

Mortality, Immortality, and Meaningfulness in Life

By

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Abstract

I don't want to die, not right now anyway. Perhaps one day my life won't seem to me to be worth living any longer and I will want to die. That is a prospect I don't relish. I want to go on living as long as the quality of my life is generally agreeable to me, that is, I want to be immortal conditionally. Relative to this desire of mine—a desire that is certainly shared by others—mortality (the finitude of life) is to be regretted. That mortality is to be so regretted does not mean, however, that ever longer life, and by extension, infinitely long life, is more *meaningful* than shorter mortal life. Supporting the claim that mortality, alone, does not diminish the meaningfulness of life will be my primary purpose herein. To this end I will introduce and defend what I call “the proportionality argument”.

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1.1 The Epicurean Argument

It seems to be quite natural for those who live even moderately rewarding or engaging lives to dread the prospect of their own deaths. Seeking to assuage such dread the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus taught that death cannot harm us. “Death, the most dreaded of evils” he claimed in his “Letter to Menoeceus,” is “of no concern to us; for while we exist death is not present, and when death is present we no longer exist.” ([ca. 300 BCE] 1997a, 469) A slightly different version of this epigraph appears in his “Principal Doctrines”: “Death is nothing to us; for what has been dissolved has no sensation, and what has no sensation is nothing to us.” ([ca. 300 BCE] 1997b, 472) Yet another formulation of this stance was later captured in Lucretius’s “On the Nature of the Universe”:

If in a future time a man is to suffer pain and misery, he must exist, or else he could not feel it. But death makes this impossible and forbids the man to exist to whom these ills could come. Therefore we may be certain that in death there is nothing to fear, that he who does not exist cannot feel pain, that it makes no difference whether or not a man has been born before, when death the immortal has taken his life. ([ca. 75 BCE] 1997, 93)

Read one way, the Epicurean argument is for a trivial conclusion: one cannot suffer from being dead (non-existent). There is, however, another way to gloss the Epicurean argument such that it makes a non-trivial point about the relevance of our finitude or mortality to the meaningfulness of our lives. Here is the Epicurean argument with such a gloss:

P1) Something can diminish the meaningfulness of an individual's life only if it causes the individual adverse experiences.

P2) Death cannot cause an individual to have adverse experiences.

C) Therefore, death cannot diminish the meaningfulness of an individual's life.

Rendered in this way the Epicurean argument escapes the charge of triviality, but it is rather easy to call into question. For us to reasonably lament our mortality—the fact that we will die—as something that diminishes the meaningfulness of our lives, we need not suppose that being dead (non-existent) will be awful; death may diminish meaningfulness, not “because of its positive features [,for it has none,] but...because of what it deprives us of .” (Nagel, 1970, 74)

1.2 The Deprivation Argument

The argument that death diminishes the meaningfulness of an individual's life as it deprives her of the possibility of partaking in any of life's (future) goods belongs to what we may call the “deprivation theory”. According to the deprivation theorist, the Epicurean argument is beside the point; it need not be supposed that being dead (non-existent) must be equated to being in a negative or aversive state in order for death (going out of existence) to diminish the meaningfulness of one's life. The deprivation theorist can thus happily agree with the Epicurean that supposing this would be downright foolish. Where the deprivation theorist finds fault with the Epicurean argument is with (P1). It is a mistake, posits the deprivation theorist, to assume that only that which causes adverse experiences can diminish the meaningfulness of one's life. Examples such as the following from Robert Nozick have been offered to make this intuitive:

[S]uppose we read the biography of a man who felt happy, took pride in his work, family life, etc. But we also read that his children, secretly, despised him; his wife, secretly, scorned him having innumerable affairs; his work was a subject of ridicule among all others, who kept their opinion from him; every source of satisfaction in this man's life was built upon a falsehood, a deception. Do you, in reading about this man's life, think: "What a wonderful life. I wish I, or my children, could lead it"? And don't say that you wouldn't want to lead the life because all the deceptions and falsehoods might come out making the man unhappy. They didn't. Of course, it is difficult to imagine the others behaving appropriately, and the person himself not being nagged by doubts. But is this the grounds of one's reaction? Was it a good life? (1997, 263)

(Admittedly, Nozick's example does not entail that the ignorant man had no adverse experiences due to that which he was ignorant of; the thrust of Nozick's example is to persuade that one need not be aware of something in order for it to undermine the meaningfulness of certain of his projects. Still, a further step may be taken, and it may be imagined that the man in Nozick's example was both unaware that his sources of satisfaction were illegitimate and that none of these undiscovered falsehoods caused him to have any adverse experiences.) It turns out however, for reasons I need not concern myself with here, that death is not a straightforward case of deprivation; it is not clear that the badness of death is a relative of the badness of transgressions against persons of which they are not aware. Indeed, the deprivation theory may very well be false¹. However, even if it is correct that death does not deprive those who die, it does not

¹ For some reasons to think this see Christopher Williams (2007) paper "Death and Deprivation".

follow that there is nothing bad—meaningfulness diminishing—about being mortal.

Death need not deprive those who die in order for it to be true, all else being equal, that life would be better, from the point of view of meaningfulness, if it were radically longer than is now possible, and by extension, that an immortal life would be a better life than a mortal life². Attempts to categorize death as an evil of deprivation are controversial because, arguably, for one to be deprived one must end up worse off after the event that deprived her than one was before, and it is difficult to see how this can be true of death since being dead is not a comparatively impoverished or deficient state compared to being alive, indeed it is not a state of an individual at all and so can neither have negative value nor positive value for the individual. This controversy does not arise when it is considered whether mortal life is comparatively less good than immortal life, for in considering this, the comparative meaningfulness (what is intended by “meaningfulness” will be explained below) of two kinds of lives, not the comparative meaningfulness of life vs. death (non-existence), is considered.

1.3 The Proportionality Argument

I intend to argue herein that an immortal life would not, simply in virtue of being an immortal life, be a more meaningful life than a mortal life. I’ll call my overarching argument for this conclusion the proportionality argument³. It runs as follows:

P1) Life’s meaning is a function of the proportion of meaningfulness within life to

² I will henceforth talk primarily of immortal life and not of radically longer life, or what we might call Malthusian life. Please note, however, that for the most part what is said herein about immortality applies to Malthusian life as well.

³ I am indebted to Professor David Matheson for his help in formulating the proportionality argument.

meaninglessness within life, not simply the amount of meaningfulness within life.

P2) If life's meaning is a function of the proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness within a life, not simply the amount of meaningfulness within life, then the length of a life alone cannot affect its meaning.

P3) If the length of life alone cannot affect its meaning, then *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

C) Therefore, *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

With this argument I make a few presumptions which should be enumerated.

First, it is presumed that death is the complete annihilation of the experiencing person; to be mortal then, is to live a life that will end in such annihilation. Related to this presumption that there is no afterlife of any form, it is also presumed that if life can be meaningful this is a possibility which owes nothing to a spiritual plane, supernatural realm, order, or entity. Second, meaning is not an all or nothing facet of life; meaningfulness in life comes in degrees. Third, and explanatory of the preceding, broadly speaking, meaningfulness is a function of what one intentionally does with one's time; it cannot obtain due to accident or result from something one had no part in. Therefore, "meaningfulness" is to be understood as being carried by or supervening on activity. Some activities carry more meaning than others and some carry none (are meaningless). The overall meaningfulness of a life thus depends on the activities conducted over its course by the one whose life it is. Now, undoubtedly it is hopeless to seek for any precise measure of the amount of meaningfulness that attaches to projects or actions. This does not entail, though, that it is senseless to suppose that meaningfulness

may attach to our actions; the amount of meaningfulness that a particular action has can be roughly gauged, which is sufficient to support the claim that the activities of a life can be classed as either meaningful or meaningless, and hence that a life as a whole will have some proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness. This claim is no more suspect than the claim that one's beliefs may be classed as reasonable to varying degrees and thus one has some proportion of rationality in one's belief network (though an accurate estimation of this proportion is perhaps impossible), and so ought to be regarded as equally uncontroversial.

The key premise of the proportionality argument is (P1), and although Chapter Three will be devoted to the defense of this premise, I will momentarily do a little work to motivate it; first, I want to make it clear that appropriately read (P2) and (P3) are relatively uncontroversial. (P2) merely asserts that if—as (P1) has it—the overall degree of a life's meaningfulness is determined by the proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness that the life contains, not simply by how much meaningfulness it contains, then how long a life is—whether it lasts for 20 years or 90, or even whether it goes on forever—makes no difference in and of itself to the life's overall degree of meaningfulness. This is because longer life alone simply guarantees a higher number of activities within a life, not a higher proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness. (P3), moreover, verges on a trivial truth: if the length of a life alone can make no change to the meaning of a life, then it is impossible for the length of the life alone to make it less meaningful. If something other than length must be added to the mix to affect meaning at all, it must also be added to the mix to affect meaning negatively.

I'll now provide a bit of support for (P1) by illustrating its implications in contrast

to the implications of its main competitor, viz. the position that the meaning of a life is a function of the sheer amount of meaningfulness within a life. An example can serve this purpose.

Imagine an individual who has done a significant number of meaningful things in her life. At this point I have not proposed nor suggested what sorts of activities count as meaningful activities—I will address this in Chapter Three—so for now I will just stipulate that our imagined individual has, in her life so far, carried out a number of meaningful activities. Now, suppose that this individual passes away at age 26. The total meaningfulness in her life is now fixed. Further, suppose that due to her actions the sum of meaningfulness in her life outweighs the sum of meaninglessness. Now, imagine again this same case except this time our character does not die at 26 and lives till she is 90. Suppose also, that in this second scenario she only carries out one meaningful action past the age of 26; the majority of her last 64 years is wasted doing meaningless things. In this second scenario our character has lived an additional 64 years and completed more meaningful actions than she had in the first scenario. Thus, according to the view that a life is more meaningful the more meaningfulness that attaches to it, the 90 year old person just mentioned has lived a life more meaningful than they would have had they died at 26. This is plainly absurd though. It appears then, that the view that the meaningfulness of a life is a function of the proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness is the more reasonable view.

