄριστον—'the chief' or 'the highest' of 'all the good things to be done' (2000, 4–5; see Urmson 1990: 31). From Cicero (1931; see von Albrecht 2003: 34–37) to Aquinas (1947: 583–88) to Spinoza (2018: 157–250), the concept featured prominently in discussions of the *summum bonum* (alternatively, the *bonum perfectum* or the *summa hominis felicitas*) of life. The concept continued to play an important role in late modern philosophical thought, finding expression as it did in the use of such terms as Schlegel's (1971) 'der Sinn des Lebens', Fichte's (1987) 'die Bestimmung des Menschen', and Carlyle's (1987) now-dominant English equivalent, 'the meaning of life' (Leach and Tartaglia 2018: 24).

The concept may be formulated quite simply: it is that of the best sort of pursuit, or purposeful activity, that we human beings can adopt in life. Under this concept it is clear why meaning should be considered not only an ethical topic but an especially deep one. Under the concept meaning is an ethical topic because it is one of the various good things—good sorts of activity—that ethics concerns, and it is an especially deep ethical topic because it is one of the evaluatively deepest of these good things. Under certain other concepts of meaning, by contrast, it is unclear why meaning should be so considered. Under the concept of meaning as whatever merits much admiration or esteem in life (Metz 2001: 147–50; Kauppinen 2012: 353), for example, or under concepts according to which meaning is an essentially disjunctive notion that ranges across various seemingly unconnected concerns in value theory and moral psychology (Metz 2013: 34–35; Kekes 2000; see also Ruse 2019: 4; Goetz and Seachris 2020: 11), meaning seems to include far too much to be considered an especially deep ethical topic. Indeed, under other concepts of meaning yet, it is not even clear why meaning should be considered ethical topic at all, let alone an especially deep one. Thus under the concept of meaning as the ultimate fate of the human species in the universe, meaning seems more properly a concern of the natural sciences than of ethics, however relevant it may be to certain ethical concerns. And under the concept of meaning as an individual's core passion or central motivation in life (see, for example, Singer 2010), meaning seems itself to be proper concern of psychology, whatever its relevance to certain issues in ethics.

Because it does not tie meaning to any particular worldview, moreover, the traditional concept does not require adherents of some worldviews to take a more pessimistic attitude toward it than do others. Under this concept, for example, philosophical naturalists need be no more pessimistic about meaning than are theists. The same cannot be said of the concept of meaning as the reason for which human beings were brought into existence (Tartaglia 2016: 2; see also Camus 1975: ix). Because this concept obviously ties meaning to a nonnaturalistic worldview, under the concept naturalists are bound to take a more negative attitude toward meaning—to be nihilists about meaning in the sense that they deny that there is any such thing, for example—if they take any attitude toward it at all.

The superlative is an ineliminable element of the traditional concept, but we need to be careful about what we read into this. Just as the superlative concept of the best sort of political system, say, or the best kind of fictional work, plausibly corresponds to something that is very multiply realizable by many different, more particular sorts of political system or fictional work, so the traditional concept of meaning plausibly corresponds to something that is very multiply realizable by many different, more particular sorts of pursuit we can adopt in life. Under this concept, accordingly, there is no obvious reason to deny that pursuits so diverse as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s activism, Marie Curie's discoveries in radioactivity, and Piet Mondrian's work on *Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow* are all shining examples of meaning. Moreover, the superlative element of the traditional concept need preclude neither the idea that meaning comes in varying measure nor the idea that meaning is better than all other good sorts of pursuit we can adopt in life only in a measure-relative sense. As the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life, meaning can be said—indeed, is most plausibly said—to come in varying measure because the particular activities that token that very general activity type can do so to varying degrees. And although meaning must be better than any other good sort of pursuit we can adopt in life, the way in which it is better is quite plausibly a measure-relative one. As the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life, meaning may—I think should—be understood as better than any distinct sort of good pursuit we can adopt in life because its tokening to a certain degree necessarily involves more value in general than does the tokening to a comparable degree of any distinct good sort of pursuit. The superlative element of the traditional concept thus leaves room for the idea that a pursuit in which there is no meaning but a large measure of moral or epistemic or aesthetic or hedonic value can be better than one in which there is only a very small measure of meaning. Even under the traditional concept, in other words, meaning can be evaluatively outweighed by other things.

The first premise of my argument for the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure is firmly grounded in this traditional concept, for the concept features in the antecedent of the premise: If there are varieties of the pursuit of something *P* that realize the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life, according to this premise, then meaning can be found in *P*'s pursuit.