1.4 The Meaning of “Meaning”

An explanation of what is intended by “meaning” or “meaningfulness” is

conspicuously absent from the discussion thus far. What does it mean to ask: “what is a meaningful life?” Since I have not yet spoken on this question the proportionality argument is unacceptably obscure. I want now to remedy this situation by briefly expounding and defending a stance on meaning.

A recent author (Thaddeus Metz, 2001 & 2008) has concluded that it is improbable that there is a singular primary concept of meaning common to 20th century Anglo-American philosophical proposals on the matter. In claiming this he is claiming that if two or more theories conceive differently of what about life can make it meaningful, then there is no principled way for us to decide which among them qualify as theories on meaningfulness and which do not. Metz imparts that the importance of this probable fact is *not* that philosophical inquiry and theorizing on meaningfulness is hopeless—that there is no relevant problem space to explore, but rather, that there is a family of problem spaces.

On route to this conclusion Metz warns against identifying conceptions of meaningfulness with conceptions of *worthwhileness*:

[T]he concept of a worthwhile life is not identical to that of a meaningful one...One would not be conceptually confused to claim that a meaningless life full of animal pleasure is most (or even alone) worth living. Furthermore, talk of a “meaningless life” does not simply connote the concept of an absurd..., unreasonable..., futile..., or wasted...life. (2008)

Because he can apparently imagine cases of worthwhile activity that do not qualify as cases of meaningful activity, Metz believes the two concepts are not co-extensive. I think

he moves too quickly, however, in his dismissal of the idea that the aim of a theory of meaningfulness is to explain what factors may make a life worthwhile. His rejection of this view seems to rest on the mistaken supposition that the concept of worthwhileness is substantive or “thick” in that it carries obvious implications about what sort of activities in life are worthwhile, while the same cannot be said of the concept of meaningfulness. But I see no reason to believe this, and what’s more Metz offers none.

On my view, conceptions of meaningfulness are conceptions of worthwhileness. When Metz suggests that some conception or other of worthwhileness does not match some conception of meaningfulness he exploits the fact that there is no substantive concept of meaningfulness (worthwhileness) and creates the false impression that “worthwhileness” and “meaningfulness” are not synonymous. In doing so, all Metz shows, in my view, is that when some of us favour one conception of worthwhileness over another we are apt to call it a conception of meaningfulness and deny this title to the other.

Why agree with me? For one, to my mind, the question of whether and how life can be meaningful seems to be less unwieldy if it is put as the question of whether and how life can be worthwhile. But that is just my impression and I won’t do more than mention it here and hope the reader assents. Instead, I’ll rest my case for the superiority of my view over Metz’s on the fact that my view appreciates that traditionally the question of how life can be worthwhile has been regarded as one with the question of how life can be meaningful. Take, for example, the issue touched on above of whether or not death is a bad thing for the one who dies. Surely the claim that death cannot be a bad thing for the one who dies has a false ring to so many people because they assume that

life can be worth living and to terminate something of worth is regrettable. To refuse to see the term “meaningful” as interchangeable with the term “worthwhile” in these contexts is to deny that this area of philosophical concern is intimately connected to meaningfulness. And this goes against Metz’s own level headed recommendation (2001, 140) that we ought to adopt a view on meaningfulness that respects that the various philosophical traditions that purport to be about the matter of meaningfulness are in fact about it. My point is perhaps made most forcefully through the observation that if we agree with Metz that meaningfulness does not equal worthwhileness we must deny that nihilism (being the position that life is not worthwhile) has any connection to the philosophy of the meaning of life. To avoid unnecessarily rejecting the intuitions and convictions of so many philosophers (and non-philosophers) who took themselves to be writing and thinking about the meaning of life, and because there is no reason not to, issues of life’s meaning should be interpreted as issues of life’s worthwhileness.

1.5 The Structure of This Thesis

In this introductory chapter I have laid out the main conclusion which I intend to defend herein. That conclusion is that life is not less meaningful (worthwhile) for being mortal rather than immortal. I also exhibited that this conclusion is related to but distinct from the Epicurean insistence that death is not bad for the one who dies.

Since defending this thesis would be a moot point if human life was meaningless, I will in Chapter Two take some time to dispute Nihilism. Additionally, because mortality in the context of the proportionality argument connotes life which is destined to be utterly ended in death and bears no relation to any supernatural or spiritual reality, I

will also argue in Chapter Two against the standpoint that meaning is conferred on life by anything supernatural or *transcendental*.

Following this I will, in Chapter Three, call upon three select decidedly non-transcendental theories on meaningfulness in life. These theories will be utilized to give specific content to the proportionality argument and thereby lend independent support to it.

Lastly, in Chapter Four I will consider several lines of thought which either challenge the proportionality argument, or by coming very close to challenging it, help disclose its scope and implications for our attitudes towards mortality. In particular I shall review and answer skeptical arguments charging that conceptions of immortality are necessarily so very impoverished and speculative so as to be useless for philosophical discussion; an argument to the effect that personal immortality is impossible; as well as an argument for the conclusion that immortality would inevitably and necessarily be meaningless and an argument to the contrary.

2.1 Immanentism, Transcendentalism, and Nihilism

In the last chapter I forwarded an argument to the effect that mortal human life is not necessarily less meaningful than immortal human life would be. As I already mentioned, a few presuppositions are inherent to my argument. One of these presuppositions is that life can be meaningful and that the sources of meaningfulness are within life itself, i.e., meaningfulness in life is in no way connected to some supernatural or spiritual order. In this chapter I will argue for this presupposition by attempting to refute both *Transcendentalism* and *Nihilism* and hence by a process of elimination uphold *Immanentism*⁴. Here are the definitions of these three perspectives; a critique of Transcendentalism follows, and then a critique of Nihilism:

Immanentism

Immanentism is simply the view that any meaningfulness that any human life may have obtains immanently: meaningfulness in human life is made possible by features and conditions within human life itself, not by any relation to a supernatural realm, order, or entity; meaningfulness attaches to or supervenes on the content of terrestrial human life. Again, this is the standpoint implicit to the proportionality argument.

Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism is the opposite view of Immanentism. According to the Transcendentalist life can be, or is meaningful, due to a relation to something, or some reality, which is radically other (e.g. supernatural, absolute, supreme, everlasting, or

⁴ Klemke (2008) seems to have been the first to use the term “transcendentalism” in the way I use it here, while, as far as I know, David Matheson originated the above use of “immanentism”.

infinite). The prototypical source of such meaningfulness is God, but it need not be an entity; the transcendent may also be conceived of as a cosmic order or deeper reality, for example.

Nihilism

Nihilism is simply the denial that life is worthwhile. It thus denies that there is any meaning to human life and that life is worthwhile either for immanent or transcendental reasons

2.2 Critique of Transcendentalism

2.2-1 Transcendentalism and Teleology

Teleological arguments are commonly forwarded in support of Transcendentalism; for this reason I'll begin my critique of Transcendentalism by attacking these arguments. According to such arguments, human life, either collectively or individually, is or may be meaningful because it does or can serve a final purpose—a purpose the fulfillment of which is meaningful due to its transcendent import. A.J. Ayer is one of a few authors I will mention herein who has argued against this contention. In particular, Ayer (2008) has argued that life cannot be meaningful, as many people still believe, in virtue of contributing towards some final end determined by God (if, for the sake of argument, we assume there is a God and that we have (a) God-given purpose(s)).

Any plan for us God might have chosen or settled upon, explains Ayer, would be arbitrary as far as we are concerned. (2008, 200) There is no logical reason to think that God's plan and hence our purpose(s)—whatever it or they might be—couldn't have been different. God could have decided upon a different plan for us and/or his creation. Put

another way, the point is that it is difficult to comprehend that God's plan and our figuring in it, due simply to the fact that it is the plan that it is and we figure in it as we do, could make our lives meaningful in a way that they could not be if suited to some other plan or purpose. Robert Nozick (1981) has argued for this same conclusion by inviting us to imagine along with him, how, if God sought to create a meaningful universe and meaningful beings, he could, by some particular designs, succeed in this task. The reality is however, that meaningfulness as a goal does not necessitate any particular means to its achievement. Thus the God in Nozick's philosophical "fable" recognizes that the aim of a meaningful creation is "insufficient to determine any particular plan into which to fit [his] creatures." (589)

To persuade that the above conclusion is justified Nozick (1981) considers and rejects three potential answers to how a plan and a purpose integral to it could be necessarily meaningful. Could it be that due to God's superiority of intellect and power, that his plan for us, whatever it might be, is necessarily meaningful? No, this cannot be the case any more than it can be the case that "the purposes of scientists [could] so give meaning to artificially created short-lived animal life they maintained in a controlled laboratory." (590) Perhaps then, "if there is a God who has a plan for us, the meaning of our existence consists in finding out what this plan asks of us and has in store for us [?]" (590) Nor can this be why our lives are meaningful, for regardless of how dedicated one is to discovering a purpose, whether or not a life of such dedication is meaningful depends on whether or not what it sought after was meaningful. If a life dedicated primarily to discovering a divinely prescribed purpose is not, in some objective sense, more worthwhile than a life dedicated primarily to some other project—and it can be so

only if its end is more worthwhile in an objective sense—then it cannot be a more meaningful life. Maybe then, God’s plans are not originally meaningful, maybe they too, like our lives, have derived meaning—a meaning derived from the fact that they are part of a more supreme God’s plans? (590) This suggestion is rather foolish though; it merely defers to another level the problem of how a plan or purpose can be necessarily meaningful.

Lastly, Nozick reflects on whether God’s plan for us might be necessarily meaningful by making our lives meaningful *for us*. (589) This suggestion too, however, is easily refuted. To be told that God’s plan is necessarily meaningful so long as our lives are valued by us is unsatisfactory, for we would want to know why, if the meaningfulness we find in life is determined by God, our lives would have a meaningfulness that they could not have if what we experience as meaningful is *not* programmed by God. It is unsatisfactory because if God’s purpose was to make his plan for us meaningful by making some purpose(s) meaningful *to us*, this intention could have been just as well served had he decided on making (a) different purpose(s) meaningful to us. Put differently, if God has given us a nature which determines what we regard as meaningful and worthwhile, what we so regard cannot be meaningful in a way (somehow necessary according to Transcendentalists) that what we regard as meaningful and worthwhile—if what we so regard in fact has no connection to a transcendent being or order—cannot be.

In light of the arguments just reviewed it should be apparent that it is implausible that life could be assuredly meaningful by having a telos of transcendental

determination.⁵ But in case the reader is not convinced, I want now to lead him or her by a different route to the same conclusion.

If, says the Transcendentalist, the scientific view of the origin of the human species and the origin of the universe is correct—if it is true that every object and life-form in the universe exists by chance, contingently, due to happenstance building upon happenstance as governed by blind physical laws—then each of our lives has no purpose; from an omniscient viewpoint the only attitude that can be taken towards our collective and individual existences is indifference. Fortunately, announces the Transcendentalist, our lives have meaning since we all have (a) purpose(s) which in the eyes of God is better fulfilled than not fulfilled.

It is simply false, however, as masterfully illustrated by Kurt Baier (2008), that life is meaningless unless it has an overarching transcendental purpose. Baier guides his reader to this conclusion by differentiating two senses of purposelessness. The first sense of purposelessness described by Baier is the sort of purposelessness or futility we say an action has when its performance has no value for the actor. Being forced to repeatedly polish someone's already immaculately shiny and spotless silverware is one of countless examples of such purposeless activity that we could generate. The second sort of purposelessness described by Baier is the sort of purposelessness the Transcendentalist wrongly supposes life must have in order to be meaningful. This type of purposelessness

⁵ I have so far, and will for the most part, when criticizing the idea of a transcendent telos or purpose, criticize the view that "God" has assigned us some purpose(s). However, it is important to note that each of the arguments presented herein against the view that human life is or can be meaningful only if there is a God and God has given us some purpose(s) are applicable to any view according to which the meaningfulness of life hinges on there being *any kind(s)* of transcendent purpose(s) (whether God given or not) to our lives.

is an absence of *derived* purpose. Purpose of this kind is the sort of purpose that artifacts and tools have. The keyboard which I type on was constructed to perform such a purpose, viz. to allow me to input words onto a digital document. Likewise, if there is a God and he has created us to perform some purpose, then the purpose of our lives is derived, just as the purpose of the keyboard upon which I type is derived.

Having distinguished the above two types of purposelessness we can now go on, as Baier does, to show that the Transcendentalist's assertion that life cannot be meaningful unless it has a transcendental purpose stems from conflating these two distinct types of purposelessness. If, as the Transcendentalist dreads, our lives do indeed lack a derived, transcendently ordained purpose, it does not follow that they are meaningless, futile, or pointless. Again, futile or pointless action is action that doesn't link up in the appropriate way with our intentions. Thus if I had been damned, similarly to the mythical Sisyphus, to spend the entirety of my life repeatedly pushing a bolder to the top of a hill, I would justly complain that my life is meaningless because it consists wholly of purposeless activity. But my life, like the lives of most persons, is not purposeless in this way. Our lives thus have purpose, because what we do can and frequently does advance our interests and intentions. And this is the sort of purpose—what Baier calls “original purpose”—whereby we view our lives as meaningful.

Not only do our lives not need to have a derived purpose in order to be meaningful, but, as Baier (2008) shows, neither is it desirable that they have a derived purpose. “To attribute to a human being a [derived] purpose” tells Baier,

is not neutral, let alone complimentary: it is offensive. It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose. If, at a garden party, I ask a man in livery, "What is your purpose?" I am insulting him. I might as well have asked, "What are you *for*?" Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget, a domestic animal, or perhaps a slave. I imply that we allot to him the tasks, the goals, the aims which he is to pursue; that his wishes and desires and aspirations and purposes are to count for little or nothing. (101)

In sum, Baier illustrates that the Transcendentalist's teleological beliefs cannot do the work he thinks they can do; our lives would not be meaningful if they had a derived purpose.

2.2-2 Transcendental Origins and Meaning

Another claim common to Transcendentalism is that because, on the scientific view, there is no definitive purpose to life, science cannot speak to important questions on the meaning of life, such as: "Why am I alive?" "Why is there human life?" "Is my existence justified?" "Is human life justified?" (Ayer, 2008; Baier, 2008) If our existences, so goes the Transcendentalist's line of thought, are meaningful, then it is because there is a reason *why* we exist. And like all reasons which explain why something or other exists, the reason why we exist must be external to our very existence. What is needed then is a reason for, or "first cause" of our existence outside our existence (a transcendental cause); only such a reason can solve the problem of the meaning of our existence. Scientific explanations, continues the Transcendentalist, are not adequate to this task because they cannot yield answers to such "why" questions. Scientific

explanations answer “how” questions, that is to say, scientific explanations are accounts of how it is that the way certain things are leads to other things being as they are and happening as they do. Further, every scientific explanation of *how* things happen as they do or are as they are rests on fact or hypothesis about how certain other things are, which themselves, to be explained, require an explanation of the same sort, and so on *ad infinitum*. Consequently, only transcendental-teleological explanations can explain *why* we exist. Therefore, concludes the Transcendentalist, scientific explanations are incomplete and transcendental explanations are needed to explain and substantiate our being.

Ayer’s (2008) rejoinder to the forgoing charge is essentially this: it is true that scientific explanations cannot justify our existences, but this is not a shortcoming; this is not something we should be perturbed by in the least bit, because to ask “what is the meaning of life?”, if by this one asks, “for what reason do we exist?”, is to pose a pseudo question. In Ayer’s words, “it is...misleading to say that life has no meaning [in virtue of having a final purpose]; for that suggests that the statement that life has a meaning is factually significant, but false; whereas the truth is that...it is not factually significant.”

(201) His argument can be represented as follows:

P1) Any attempted explanation of *why* life has such and such a telos can only, as a matter of logical necessity, tell *how* life’s telos resulted from certain other things being as they are/were.

C1) Thus, even if it were true that life has an overarching purpose, we could not have an answer to *why* life has this purpose.

C2) Therefore, it is illogical to ask: “what is the reason *why* we exist?”

Like Ayer, Baier (2008) also rejects the Transcendentalist's contention that scientific explanations are deficient as they exclusively provide accounts of *how* phenomena occur and obtain. Baier takes a different approach though, to refuting the Transcendentalist on this point. While Ayer asserts that it is senseless to suppose that there can be an answer to the question "what is the reason *why* we exists?", Baier focuses on explaining why our existence is not an unsolvable puzzle, mystery, or problem. The accusation that scientific explanation is inadequate because it cannot explain why we exist is grounded, says Baier, in the Transcendentalist's failure to understand that our existence does not require an "un-vexing explanation".

What Baier calls un-vexing explanations are those which are needed when our explanatory models are contradicted or fail to account for some phenomenon or phenomena within their explanatory scope. Such phenomena are vexing in virtue of the fact that they expose our models as insufficient. (Alternatively, a phenomenon may seem vexing to one because one doesn't comprehend how some model one is familiar with explains the phenomenon. But in such cases the phenomenon is not actually vexing—it does not necessitate an amendment to the model or a new model; the solution is to improve the person's comprehension of the model). Vexing phenomena thus presuppose some model; a vexing phenomenon challenges our knowledge, beliefs, or assumptions about the way things are and/or work; a vexing phenomenon is one that strikes us as confusing or puzzling precisely because it doesn't fit what some model(s) of ours says is possible or to be expected.

Having defined vexing phenomena we can now elucidate Baier's argument that although no scientific explanation can answer the question "what is the reason why we

exist?” scientific explanation is not therefore deficient. First, let’s be sure we are clear about what the preceding question seeks after. It does not seek after *how* any one of us, or the human species in general, came into existence, for these are things which can be explained scientifically; the existence of any one person, as for the existence of the human species in general, can, in principle, be explained as a contingent link in a causal chain comprised entirely of contingent links stretching back to the dawn of our universe. Instead, to ask “what is the reason why we exist?” is to ask for an explanation not only of human existence but of existence itself, in other words, it is to ask, not for an explanation of the origin of any particular existing thing, nor to ask for an explanation of the origin of all particular existing things, but to ask for an explanation of the very possibility of existence, to ask: “why are there existing things at all?” or “why is there anything rather than nothing?”. Not even a “theory of everything”—one which could generate explanations of all phenomena by way of a model of the basic structure of reality—could answer these questions.

All that there is to be explained are particular phenomenon, particular existing things, and particular regularities or universals. Existence itself is not any such thing, indeed it is not a thing at all, and hence no model needs to account for it. No model can be incomplete because of not explaining existence itself. Theoretically, any phenomenon can be explained by the content of a model of such phenomena, but the very fact that there are phenomena cannot be explained by the content of any such model; to think otherwise is to confusedly think of existence itself as a phenomenon. Existence itself is no-thing to be explained. No wonder then that no theoretical model can possibly explain existence in general. For this reason, it is wrongheaded to think that all scientific

explanation is necessarily incomplete—at least, in any problematic way. The Transcendentalist who seeks an answer to the question “what is the reason we exist?” has mistakenly taken his question to be valid because it can be posed.

2.2-3 Transcendentalism and Objective Meaning

In his paper “Living Without Appeal: An Alternative Philosophy of Life” E.D. Klemke (2008) swiftly and effectively demonstrates that Transcendentalism cannot lay claim to objective meaning. He does this by noting that even if we assume that there can be objective meaning, the transcendent cannot guarantee it. The argument is easily grasped as articulated by Klemke:

If the notion of objective meaning is a plausible one, then I see no reason why it must be tied up with the existence of a transcendent being, for it certainly is not self-contradictory to hold that an objective meaning could conceivably exist even though a transcendent being did not. That is, the two concepts of “transcendent being” and “objective meaning” are not logically related in the way in which the two concepts “three” and “odd” (for example) are related. (190)

Plainly, objective meaning does not necessitate a transcendent from which to issue.

Those such as, for example, Lous P. Pojman, are wrong to suggest otherwise⁶.