Were the consequent of the premise to be strengthened, for example to the claim that meaning *must be* or *always is* found in *P*'s pursuit, the antecedent would also have to be strengthened correspondingly, for otherwise the premise would be too easily falsified by counterexample. To illustrate, consider that there is no serious question about whether meaning must be found in the pursuit of morality, the pursuit of knowledge, or the pursuit of art. In the light of examples such as the following, it is clear that meaning *need not* be found in any of those broad sorts of pursuit:

> Authoritarian Parenting. Much of a father's interaction with his son aims to impart some important moral lessons, for example about

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morally fitting responses to hardship, about not unfairly privileging one's own desires over those of others, and about showing others the respect they morally deserve. So rigidly does the father follow the pattern set by his puritanical forebears or narrow-minded society, however, that his parental effort ends up as a perfect example of one of the worst styles of parenting—a very lamentable sort of authoritarian parenting in Diana Baumrind's (1967) famous typology. The effort carries a significant hedonic cost to the father himself: he is not being entirely untruthful when he says things like 'I hate to have to do this, son' and 'This is going to hurt me as much as it is you'. But the hedonic cost to the father pales in comparison to the hedonic cost to the son. As he learns those moral lessons, the son is in a constant state of soul-crushing misery.

Evil Experimentation. A skilled social psychologist designs and leads a series of experiments in order to test his current hypotheses about the dynamics of human behavior in hierarchical social groups. His desire for knowledge on these matters is so strong and central to his identity that he is not motivated, even in part, by some morally laudable ideal, like understanding how a horrible injustice of the past could have been allowed to happen. That he is exceptionally skilled in the pursuit of his epistemic aim is evident in the ingenuity and aptness of his experimental design. And the experiments do largely hit that aim, yielding the psychologist much of the hoped-for knowledge. At the end of the process, however, the psychologist and various members of his experimental team are loath to share the knowledge more widely, for in their heart of hearts they know the evil they have done. The subjects in the experiments were intentionally drawn from impoverished and poorly educated segments of society, and due largely to the remuneration they were offered and the way in which the experiments were explained to them, they could not truly be said to be willing participants. No reasonable ethics review board would have deemed the subjects' consent informed. Moreover, the anguish the subjects experienced throughout the experiments was truly awful. Most escaped only with lasting, highly debilitating forms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Frightful Fiction. Laboring under the delusion that the admirable talents he has developed in his chosen profession will somehow transfer over, an accomplished engineering professor endeavors for a time to make a contribution of his own to a genre of detective fiction he loves: hardboiled. Things start off badly and do not improve as he works on his novel in all of his spare moments during this period. It is clear to those to whom he shows the occasional draft chapter that his academic talents do not transfer, and he seems incapable of any greater accomplishment in this work than a sad, thinly disguised

> attempt to imitate aspects of the work of such luminaries as Raymond Chandler and Sara Paretsky. Partly because they know how meaningful his life is anyway by virtue of his academic accomplishments, and partly because they do not see it as detracting from—only as failing to add to—this meaningfulness, friends who know about the professor's fiction writing do not have the heart to tell him how awful it really is.

Meaning is not plausibly to be found in the pursuit featured in any of these cases. In Authoritarian Parenting, the father engages in a pursuit of morality, for he engages in an activity directed at a moral end, to wit, the end of teaching his son important moral lessons. But the father's pursuit of morality seems far too marred by the extreme hedonic disvalue it carries, and far too much in lockstep with the pattern of his forebears or society for it to carry any meaning. In Evil Experimentation, the experimenter pursues knowledge because he takes up an activity directed at an epistemic end, namely, the end of knowing the truth about his current hypotheses. The experimenter's pursuit of knowledge is so devoid of moral value, however, and indeed of such great moral disvalue, that it seems absurd to think of him exemplifying meaning with it. In Frightful Fiction, the professor pursues art because he engages in an activity directed at the aesthetic end of producing a great work of fiction. Yet the professor's pursuit is so poorly aimed at its aesthetic end, and so pathetically imitative that it is just sad to think of him as wasting so much of his time on such a meaningless activity. In the light of examples like these, then, it is clearly false that meaning must be found in the pursuit of morality, the pursuit of knowledge, or the pursuit of art. We have only to add recognition of the many other examples of these sorts of pursuit in which meaning obviously is found—famous ones, such as King's activism, Curie's discoveries in physics, and Mondrian's painting spring most readily to mind—to get clear counterexamples to the claim that if some varieties of the pursuit *P* realize the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life then meaning *must be* found in *P*'s pursuit. Examples like Authoritarian Parenting, Evil Experimentation, and Frightful Fiction show that meaning need not be found in the pursuit of morality or knowledge or art. Examples like those of King, Curie, and Mondrian show that there are nevertheless varieties of such pursuits that realize the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life.