⁶ In his article “Religion Gives Meaning to Life” Pojman argues that if there is no caring omniscient being governing the cosmos then the universe and our lives are objectively valueless and purposeless. (2008, 27-28)

2.2-4 Meaning and the Afterlife

Finally, to close this critique of Transcendentalism, I'll address the standpoint that our lives cannot be meaningful unless there is an afterlife: whether or not there is an afterlife is beside the point. Granted, if one thinks that this life is meaningful only derivatively as an opportunity to graduate to a meaningful afterlife, then, as Baier (2008) notes, one may be inclined to think that life is meaningless if this is not true. However, even if there is a blissful afterlife, it does not follow that our terrestrial human lives are not meaningful in ways that are independent of there being such an afterlife, or any afterlife whatsoever. Moreover, clearly the meaningfulness of most of what we find meaningful, probably all we find meaningful, doesn't require that there is an afterlife to be meaningful to us. How could it? How could the meaningfulness of one's projects, for her, be meaningful due to either the prospect or eventuality of an afterlife? The proposition is as baseless and absurd as supposing that my enjoyment of a piece of music, a dish of food, a friends company, a lover's touch, or any such pleasantries is possible only because I will or might somehow continue to exist and live after the death and destruction of my body.

2.3 Critique of Nihilism

Since transcendental theories are, in general, poor theories on the meaningfulness of life, it follows that the falsity of Transcendentalism is not sufficient to establish Nihilism. If our lives are in fact worthless or meaningless they must be so for immanent reasons rather than due to the absence of a transcendent. The following analysis of

Nihilism will thus focus primarily on Immanentist types of Nihilism, in particular the Nihilisms of Schopenhauer and Nagel⁷.

2.3-1 Taylor's Affirmationism

One doubt which may seem to an immanentist to let in nihilism is the doubt that there is objective meaning. (Of course an immanentist is not logically obliged to disbelieve in objective forms of value or meaning). Richard Taylor has met this worry by arguing that subjective meaning is sufficient to make life worthwhile.

Taylor (1984) couches his argument in his own version of the myth of Sisyphus. "Let us suppose", writes Taylor,

that the gods, while condemning Sisyphus to [repeatedly and eternally rolling a stone to the top of a hill], at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him a strange and irrational impulse; namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones. (1984, 259)

Modified in this way, the myth of Sisyphus presents us with a case of objectively meaningless activity which is subjectively meaningful. Sisyphus' activity is objectively meaningless, says Taylor, because it does not culminate in anything outside itself of lasting value⁸; the activity is pointless, it serves only to perpetuate itself. For Sisyphus

⁷ Schopenhauer's and Nagel's Nihilisms are the only prominent forms of Nihilism in contemporary analytic philosophy; thus a critique of their forms of Nihilism will suffice as a critique of Nihilism in general.

⁸ Taylor's talk of objective value is confusing. He frequently alludes that something of value which lasted a considerable amount of time would count as something objectively valuable. However, Taylor also indicates that something of value which lasted an infinite amount of time would not suffice to be objectively valuable. So, only sometimes, by "objective value" does Taylor appear to mean permanently lasting value. The crux, in my opinion, is that Taylor fails to differentiate "lasting value" from value which

however, his stone-pushing life has meaning. Sisyphus may well be aware that his will to push his stone up the hill is arbitrary—the gods could just as easily have assigned him a different nature, say, one that is expressed by knitting quilts, or building houses of cards, or shucking corn—yet since it is *his* will to push stones, for Sisyphus it will seem that the gods have guaranteed him the most worthwhile life he could ask for; the ideal life for a being whose nature is precisely and exclusively to roll stones, is one filled with stone rolling. Sisyphus' objectively meaningless life is for him very much worth living. The implication is that whether or not one is driven to do an activity and is gripped by it is what counts, not whether or not the activity produces something of objective value. Were Sisyphus not driven to push stones up hills, but the gods had seen to it that his efforts would somehow found something of objective value, his eternal life would be, for him, in and of itself, not worth living; in fact it would be perdition. Taylor's Sisyphus thus indicates that an absence of objective meaning is not sufficient to establish nihilism.

2.3-2 Schopenhauer's Nihilism

“[T]he world is Hell and men are on the one hand the tormented souls and on the other the devils in it.” (1970a, 48) Such is the view of Arthur Schopenhauer. Life is the definition of Hell, says Schopenhauer, because its most dominant and pervasive feature is suffering. And since suffering is the chief export of life, life is of negative value. Indeed, so sparse in pleasure—that which alone is meaningful to us—is life, thought

Schopenhauer, that nonexistence is superior to life; so, he asserts:

obtains in something “independently of our own deep interest in [it]” (263). Hence, Taylor has not been careful; he seems not to appreciate that objective value in his sense—something of value which lasts for eternity—is neither necessary nor sufficient for objective value in another sense—as meaningfulness which is not relative to any subjective perspective.

If you imagine, in so far as it is approximately possible, the sum total of distress, pain and suffering of every kind which the sun shines upon in its course, you will have to admit it would have been much better if the sun had been able to call up the phenomenon of life as little on the earth as on the moon; and if, here as there, the surface were still in crystalline condition. (47)

Although it is fair to say that on Schopenhauer's Nihilism life is like damnation because it inevitably consists of a preponderance of suffering over pleasure, at times Schopenhauer indicates that he thought that Nihilism is justified even if this is not true. For example, with these words it appears that Schopenhauer believed that Nihilism was somehow warranted by the ephemeral nature of all things:

In the first place, no man is happy but strives his whole life long after a supposed happiness which he seldom attains, and even if he does it is only to be disappointed with it; as a rule however, he finally enters harbor shipwrecked and dismayed. In the second place, however, *it is all one* whether he has been happy or not in a life which has consisted merely of a succession of transient present moments and is now at an end. (1970b, 52-53, italics mine)

However, as we shall see, Schopenhauer's metaphysics of time offers comparatively weak support for Nihilism in contrast to his arguments on suffering.

"Time," says Schopenhauer, "is that by virtue of which everything becomes nothingness and losses all real value." (1970b, 51) Our efforts to act and live meaningfully, whatever they might be, if we agree with Schopenhauer, may be compared to those of a builder who sinks the foundations of his delicate structures into the shifting

sands of a desert; some of the builder's structures will stand longer than others, but they will all eventually topple and disappear beneath the sand, and once they are gone, they are gone as objects of value. Similarly, our lives, as for each moment of our lives, will pass, and once they have passed so too will have any happiness we might have enjoyed. And because that which *has been* "as little exists as that which has *never* been," (51) whether or not one has been lucky enough to live a happy life will be of no importance once one's life as such has ended. In sum, Schopenhauer's claim is that since a good which *has been* (for Schopenhauer all of life's goods are forms of pleasure) is no longer a good, it makes no difference how much or how little good one has had in their life. It is equally sensible to speak of meaningfulness here, and if we do we may recast Schopenhauer's claim as the claim that once the meaningfulness that supervenes on some action(s) has expired, it does not matter that it once was present.

Important to notice about the above claim is that it does not, by itself, support Nihilism. It may be that meaningfulness is real only when it is present; it does not follow though, that bygone meaningfulness is insignificant. I would much rather greet death knowing I had lived a meaningful life than knowing I had not lived a meaningful life, and I trust I do not assume too much if I think the reader would say the same. Perhaps, then, to appreciate Schopenhauer on the ephemeral nature of all experience we need to emphasize the fact that it cannot matter to the deceased whether or not they lived meaningful lives? Certainly not, for this point goes against Nihilism and affirms the possibility of living a meaningful life. How then, does Schopenhauer justify his assertion that "it is all [the same] whether [one] has been happy or not in a life which has consisted merely of a succession of transient present moments and is now at an end"? (1970b, 52-

53) After all, the conclusion that it is no better to live a meaningful life than a meaningless life is simply not deducible from the premise that whatever meaningfulness attaches to a life or a moment in a life passes with the passing of that life or moment.

No support for Nihilism, I submit, is to be found in Schopenhauer's metaphysics of time. The following passage is the closest he comes to giving an explanation as to why, because everything of value is fleeting and perishes in time, our existences, projects, strivings, etc. are futile:

You could, to be sure, [say]...that the greatest *wisdom* consists in enjoying the present and making this enjoyment the goal of life, because the present is all that is real and everything else merely imaginary. But you could just as well call this mode of life the greatest *folly*: for that which in a moment ceases to exist, which vanishes as completely as a dream, cannot be worth any serious effort. (1970b, 52)

This is a poor explanation though. Once more, nothing, in principle, prevents a result from being satisfactory solely because it is transient. It is not as though all pleasure in life (again, Schopenhauer believed that pleasure was the only thing of value in life) is so short lived that it is hardly identifiable as pleasure and therefore not worth working for. If pleasure is insignificant it cannot be simply because it is momentary. Further, if pleasure is supposed to be insignificant because it is momentary and momentary because that is the nature of all experiences, then suffering too must be insignificant. But Schopenhauer clearly believed that suffering is significant. Consequently it is best to disregard his suggestions linking temporality and Nihilism. Schopenhauer's Nihilism is

most clear and forceful when read as the position that life is necessarily so bloated with suffering that it is on the whole not worth living. Thus, if we wish to contest Schopenhauer's Nihilism, we need to evaluate his arguments for the viewpoint that all pleasure that can be wrestled from life is insufficient reward for putting up with the suffering of existence, and that therefore life is meaningless.

One reason Schopenhauer gives for the insignificance of pleasure is its "negativity". It is negative, he says, in that it is equivalent to the termination of pain or desire. (1970a, 41-42) This is blatantly wrong however. It is fine to assert that the absence of pain, as compared to the presence of pain, is in itself a kind of pleasure, but it is something else to claim that all pleasure is an absence of pain; there is a difference between the removal of an aversive stimulus and the application of a pleasing stimulus. Likewise, the pleasure of slaking a desire is not simply due to its cessation but its cessation by the attainment of that which was desired. Only if we take Schopenhauer's doctrine of the negativity of pleasure and the positivity of pain as the psychological claim that "we never really notice or become conscious of what is agreeable to our will"(41) instead as a metaphysical claim—as he apparently intended it to be⁹—does it have merit. I recommend, then, that it is best to suppose that by qualifying pleasure as "negative" and pain as "positive," Schopenhauer be understood as saying that pleasure somehow registers with us less intensely than pain. Indeed, there seems to be something truthful about the statement that "we find pleasure much less pleasurable, pain much more painful

⁹As the following passage suggests: "I...know of no greater absurdity than that absurdity which characterizes almost all metaphysical systems: that of explaining evil as something negative. For evil is precisely that which is positive,...and good, on the other hand, i.e. all happiness and all gratification, is that which is negative". (1970a, 41-42)

than we expected” (42). Pain does seem to impress itself upon us much more strongly than pleasure; any amount of time spent in pain is too much while the same cannot be said of pleasure; we are typically not concerned to escape pleasure, so it does not alert us and capture our attention as pain does.

Pre-reflectively, it may seem right that pain is more intensely felt than pleasure; “compare the feelings of an animal engaged in eating another with those of the animal being eaten,” (1970a, 42) suggests Schopenhauer, and we will see how deeply terrible pain is and how shallow pleasure is. But we should not too quickly side with our intuitions; a little analysis will show that it is in fact dubious to conclude, with Schopenhauer, that feelings of pain are more intensely felt than feelings of pleasure. How can we say that, in general, the heights of pleasure we may experience pale in comparison to the lows of pain we may experience?

We might try to determine whether, typically, the maximal intensities of pains are greater than the maximal intensities of pleasures by consulting our intuitions with regards to contrast cases. Schopenhauer himself hints at this as a method with the aforementioned example of the feasting animal and the animal being feasted on. Perhaps the idea is that, when we think of the animal devouring and the animal being devoured, and ask ourselves if the possibility of the pleasure of feasting is worth the possibility of the pain of being feasted upon (in other words, whether we would give up the pleasure of eating to do away with the pain of being eaten), we will recognize that it is not. Yet this would only provide one piece of datum towards resolving whether or not, overall, suffering outweighs pleasure in life; one case cannot establish the truth of this matter. Furthermore, it is not clear which contrast cases are relevant. Why suppose it is

appropriate to contrast the pleasure of eating with the pain of being eaten? Why not, instead, contrast the pleasure of eating with the suffering of going hungry? But even if there are relevant contrast cases, it is not safe to conclude that it is universally true that, for the most part, the maximal intensities of pains are greater than the maximal intensities of pleasures. This is so due to individual differences in pain tolerance and pleasure enjoyment; a pain that is unbearable for one may be quite tolerable for another, while a pleasure that is all consuming for one may not be so for another.

Also important to appreciate is that whether or not one would give up the possibility of experiencing some pleasure to avoid the possibility of experiencing some pain depends on more than the quality of those feelings; it depends also on the individual's estimation of the probability of experiencing one or the other. I have been fortunate in that I have never gone hungry in my life for any significant amount of time; thus, I, for one, would not sacrifice the pleasure of food so that I could not possibly go hungry and become malnourished. And should one say I have missed the point, that I should have asked myself whether, if I knew I was going to starve, I would give up the possibility of the pleasure of eating in exchange for not being able to starve, he would be wrong. The point of talking about contrast cases was to evaluate Schopenhauer's insistence that the sum of suffering in life outweighs the sum of pleasure in life, and that it is the exceedingly rare life for which this is not true. And the sum of suffering in one's life obviously depends, to a large extent, on one's circumstances and the resources of which one may avail oneself. Starvation is but one form of suffering I have been fortunate enough not to have experienced, and it is fair to say that I do not have an uncommonly high quality of life—at least not for a Canadian of my general social status

and privilege. The avoidance of large amounts and kinds of suffering is clearly not necessarily as improbable for human beings as Schopenhauer made it out to be.

One might object here that I have misinterpreted Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer says that “as a rule we find pleasure much less pleasurable, pain much more painful than we *expected*” (1970a, 42); it is because pleasure disappoints our *expectations* and pain exceeds them that (for one reason) life consists of a greater portion of suffering than pleasure, not because, typically, the maximal intensities of pains are greater than the maximal intensities of pleasures. I don’t wish to contest this point about expectations. I think Schopenhauer is correct that many of us tend to idealize happiness such that when we are happy it doesn’t seem as good as we thought it would be.¹⁰ Yet this does not validate Nihilism. If expectations or attitudes are the problem then it is not true that suffering necessarily overshadows pleasure in life, for unrealistic expectations may be corrected or prevented from developing. So much then for Schopenhauer’s statement that pain is much more painful than pleasure is pleasurable.

The other reasons proffered by Schopenhauer to convince that suffering is the essence of life are these: (1) every satisfaction of a desire is preceded by a negative state of wanting or dissatisfaction, and (2) to want not leads to boredom (yet another negative state). Let’s take up each of these statements in turn beginning with the former.

¹⁰ Here is one passage by which Schopenhauer claims this: “to attain something desired is to discover how vain it is; ...we live all our lives in expectation of better things, [and] often at the same time long regretfully for what is past. The present on the other hand is regarded as something quite temporary and serving only as a road to our goal. That is why most men discover when they look back on their life that they have the whole time been living *ad interim*, and are surprised to see that which they let go by so unregarded and unenjoyed was precisely that in expectation of which they lived.” (1970b, 53)

Because our desires outnumber those of other animals, desire, argues Schopenhauer, is particularly problematic for us. Man, says Schopenhauer, deliberately intensifies his needs, which are originally scarcely harder to satisfy than those of the animal, so as to intensify his pleasure: hence luxury, confectionery, tobacco, opium, alcoholic drinks, finery and all that pertains to them. To these is then added, also as a result of reflection, a source of pleasure, and consequently of suffering, available to him alone and one which preoccupies him beyond all measure, indeed more than the rest put together: ambition and a sense of honour and shame—in plain words, what he thinks others think of him. (1970a, 44)

We can dispute Schopenhauer on desire with a few observations. First, it is not always the case that when one has a desire one is unsettled and dissatisfied. Not all things desired are desired as an addict desires his next fix. For example, I may desire to complete some piece of art or a renovation, but I may be content to work towards this desired end. I am not dissatisfied so long as I have not completed my project. This is similar to a point made by Richard Taylor (1970): striving, i.e., doing things which are our will to do, even if those things are difficult, is meaningful to us. Second, as for the sorts of desires mentioned by Schopenhauer in the above quote, it is plain that these sorts of desires do not plague all persons; a moderate drinker or one who enjoys the occasional sweet won't *need* sweets or libations, and so won't be agitated or on edge until she is consuming or has consumed her choice drink or sweet. Only severe, demanding desirousness can be fairly called a negative mode of being. Lastly, as for Schopenhauer's claim that human suffering is vastly expanded by our care for what others think of us, this

too is an overstatement. Granted, we may worry over what some others think of us, but if we are reasonable and tend to act in ways we ourselves approve of, then what others think of us may be but a small source of dismay. It is a stretch then, to say, with Schopenhauer, that all unsatisfied desirousness is experientially negative.

Since unsatisfied desire is not always negative, it is not right that one is either gripped by a negative state of desire or in some fleeting positive state (positive states are soon disrupted by desire or turn to boredom according to Schopenhauer) or in a state of boredom, and therefore life is mostly spent in negative states.¹¹ Boredom cannot be the scourge Schopenhauer made it out to be.

In sum, we have seen that suffering in life is not as inevitably extensive, and pleasure is not as measly as Schopenhauer argues. This is not to say that suffering is not a problem, only that it is not a universal truth that human life is marked most extensively by suffering. The origins of suffering Schopenhauer describes are indeed common, but they need not be; their prevention is possible and not uncommon. Suffering is inevitable, but it is not inevitable to a degree that guarantees that we should, rationally, prefer that we had never been born. Hence Schopenhauer's Nihilism fails as he fails to give grounds to believe that human life is miserable in virtue of some truth or truths that hold for all human lives.

A final comment is in order before ending this assessment of Schopenhauer's Nihilism: suffering is not all bad. Suffering can be meaningful. The value we ascribe to many achievements increases with their difficulty or the degree to which we must bear

¹¹ This is what Schopenhauer implies when he characterizes want (desire) and boredom as "the twin poles of human life (1970a, 45)".

with hardship in the course of working towards them. Climbing Mount Everest, for instance, wouldn't be an achievement of worth if it was easy, if it weren't a physical challenge, if it weren't a struggle, if busloads of tourists frequented the summit. In short, to succeed despite the disincentive of suffering is meaningful; Schopenhauer is wrong to argue that pleasure—which he defines as the satisfaction of desire—is the sole thing of meaning in human life, for the path taken to the satisfaction of a desire or attainment of a goal can also be meaningful.

2.3-3 Nagel's Nihilism

Thomas Nagel's Nihilism is quite different from Schopenhauer's. Whereas Schopenhauer maintains that our lives are terrible, so terrible that were we not such stubborn creatures we would commit suicide, Nagel argues that since we can see our lives as objectively meaningless they are absurd. My task in this section is to elucidate this claim and determine whether Nagel is right and if, therefore, Immanentism is false.

In everyday life something is absurd when its intended or expected meaningfulness or purpose is opposed by some reality. In Nagel's words "a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretention or aspiration and reality". (1971, 718) Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale, "The Emperor's New Clothes," centers on a whimsical example. In the famous story a pompous king, who has been tricked into believing that he is wearing the finest robes in all the land (when in fact he is wearing nothing), parades before his citizens thinking he is appearing as their wise and dignified king. But of course the king's aim to humble his citizens fails laughably. The conspicuous absence of the very symbolism he hoped to deploy—opulence as an

indicator of superiority—ensures that his citizens do not see him as their superior. Instead the king is seen as something like the village idiot with too much power. The meaningfulness the king sought is undermined by absurdity. It happens as Nagel says: some reality conflicts with attitudes or intentions. The emperor's belief that he is clothed in luxurious garments and his consequent pride are at odds with the reality that he is naked.

A simple but important distinction needs to be made before putting aside the story of the emperor. The distinction is that between *appearing absurd* and *being absurd*. We have to admit of the possibility that someone's actions may appear absurd but not actually be absurd. In the emperor's case his appearing absurd is due to his being absurd. The perspective from which the emperor seems absurd is the veridical perspective, while the emperor's own perspective is mistaken. True absurdity—being absurd—necessitates a standpoint that is ignorant of something which prevents it from securing its goal(s) and/or invalidates its judgment. This point will be vital to rejecting Nagel's nihilism which I'll now present.