Although the first premise of my argument is thus grounded in a traditional concept of meaning, it should nevertheless be of considerable appeal to many with alternative concepts of meaning, for the traditional concept seems to set the bar of meaning higher than do the alternatives, such that if there is good reason to think that the pursuit of pleasure surpasses the bar under the traditional concept then there will be as good or better reason to think that it surpasses the bar under the alternatives. Thus, for example, the first premise of my argument should not only be of considerable appeal to those with the concept of meaning as whatever merits much admiration or esteem in life, but also to those whose concept of meaning is an essentially disjunctive one that ranges across various value-theoretic and moral-psychological concerns.

The other premise of my argument is that there are varieties of the pursuit of pleasure that realize the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life. To focus one's consideration of the pursuit of pleasure exclusively on examples of it in which meaning is intuitively not to be found is to fail fully to appreciate the plausibility of this premise, for examples of meaningless pleasure-pursuit seem inevitably to be ones in which there is no exemplification to any degree of the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life. Indeed, so far are these examples removed from the realm of that best sort of pursuit that there can be some difficulty parsing them as instances of activity in the first place. It can take some coaxing for us to appreciate that Wolf's examples of recreational pot-smoking and indulging in mindless sit-coms, fleshed out as she presumably means them to be fleshed out, are cases of activity at all, let alone cases of the best sort of purposeful activity we can adopt in life. Isn't the pothead just sitting around high all day, not doing anything? Okay, there is some activity in the purchasing, the measuring, the rolling, the smoking, and so on, but it is hardly possessed of sufficient value, and hardly displays sufficient skill and ingenuity to come anywhere close to the best that we can do, pursuit-wise. Isn't the mindless sit-com indulger basically just a couch potato, the very definition of inactivity? Well, not exactly: he does have to arrange some time out of his day for his viewings, make some effort to choose the sit-coms he loves the most, and so on. But again, there is so little to admire in any of this, and so much to loathe, that even to consider it in relation to the best sort of pursuit that human beings can take up is laughable.

The plausibility of the other premise of my argument emerges, however, when we turn our attention to quite different examples of the pursuit of pleasure. Thus consider the following examples:

> Bon Vivant. A public defender's very successful career is by no means all there is to her life. On the personal side of things she finds enormous fulfillment as a gourmet. She is passionate about creating for herself new gustatory experiences of the highest caliber, and she has become exceptionally good at it over the years. She can happily spend the better part of a day—one of those rare days not devoted to the service of others in her career—planning, preparing, and savoring some dish that is bursting with flavor. Her favorite section of her favorite cookbook, Nigella Lawson's *How To Eat: The Pleasures and Principles of Good Food*, is the one in which the author insists that there is much more to food than sharing and connectedness, and that there is something 'robustly affirmative' about cooking for oneself and using food to enjoy life 'on purpose, rather than by default'. Our defender has come to suspect that the rewards she receives from her outstanding gustatory pursuits may be a significant part of what helps her hold it together so well under the often intense pressures of her career. But she knows that if so, it is a fortunate coincidence, because those rewards are the true aim of the pursuits, not the bolstering of her career.

Premier Partying. A self-made woman loves to attend, and especially to host, good parties. No one would call her a social butterfly, however, for that seems at odds with the planning and insight and effort she puts into her partying. A more apt description, heard more than once on her friends' lips, would be 'the emcee'. She has developed an amazing sense of what makes for a good guest and a good host, and she's constantly applying it in ingenious ways, much to the satisfaction of others as well as herself. You can only be filled with admiration when you witness her work her magic in a room full of people. She is happy when she hears about how much her friends enjoy her parties, and about how much they appreciate her enlivening presence at theirs. Still, the woman is sufficiently self-aware to recognize that her main reason for all the partying is her own pleasure. Rightly confident in her own goodness, she has no need for pretentious talk of the moral virtues of her partying. She is quite comfortable with the fact that she parties because of the joy it brings her, not because of the joy it brings her friends, happy though she always is to hear about that.