On Nagel's account each of us is capable of adopting a perspective which does not and cannot confirm the value of our activities as seen from the non-reflective, practical perspectives we adopt when engaged in those activities. When we look upon our lives and priorities as though they were not ours—as if from an outside perspective, we cannot, from that perspective, justify the assumption that our lives, or any content thereof, are meaningful or important. Perhaps the reader has, when in a crowded public place surrounded by strangers, each of them living *their* own lives, focusing on their families, their friends, their health, their wealth, their job, their status, their hobbies etc.,

been suddenly visited by feelings of smallness, absurdity, or insignificance. In such moments, Nagel believes, we recognize that we too are strangers in the crowd, shadows on the periphery of other's lives, anonymous souls whose presence on earth is entirely unnecessary; the importance our endeavours have for us when engaged in them is exposed as an inherent bias that comes along with being particular beings with particular make-ups, particular needs, and particular histories. In brief, the threat of Nihilism, in Nagel's opinion, comes from our ability to transcend ourselves and adopt an external standpoint divorced from whatever grounds our will to live in some characteristically human way or another, a standpoint that attributes no importance to what, for some other aspect of us, is meaningful. Thus, Nagel writes:

Watching the human drama is a bit like watching a Little League baseball game: the excitement of the participants is perfectly understandable but one can't really enter into it. At the same time, since one *is* one of the participants, one is caught up in the game directly, in a way that cannot include an admission of relativity (1986, 217-218).

And it is the discord between the indifference towards human life of the external perspective, and the importance of human life from the internal perspective, which, together with one further condition, make our lives absurd. The further condition, according to Nagel, is the capacity to adopt both the internal (or subjective) perspective, in the light of which one's pursuits have value, and the external (or objective) perspective, in the light of which they do not; the life of one who cannot adopt the external perspective is not absurd. Thus Nagel says a mouse is not absurd:

Why is the life of a mouse not absurd? ...A mouse...has to work to stay alive. Yet he is not absurd because he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse. If that *did* happen, his life would become absurd, since self-awareness would not make him cease to be a mouse and would not enable him to rise above his mouselike strivings. Bringing his newfound self-consciousness with him, he would have to return to his meager yet frantic life, full of doubts that he was unable to answer, yet full of purpose he was unable to abandon (1971, 725).

What makes human life absurd, then, on Nagel's account, has centrally to do with our capacity for adopting the external perspective; were we, like the mouse, incapable of adopting that perspective, the specter of absurdity would not arise. It cannot seem to a mouse that its activities are lacking in value because the mouse cannot adopt the external perspective. But it can seem to us that our activities are lacking in value because we can adopt that perspective. Moreover even if we do not regularly adopt the external perspective with respect to our activities, the fact that we can, together with the clash between the value of our activities were they to be seen from that perspective and their value when seen from the internal perspective, alone suffices in Nagel's view to render the activities and the lives they compose, absurd (cf. Feinberg 1992).

We may, accordingly, construct Nagel's central argument as follows¹²:

P1) An activity is absurd if its value from the internal perspective conflicts with its value from the external perspective.

¹² I am grateful to David Matheson for his assistance in reconstructing Nagel's argument.

P2) All of our activities within life are such that their value from the internal perspective conflicts with their value from the external perspective.

C1) So, all our activities within life are absurd.

C2) Therefore, our lives are absurd.

To say, as in (C2), that our lives are absurd is to affirm that our lives are meaningless. Nagel's argument thus provides a different route to the nihilist conclusion that Schopenhauer, as we have seen, sought to defend. But is that route any more plausible than Schopenhauer's? I want to suggest that it is not, for it relies on the claim—(P2) of Nagel's argument as expressed above—which is far from obvious. I will argue that this premise is not only false, but one that, surprisingly, Nagel himself has provided us with good reason for rejecting.

Consider Nagel's comment that

[the external perspective] may fail to discover *independent* reasons to care about what subjectively concerns us, but much of what is of value and significance in the world can be understood directly only from within the perspective of a particular form of life, and this can be recognized from an external standpoint.

The fact that the point of something can't be understood from the objective [i.e. external] standpoint alone doesn't mean it must be regarded objectively as pointless, any more than the fact that the value of music is not directly comprehensible to someone deaf from birth means he has to judge it as worthless.

(1986, 219)

The crucial point is that from the fact that the external perspective cannot on its own add any value to our life activities (i.e. cannot provide us with any further reasons for seeing them as valuable), it does not follow that the activities must be seen as having no value from the external perspective; it only follows that the activities must be seen as having no *additional* value than what they are recognized as having from the internal perspective.

The inability to contribute any additional value, in other words, does not entail the negation or denial of existing value. But if that's the case, then we cannot infer that all of our activities within life are such that their value from the internal perspective *conflicts* with their value from the external perspective (as (P2) of Nagel's argument would have it) from the point (which we may grant) that all of our activities within life are such that their value from the internal perspective is not enhanced or added to by anything to be obtained from the external perspective.

Indeed, this Nagel-inspired response to Nagel's own argument is further bolstered by a consideration of examples that he himself provides. Consider such mundane activities as preventing a child from burning her hand on a hot stove, taking aspirin to relieve a headache, or visiting an admired art exhibit. (Nagel 1971, 717) These activities are undoubtedly valuable from the internal perspective: from the point of view of those engaged in the activities, they are arguably of intrinsic value. Such value remains in place, and is capable of being recognized, from the external perspective, even if it turns out that the adoption of that perspective provides no additional reason for treating the activities as valuable: one need not (and presumably would not) fail to recognize the value attached to such activities by those who perform them simply by considering them

from the point of view of one not performing them. That is to say, human life may *seem absurd* from the external perspective, but it is not *actually absurd*.

Even if we are inclined to adopt Nagel's general account of absurdity as expressed in (P1) of the above argument, accordingly, we are left with no compelling reason to embrace his nihilistic conclusion as expressed in (C2), for the acceptance of (P2) of the argument is not only unmotivated but seems to rest on a conflation between (1) the inability of the external perspective to provide additional value to our life activities, beyond the value given to them from the internal perspective, and (2) the necessity of a conflict between the valuations of the external perspective and those of the internal perspective. Nagel's Nihilism is thus invalid; our lives are not inevitably absurd. The Immanentist may still be right to maintain that immanent value is sufficient to make life meaningful.

3.1 Immanentism and the Proportionality Argument

The arguments of the preceding chapter entitle us to conclude that life can be meaningful or worthwhile (Nihilism is unjustified) and meaningfulness in life is grounded in the immanent (not the transcendent). The goal of this chapter is to support the thesis that our lives are not less meaningful for being mortal instead of immortal by situating it within Immanentist theories. Such theories, as the reader may recall, assume that what is meaningful in human life is meaningful relative to the human perspective, to human needs and potentials—which have no grounding or relation to anything transcendent. To uphold this thesis three of the most prominent Immanentist theories (those of Moritz Schlick, Joel Feinberg, and Susan Wolf) will be utilized to express the proportionality argument introduced in Chapter One. A restatement of that argument is appropriate here to refresh our memories:

P1) Life's meaning is a function of the proportion of meaningfulness within life to meaninglessness within life, not simply the amount of meaningfulness within life.

P2) If life's meaning is a function of the proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness within a life, not simply the amount of meaningfulness within life, then the length of a life alone cannot affect its meaning.

P3) If the length of life alone cannot affect its meaning, then *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

C) Therefore, *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

As I said in Chapter One, (P1) is the crucial premise of this argument. The claims

of (P2) and (P3) are straightforward and uncontroversial. Thus the defense of (P1), by showing how it is implied and supported by the above mentioned Immanentist theories will be the primary concern of this chapter. I should also note that it is not my interest herein to be critical of these theories except so far as is necessary to represent them accurately as unique and substantial frameworks for the encapsulation of the crucial premise of the proportionality argument. Let's begin with Moritz Schlick's philosophy.

3.2 Schlick's Theory

It is a popular sentiment that unless one has goals to work towards one's life will be meaningless. Purpose is thought to give us reason to care, reason to engage, and "reason to live." Yet according to Moritz Schlick (1979) it is foolhardy to try to bring meaning to life through goal directed action, i.e. through *work*. If we dedicate our lives to doing things not for their own sake but for the sake of external ends our lives will be meaningless, argues Schlick. For our lives to be meaningful we must do the opposite of work, we must *play*.

To convey Schlick's theory two things are compulsory: (1) a presentation of his arguments for why our lives cannot be meaningful in virtue of including work, and (2) a summary of his arguments for why play, uniquely, is meaningful activity. I'll begin with the former.

Schlick's rejection of the proposition that life can be made meaningful through work or purposeful action places credence in a Schopenhauerian insight:

Man sets himself goals, and while he is headed towards them he is buoyed up by hope, indeed, but gnawed at the same time by the pain of unsatisfied desire. Once

the goal is reached, however, after the first flush of triumph has passed away, there follows inevitably a mood of desolation. A void remains, which can seemingly find and end only through the painful emergence of new longings, the setting of new goals. So to and fro between pain and boredom. (Schlick, 1979, 112-113)

The idea here, familiar to us from our discussion of Schopenhauer's Nihilism in Chapter Two, is that the satisfaction of reaching an end is too brief and/or insignificant to compensate for the work it took to achieve. Moreover, once satisfaction dissipates it is soon replaced by boredom.

There are other reasons too why Schlick believes that the products of work are incapable of conferring meaning back onto work: much work undoubtedly yields "meaningless trash" and frequently it merely serves the purpose of enabling yet other work, or the maintenance of life is all that is achieved (and because "mere living, pure existence as such is certainly valueless; it must also have a content, and in that only can the meaning of life reside," (114) maintaining life cannot make life meaningful).

Thus Schlick claims:

if we wish to find a meaning in life we must seek for *activities* which carry their own purpose and value within them, independently of any extraneous goals; activities therefore, which are not work in the philosophical sense of the word. If such activities exist, then in them the seemingly divided is reconciled, means and end, action and consequence are fused into one, we have found ends-in-themselves which are more than mere end-points of acting and resting-points of

existence, and it is these alone that can take over the role of a true content to life.

(1979, 114)

The mode of acting that fits this description, contends Schlick, is *play*. Play is action which is free from the tyranny of (external) purpose; it is valuable in and of itself, intrinsically; play is the meaningful content of life.

Play, Schlick seems to be suggesting, is meaningful activity because it is worthwhile, unlike work which is not worthwhile as it regularly carries more negative intrinsic value than it produces in positive intrinsic value. Yet we should not suppose that Schlick singles out play as meaningful merely because it has positive intrinsic value, and is not, by its nature, linked to negative intrinsic value. For certainly there are other elements of positive intrinsic value in human life of which this is also true, for example, relaxation after physical exertion or the pleasure of observing the beauty of nature.

What then, is behind Schlick's belief that play, alone, is meaningful? One vital assumption, I think, is that the moments of intentional activity in our lives are the only occasions on which meaningfulness may attach to our lives. A meaningful life isn't something that happens to persons, it is something persons achieve (or not). Thus, a passive life, say one of lounging around and being pampered is regarded as a pleasurable life but it isn't and shouldn't be regarded as a meaningful life. Further, we may assume that when one is active they are either playing—acting for the sake of acting—or working—acting as a means to an end.¹³

¹³ Some activities may be all work and no play or vice versa, but some activities are a combination of different degrees of play and work. The point is implied in this passage from Schlick:

Although meaningfulness in life is something one must attain, and what this means according to Schlick is that one must play to have a meaningful life, it is wrong to assume that meaninglessness in life must also be actively produced, that work is the only contributor of meaninglessness to life. Inactivity, as the example of the pampered life makes intuitive, can also diminish the amount of meaningfulness a life has. Such a life is clearly not meaningless in virtue of being a life of work, for that is what it is not (nor is it a playful life, it is a life of passive enjoyment). Important to note here is that not all inactivity is meaningless to a significant degree. We do not view normal healthy sleep or rest, for example, as substantially meaningless as we do the pampered moments of a life characterized by such idleness. Some inactivity we see as a squandering of the human potential to do and create while some inactivity we excuse as natural, as inherent to the rhythm of human life, and thus not significantly meaningless. Now, probably, in principle, it is not possible to analyze a life and account for every moment of inactivity as either natural or wasteful. However this does not invalidate the distinction. Some amount of inactivity is obviously unavoidable, i.e. natural. And unavoidable meaninglessness is not nearly as regrettable as avoidable meaninglessness. It is meaningless inactivity which is intentional, which stems from one's personal preferences, dispositions, and proclivities which is appreciably meaningless.

We ought not then to comprehend Schlick as limiting his conception of

To be sure, [play] will only work perfectly where it is not brought externally and deliberately to the activity, and artificially coupled with it, but evolves spontaneously from the nature of the action and its natural form. There are some kinds of work where this is impossible; many are of such a nature that they always remain an evil. (1979, 117)

Certain activities, due to their very nature, exclude the possibility of play; thus surely some activities permit a small degree of play, while some permit slightly more, and others even slightly more, and so on.

meaninglessness in human life to work. Work is not the only kind of meaninglessness in life; it is just the opposite of what is meaningful in life (play). That being said, I recommend that we understand “meaninglessness” on Schlick’s theory to be equivalent, not to work alone, but to non-playfulness in life (some non-playfulness in life is work and some is wasteful inactivity).

We are now in a position to exhibit the proportionality argument grounded in Schlick’s (1979) theory:

P1) Life’s meaning is a function of the proportion of play within life to non-play within life, not simply of the amount of play within life.

P2) If life’s meaning is a function of the proportion of play within life to non-play within life, not simply of the amount of play within life, then the length of a life alone cannot affect its meaning.

P3) If the length of life alone cannot affect its meaning, then, *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

C) Therefore, *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

That Schlick’s theory supports (P1) of the proportionality argument—that the overall meaning of a life cannot simply be a function of the amount of playfulness within life, but must rather be a function of the proportion of playfulness to non-playfulness within life—can be put beyond doubt simply by considering two imagined lives. The first life has a *moderate* amount of playfulness due to the number of playful activities of varying degrees of intrinsic value within it; it also has a *large* amount of non-playfulness

within it due to including a number of working activities of varying degrees of intrinsic non-value and some proportion of wasteful inactivity. The second life has the *same* moderate amount of playfulness within it, but it also has a very *small* amount of work and wasteful inactivity within it. Which of these two lives is more meaningful than the other? Clearly, the answer is “the second life”. The two lives have the same amount of meaningfulness (play) but different amounts of meaninglessness (work and wasteful inactivity); the concentration of meaningfulness in the second life relative to the concentration of meaninglessness is greater in the second life than the first. So, the second life is more meaningful than the first because it includes a lesser proportion of meaninglessness to meaningfulness.

Before concluding this discussion of Schlick’s position I want to complete two additional tasks. First, I want to make note of an important counterpoint from Schlick, and second, I want to consider the question: if any activity can become play and thus contribute to the meaningfulness of a life, might immoral or evil actions be meaningful?

The important counterpoint from Schlick is a rejoinder to this complaint: play might be enjoyable but it is otherwise frivolous; play does not put food on the table; play cannot sustain a household or a community; play does not stimulate the economy, it is a luxury and one who overindulges in it is wasting his time. This complaint implies that work and hence meaninglessness is inescapable and therefore Schlick’s standard for a meaningful life is too strict. However, those activities that we are accustomed to call work do not have to be work. “Play”,

is any activity which takes place entirely for its own sake, independently of its effects and consequences. There is nothing to stop these effects from being of a useful or valuable kind. If they are, so much the better; the action still remains play since it already bears its own value within itself. Valuable goods may proceed from it, just as well as from intrinsically unpleasurable activity that strives to fulfill a purpose. Play too, in other words, can be creative; its outcome can coincide with that of work. (Schlick, 1979, 115-116)

Much of what we do that is necessary to staying alive and up-keeping quality of life can and should be done playfully. “[T]he joy in sheer creation, the dedication to the activity, the absorption in the movement, [can] transform work into play.” (117)

It is fair to assume that since immoral actions are typically goal oriented, i.e., performed for the sake of some end (examples: the accumulation of wealth, status) they are typically not play. However, the same could be said of moral action, and many other generally commendable activities, such as those that are thought to encourage positive personal growth, and actions that are thought to be socially productive. Moral actions are not play so long as they are done on principle and neither can one play if the initiative is personal growth or social productivity, for these too are purposes. Thus if the ends of these sorts of “positive” actions can become secondary to their playful performance, as Schlick maintains, why can’t “negative” actions also become play? I have not been able to extract an answer to this question from Schlick’s theory.¹⁴ I contend then, that on

¹⁴ Notice though that if a sound answer to this question is available therein my thesis goes through anyway. Should I be wrong, my conception of “play” is too inclusive, but were it less inclusive it could still be used to express the proportionality argument.

Schlick's theory, meaningful (playful) activities are not necessarily activities that we would recommend or judge to be morally good.

A small digression is fitting here to explain how a theory on meaningfulness in life can allow immoral or evil actions to be meaningful. After all, this challenges one mainstream construal of a meaningful life, specifically, that a meaningful life is one that is good for others, where "good for others" involves reducing the suffering of others and/or enriching their lives. There is no cause for concern however; Schlick's theory does not undervalue morality. In allowing that immoral actions can be meaningful his theory does not allow us to see immoral actions as valuable in anything remotely like an objective sense. Meaningfulness on Schlick's theory is a subjective phenomenon. Thus, there is no reason to suppose that *per* Schlick's theory immoral activity is any less reprehensible than it is, say, for the most staunch Kantian. That immoral action (if it is playfully performed) may be meaningful *for the* odd individual does not entail that immoral action itself—abstracting the actor—is meaningful (worthwhile) activity.

3.3 Feinberg's Theory

Like Schlick, Joel Feinberg (1992) argues that intrinsically valuable activity is the source of meaning in life. Where the two philosophers differ is in what they propose is the relevant (meaningful) sort of activity. As we saw, Schlick thinks the relevant activity is *play*; in Feinberg's view this role is performed by activities that contribute to and express *self-fulfillment*. In this section I'll present Feinberg's case for claiming fulfilling activities to be the bearers of meaning in life, I'll then amend the proportionality argument to his position.

A preliminary sense of what Feinberg means by “self-fulfillment” can be gained from the following:

[Self] fulfillment...is often said to be a “realizing of one’s potential” where the word “potential” refers not only to one’s basic natural proclivities to engage in activities of certain kinds but also to one’s natural capacities to acquire skills and talents, to exercise these abilities effectively; and thus to produce achievements. (1992, 316)

The shortcoming of this depiction of self-fulfillment is not—at least not according to Feinberg—as one might suppose, that immoral or evil actions cannot, on it, be ruled out as fulfilling activities. For as Feinberg states (and I agree), a disposition to engage in some way or another which may be cultivated into an aptitude to carry out those activities skillfully and/or creatively, is a disposition to do what is fulfilling regardless of whether it is a disposition to do “good” or “evil.” (322)

To refine the above quoted description of self-fulfillment, Feinberg introduces the distinction between what is in one’s “genetic nature” to do and what is in one’s “personal” or “individual nature” to do. As one might guess, genetic nature refers to those traits which characterize members of species, as examples of human genetic nature Feinberg mentions the dispositions to walk upright and to speak a language. (1992, 317) Individual nature, in contrast, encompasses traits we tend to use to differentiate and characterize persons as beings who develop and change as a function of their decisions, efforts, interests, values, environments etc.