Sweet Dreams. Aware of the impact that poor sleep tends to have on her well-being, and with the aim of increasing the quality of her own life, an irregular-shift employee puts quite a bit of effort into coming up with personally apt sleep aids and techniques. She spends many of her leisure hours, over a number of months, researching the latest discoveries in sleep science, thinking about how the most relevant of these could best be implemented in her own particular circumstances, and inventing the aids and techniques accordingly. The great success of her sweet-dreams quest would be unsurprising to anyone else who knew of the rationality and creativity the employee displayed throughout it. The aids and techniques she invents prove extraordinarily useful for her, enhancing her quality of life so much that afterwards she can hardly imagine how she managed to cope without them.

In each of these examples it is very plausible to maintain that the variety of the pursuit of pleasure involved realizes the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life, where the latter is glossed in the multiply realizable, varying-measure, and measure-relative way I have suggested it should be. Indeed, in each example it is at least as plausible to maintain this as it is to maintain that many intuitively meaning-endowing varieties of the pursuit of morality, the pursuit of knowledge, and the pursuit of art realize that best sort of pursuit, particularly when one keeps in mind that the latter will include many humbler and uncelebrated instances as well as more famous ones like that of King, Curie, and Mondrian. In Bon Vivant, the culinary pursuit of pleasure the public defender takes up is so superb and so saturated with skill that it seems downright offensive to deny it one of the many faces of the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life. Because the self-made woman's social pursuit of pleasure in Premier Partying serves as the very model of what an admirable agent might do, the same seems true of it. The similarity of what the shift employee does in Sweet Dreams to more celebrated pursuits of pleasure, such as the one for which Josephine Cochrane (inventor of the modern automatic dishwasher) is justly famous, makes it very hard to deny that the sort of pleasure-pursuit she exemplifies at least to some extent realizes the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life.

Examples of the pursuit of pleasure like the three above throw the plausibility of the other premise of my argument into stark relief. The relief is made only starker by the point that, because the pursuit of pleasure is such a broad pursuit of something of such basic, indeed final value in life (pleasure is not only one of the simplest and most general forms of goodness in life, but also one of the simplest and most general forms of what is worth pursuing in its own right; see Wolf 1997; Metz 2013: 59–65), it would be surprising if no varieties of it whatsoever turned out to realize the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life. Indeed, the pursuit of pleasure seems no narrower a pursuit of something of basic final value in life than the pursuit of morality, the pursuit of knowledge, or the pursuit of art. It would thus be as astonishing to learn that no variety of the pursuit of pleasure realizes that best sort of pursuit as it would be to learn that no variety of the pursuit of morality, knowledge, or art realizes it.

3

My argument is straightforward enough: If there are varieties of the pursuit of something *P* that realize the best sort of pursuit that we can adopt in life then meaning can be found in *P*'s pursuit, and there are some varieties of the pursuit of pleasure that realize that best sort of thing. The argument is also compelling enough to be given serious consideration. It is far from conclusive, however, and I have no doubt that various concerns will remain about accepting the view it supports. To help ease those remaining concerns, I draw attention to four things that this view does not imply.

First, the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure does not imply that we have a reason to take hedonistic theories of meaning seriously. A reason to take such theories seriously would be a reason to think either that meaning is a type of pleasure or that meaning can be found only in the pursuit of pleasure, for one or the other of these claims is surely the sine qua non of hedonistic theories of meaning. But the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure implies no reason at all to think that either of these claims is true. Thus one need not deny that meaning can be found in pleasure's pursuit in order to accept Metz's sensible point that there is something about the very notion of meaning that 'rules out a hedonistic theory of it' (2013: 62).

One way to see this is to compare the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of morality. Few if any would be tempted to suppose that by embracing this view we thereby acquire a reason to take moralistic theories of meaning seriously—a reason, that is, to think either that meaning is a type of morality or that meaning can only be found in the pursuit of morality. To a similar effect, we might compare the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of knowledge, or the view that it can be found in the pursuit of art: it seems obvious that neither view gives us a reason to take narrow-minded intellectualistic or aesthetical theories of meaning seriously. Neither gives us any reason, that is, to think that meaning is just a species of knowledge or art, or only to be found in the pursuit of knowledge or the pursuit of art.

The meaning-bearing potential of these sorts of pursuit fails to imply a reason to take the correspondingly narrow-minded theories of meaning seriously because varieties of any one of these sorts of pursuit stand as just some of the realizers of a very general, multiply realizable activity-type. As I noted above, even under the traditional concept in which my prima facie case is grounded, meaning is presumably of such generality as to be realizable by many different things, including varieties of the pursuit of morality, the pursuit of knowledge, and the pursuit of art; so that meaning can be found in these sorts of pursuit yields no reason to think that it is merely a kind of morality, knowledge, or art, nor any reason to think that it is only to be found in the pursuit of morality, knowledge, or art. In the same way, even if we allow that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure, we will only do so with the recognition that varieties of the pursuit of pleasure are just some of the many realizers of meaning. Hence, the allowance will not yield any reason to take hedonistic theories of meaning seriously.

It might also be helpful to consider some of the contemporary conceptions of meaning that do not obviously preclude the view that it can be found in the pursuit of pleasure, for under no remotely plausible taxonomy do they count as hedonistic conceptions. Landau's conception, for example, according to which meaning supervenes on various things of value (2017: 29), can only with the oddest of classifications be called a hedonistic theory. On Richard Taylor's (1987, 1981) creativity conception, to take another example, meaning consists of activity aimed at something of final value through the exercise of the agent's creative capacity. Given that morality, knowledge, art, and pleasure are all of final value, and that they all appear capable of being pursued through the exercise of the agent's creative capacity, this conception does not obviously preclude the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure as well as in the pursuit of morality, knowledge, or art. Yet it would be a gross mischaracterization to say that the conception is a hedonistic one.

Second, the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure does not imply that meaning can be found in the deeply immoral, the deeply ignorant, or the deeply repulsive pursuit of pleasure—in the varieties of it, in other words, that involve extraordinary sorts of moral wrongdoing, false belief or unreliable belief-forming practices, or ugliness. Because it requires only that meaning is found in some, not all varieties of the pursuit of pleasure, the view sits quite comfortably with the point that meaning is found in no subvariety of the deeply immoral, deeply ignorant, or deeply repulsive pursuit of pleasure, and hence quite comfortably with the claim that meaning cannot be found in any of these varieties of the pursuit of pleasure.

This is precisely analogous to what we want to say of the pursuit of morality, the pursuit of knowledge, and the pursuit of art. In each of these cases, we want to say, meaning can be found in the relevant sort of pursuit, but cannot be found in the varieties of it that involve one or more of the horrible forms of basic disvalue, for

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the general conditions on meaning-bearing activity preclude it. Of course meaning can be found in the pursuit of morality, as examples like King's show; but it is perfectly consistent for us to add that meaning cannot be found in varieties of morality's pursuit that involve needless and enormous amounts of hedonic disvalue, as examples like Authoritarian Parenting show. Of course meaning can be found in the pursuit of knowledge, as examples like Curie's show. Yet it's quite plausible to add that meaning cannot be found in those sorts of knowledge-pursuit that realize sickening forms of moral disvalue, as examples like Evil Experimentation show. And whereas everyone wants to say that meaning can be found in the pursuit of art, no one wants to say that it can be found in varieties of art's pursuit that involve the most awful sorts of aesthetic disvalue (as intensified versions of Frightful Fiction would show) or horrible moral disvalue (as in Hannibal Lecter-style pursuits of art). With Metz, we want to say that the deeply disvaluable nature of such pursuits of morality, knowledge, and art undercuts their 'meaning-conferring power' (2013: 221). With Cottingham, we want to say that the badness of these pursuits dehumanizes the pursuers in such a way as to vitiate the meaning the pursuits might otherwise have borne (2003: 23).

Third, the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure does not imply that there is a significantly easier route to meaning than the pursuit of morality, knowledge, or art. Consonantly with that view, and with what I have just said, we may have very good reason to maintain that meaning cannot be found in the deeply immoral or the deeply ignorant or the deeply repulsive pursuit of pleasure. And we may find, consequently, that the varieties of the pursuit of pleasure we are left with are one and all about as difficult to effect as the varieties of the pursuit of morality or knowledge or art in which meaning is found. Indeed, the more we reflect on plausible examples of the varieties we are left with, such as the varieties featured in Bon Vivant, Premier Partying, and Sweet Dreams, the more we will be inclined to say that these varieties are typically at least as difficult to effect as the varieties of the pursuit of morality, knowledge, or art in which meaning is to be found.

When it comes to the varieties of a pursuit-type in which meaning is found, the relative ease with which they are typically effected is presumably not all there is to how easy they are as routes to meaning. The relative measure of the meaning typically to be found in them—the relative extent to which their instantiation in turn typically instantiates meaning—is presumably also part of it. If it should turn out that—holding constant the relative ease with which they are typically effected —varieties of the pursuit of pleasure in which meaning is found typically yield smaller measures of meaning than do varieties of the pursuit of morality or knowledge or art in which meaning is found, then we are well on the way to the position that the pursuit of pleasure is in fact a significantly *more difficult* route to meaning than is the pursuit of morality or knowledge or art. The position would be that you have to work significantly harder in the pursuit of pleasure than you do in the pursuit of morality or knowledge or art to add a comparable measure of meaning to your life. The view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure, then, just does not imply that in this pursuit we have a significantly

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easier route to meaning than we have in the pursuit of morality or knowledge or art. In fact, the view fits quite well with the idea that in it we have a significantly more difficult route to meaning.

Of the four sorts of pursuit on which we have been focusing, the pursuit of pleasure might be thought to be the only one we share with nonhuman animals. If it makes sense to talk of them pursuing things at all, one might think, chimpanzees, dolphins, and dogs can plausibly be said to pursue pleasure; but it is beyond the pale to suggest that they pursue morality, knowledge, or art. Of course their behavior often fits altruistic patterns to varying degrees, they know many things to some extent or other, and they frequently display much grace and elegance and beauty in what they do. But none of this is to say that the animals pursue moral, epistemic, or aesthetic ends; it is at best to say that they exemplify such ends while engaging in the only sort of pursuit of which they are capable, to wit, the pursuit of pleasure.

It is thus plausible to suppose that the pursuit of pleasure is the only sort of pursuit we share with our nonhuman counterparts, and in the light of this supposition one might reason that if meaning can be found in pleasure's pursuit then it can be found in pursuits that involve merely animalistic, and so not characteristically human, aptitudes and emotions. More simply put, one might infer that if meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure then it can be found in pursuits that involve only baser aspects of human nature.

From my discussion so far of the implications of the view for which I have argued, it should be clear why I regard this inference as fallacious. The view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure does not imply, as the inference assumes, that meaning can be found in pursuits that involve only baser aspects of human nature. It no more implies this than it implies that meaning can be found in the deeply immoral, the deeply ignorant, or the deeply repulsive pursuit of pleasure. Unlike the view that meaning must be or always is found in it, the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure does not require meaning to be found in every variety of that pursuit. The view comports just as well with that claim that meaning cannot be found in pursuits that involve only baser aspects of human nature as it does with the claim that it cannot be found in the deeply immoral, or deeply ignorant, or deeply repulsive pursuit of pleasure.

Consonantly with the view, we may maintain that the base pursuits that feature in the life of someone 'like Percy Berkeley, the gourmandising officer in Simon Raven's *Alms for Oblivion* sequence, who "had not had a thought in his head for twenty years that was not connected to his immediate pleasure or comfort"' (Cottingham 2003: 25) are of no meaning whatsoever. But as I have emphasized above, there are many varieties of the pursuit of pleasure that are not so base. The admirably gourmandizing public defender in Bon Vivant is no Percy Berkeley, and her culinary pursuits of pleasure, unlike his, plainly recruit some very high level, very characteristically human aptitudes and emotions. If it turns out that the kinds of pleasure-pursuit in which meaning is plausibly found are one and all like hers and not like his in that respect, then meaning will be found in the pursuit of pleasure but never in any variety that involves only baser aspects of human nature.

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In light of the argument I presented in section two, nonhedonistic theorists of life's meaning who would tie it to fundamentally good, difficult, and characteristically human pursuits now have reason to accept the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure. In keeping with the traditional concept of meaning in which my argument is grounded, meaning can be found in a pursuit if there are varieties of that pursuit that realize the best sort of pursuit we can adopt in life, understood in the multiply realizable, varying-measure, and measure-relative way I have suggested; and it is very plausible on reflection to think that there are varieties of the pursuit of pleasure that realize this, so understood.

In the light of my discussion in section three, those theorists may also now have much less reason to hesitate in accepting the view that meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasure. The view implies no reason to take hedonistic theories of meaning seriously. It implies neither that meaning can be found in the deeply immoral, the deeply ignorant, or the deeply repulsive pursuit of pleasure, nor that there is a significantly easier route to meaning than the pursuit of morality, knowledge, or art. The view also does not imply that meaning can be found in pursuits that involve only baser aspects of human nature. Nonhedonistic theorists who would tie meaning to fundamentally good and difficult and characteristically human pursuits need therefore not be any more worried than other theorists about accepting that view.

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