This distinction is intuitive but course grained. The point is made by Feinberg in

connection to Sisyphus' desire to push rocks instilled in him by the gods (on Taylor's version (1970) of the myth):

Depending on the extent to which the gods had to tamper with him, he has either had a new individual nature grafted onto his basic human nature, or else a new (hence nonhuman) genetic nature instilled in him. If we say the former, then we must think of his infinite rock pushing proclivities as merely personal eccentricities, only contingently unshared by other persons who share his human nature. If we say the latter, then the individual nature of Sisyphus and his genetic nature coincide, since he is now one of a kind, the sole member of his new species...Still more plausible, perhaps, we might think of the new Sisyphus as a borderline case for our old classifications. Unless we hold to the discredited doctrine of fixed species, we can simply declare that there is no uniquely correct answer to the question of whether Sisyphus' generic nature has been changed, and that considerations of convenience and tidiness are as relevant to its resolution as are any questions of fact. (1992, 320)

We would be mistaken to conclude, though, from these remarks, that the distinction between individual and genetic nature is invalid; it is true that what is "genetic nature" and what is "individual nature" may sometimes be ambiguous. It does not follow, however, that the distinction is senseless. There are cases—arguably the majority of cases—which obviously do not lie within the blurred boundaries of genetic and individual nature. Pretty clearly, I do not express human genetic nature by avoiding large social gatherings of people I don't know or by designing and construction art pieces that move; these things are part of what is in my personal nature to do. Yet, it is also true that

each item in my personal repertoire of activities which I have a passion for doing has a genetic component. We can think of our individual natures as contingently realized potentialities supported by our genetic natures. We need to say more, though, to comprehend how this is relevant to self-fulfillment as Feinberg construes it.

Feinberg's central reason for bringing in the distinction between "genetic nature" and "individual nature" is to communicate that typically the fulfilling of genetic nature is insufficient for self-fulfillment. Doing what is in our shared genetic nature as humans to do, such as appeasing our inherent needs—those for water, food, shelter, sex—will not be fulfilling in the sense intended by Feinberg. After all, it is easy to imagine one who has such needs sufficiently met, but nonetheless is not living a fulfilling life. (1992, 321) It is rather activities that are in one's personal nature to do which can be done more or less effectively or skillfully, activities which exercise creative capacities, activities which manifest talents, and activities which produce insights and solve problems which contribute to one's self-fulfillment. In short, fulfilling activities are those which discharge our *basic dispositions* or *aptitudes* and help develop them. The use of the terms "basic dispositions" and "aptitudes" is significant. Aptitudes or basic dispositions are easier to fulfill than desires, plans, and hopes; for these things typically are quite particular. (322) In contrast, because basic dispositions are less specific they may be realized in a number of ways. There are options for fulfillment when it comes to basic dispositions and aptitudes. For instance, an aptitude to construct artifacts may be activated just as well by, say, building boats or building furniture.

Enough has now nearly been said about Feinberg's conception of self-fulfillment to employ it in the proportionality argument. A last bit of clarifying analysis on the

relationship between *self-fulfillment* and *fulfilling activity* needs to be given.

The concept of self-fulfillment is a concept of a state or end. To be self-fulfilled is to be a certain type of person—a person who has realized her potential to a high degree. The concept of fulfilling activity is based on the concept of self-fulfillment. A highly self-fulfilled person has performed a significant number of fulfilling actions over the course of her life. These actions exercise and/or contribute to the development of one's personal dispositions. Something like a reciprocal relationship thus exists between self-fulfillment and fulfilling activity; fulfilling actions are the points of meaning in life but how meaningful (intrinsically valuable) a particular fulfilling action or project is depends upon the degree of self-fulfillment it reflects. It is not the case then, as may initially seem plausible that *per* Feinberg's theory the amount of meaningfulness that attaches to one's life is equal to the degree of self-fulfillment one has attained in life.

The preceding point is also instructive for how to properly conceive of meaninglessness relative to Feinberg's theory. Since meaningfulness is not the degree to which one is self-fulfilled, meaninglessness is not the degree to which one is *not* self-fulfilled. To conceive of meaninglessness in a manner consistent with Feinberg's conception of meaninglessness, it cannot simply be thought of as a lack of self-fulfillment. Rather, meaninglessness must be recognized as having a positive presence; meaninglessness is non-fulfilling activity or inactivity. Qualifications similar to the ones made earlier in connection to meaninglessness with respect to Schlick's theory also need to be made here. Not all the moments of our lives that are spent doing something other than fulfilling activity are significantly meaningless. Again, some proportion of inactivity in life is natural and thus not significantly meaningless. It is, rather, those

moments of life which are *not* naturally non-fulfilling and are wasted doing non-fulfilling things or not doing much of anything at all that are substantially meaningless.

Let's now exhibit the proportionality argument grounded in Feinberg's theory:

P1) Life's meaning is a function of the proportion of fulfilling activity within life to non-fulfilling activity and inactivity within life, not simply the amount of fulfilling activities within life.

P2) If life's meaning is a function of the proportion of fulfilling activity within life to non-fulfilling activity and inactivity within life, not simply the amount of fulfilling activities within life, then the length of life alone cannot affect its meaning.

P3) If the length of life alone cannot affect its meaning, then, *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

C) Therefore, *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

As we did in the previous section on Schlick's theory, we can also imagine two lives to persuade that on Feinberg's view as well, life's meaning is a function of the proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness within life, not merely the amount of meaningfulness within life. If one life has a moderate amount of fulfilling activity within it, but a large amount of non-fulfilling activity and inactivity within it, while another life has the same moderate amount of fulfilling activity within it, but a smaller amount of non-fulfilling activity and inactivity within it, which of these two lives is more meaningful overall? Which is the more worthwhile life according to Feinberg's theory?

The strongly intuitive answer is “the second life”.

3.4 Wolf’s Theory

The Immanentist positions—those of Schlick and Feinberg—that we have covered and drawn on thus far identify meaningfulness in life with activity of subjective value. Whatever the activity, if it is done playfully—joyfully engaged in for its own sake—or is fulfilling—discharges one’s basic dispositions and/or develops them into talents—it is meaningful, impart Schlick and Feinberg, respectively. Thus, on these theories the activities which bring meaning to life can do so without having impersonal or objective value. Taylor’s (1970) Sisyphus—for whom the gods have seen to it that he finds his stone rolling fulfilling—is a case in point. Sisyphus’s life is fulfilling and therefore meaningful despite exemplifying pointless toil. One may even be “capable of seeing, from time to time”, says Feinberg,

that this “nature” of his is more than a little absurd. What he does best and most, let us imagine, is play chess and ping-pong and socialize with others who share these interests. He takes those pursuits more seriously than anything else in his life. But he knows that they are, after all, only games, of no cosmic significance whatever, and certainly of no interest to the indifferent universe, to posterity, to history, or to any other abstract tribunals by which humans in their more magniloquent moods are wont to measure significance. And yet, [objectively] absurd as it is, it is *his* nature, and the only one he has, so somehow he must make the best of it and seek his own good in pursuit of its dominant talents. (1992, 324)

In opposition to the frameworks of Schlick and Feinberg, Susan Wolf (2010)

argues that the subjective appeal of an activity alone is never sufficient for it to be meaningful. Being subjectively valuable is only one condition of meaningful activity, says Wolf. Meaning obtains, she claims, “when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.” (9) Wolf’s position is a hybrid view: it attempts to explain meaningfulness in human life as both a function of human subjectivity and the (fallible) human capacity to recognize what is valuable from an impersonal perspective. In what follows I’ll present Wolf’s theory on meaningfulness in life, which I will then use it to give content to the proportionality argument. I’ll end by defending this Wolf-inspired version of that argument.

Wolf’s hybrid theory is an alteration of what she calls the Fulfillment View. What this view gets right, according to Wolf, is its definitive claim, namely, that having passion for and deep interest in what we do connects us to life, that without this type of care and involvement with something(s) in our lives they will feel meaningless to us and actually be so. What this view gets wrong, says Wolf, is the further claim that so long as an activity is fulfilling for the actor in this sense, it is meaningful activity. Wolf would not agree with Feinberg (1992) that an enthusiasm for ping-pong could be at the core of a meaningful life. Her examples of meaningless yet subjectively valued activity, like the example of ping-pong, are also likely to strike the reader as examples of trivial activities.¹⁵

In order for a fulfilling activity to be meaningful it must be an activity that, as Wolf puts it, is “fitting” for fulfillment. By this she means that a fulfilling life will be a

¹⁵ Wolf’s examples are pot smoking, crossword puzzles, being overly invested in making hand-written copies of *War and Peace*, or caring for a gold-fish.

meaningful life only if the fulfilling activity has or is linked to objective value. Her thesis is this: “meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way.” (2010, 8)

It is not sufficient, however, for an activity to be meaningful that it be fulfilling and have objective value. The subjective and objective components need to be suitably related for meaning to appear, claims Wolf. One’s emotional investment or subjective attraction to something must, in part, be due to the perception that what one is subjectively attracted to has non-subjective value. (22) When this is the case, provided the engagement is positive¹⁶ and the assumption or perception of non-subjective value is correct, an activity is “fitting” for fulfillment. Restated, the idea is that one acts meaningfully when one loves and engages positively with “something the value of which is independent of and has its source *outside of oneself*.” (19) To have meaning in our lives we must be lovingly involved with values that are not only our values.

Further, it is natural, posits Wolf, that persons seek fulfillment by engaging with objects which are worthy—for reasons which are not idiosyncratic or particular to themselves—of their care and time. Meaningfulness is a separate dimension of value not to be equated with either the good of morality or the good of happiness. It is a dimension which arises for us, hypothesizes Wolf, for at least three reasons: our capacity and tendency (discussed in Chapter Two in relation to Nagel’s Nihilism) to take an external view of ourselves and our need for self-esteem—these factors are thought to coalesce into

¹⁶ To positively engage with an object, Wolf writes, “[o]ne must be able to be in some sort of relationship with the valuable object of one’s attention—to create it, protect it, promote it, honor it, or more generally, to actively affirm it in some way or other.” (2010, 9-10)

a wish to “be able to see oneself and one’s life [from the external perspective] as good, valuable, and a rightful source of pride” (28)—and our need not to feel alone, to feel part of a community of value.

This idea that some things are more worthy, in an objective sense, of our care or love than others is, by far, the aspect of Wolf’s thesis that is most likely to be a target of critical attention. As I said in the introduction to this chapter, it is not necessary for my purposes to thoroughly critically evaluate the theories covered herein. It is essential however that I articulate them extensively enough so that the versions of the proportionality argument based on them are as unambiguous as possible. And as the existence of objective value is assumed by Wolf it is appropriate to review and reflect on her comments meant to sketch the conception she has in mind.

Quite rightly, Wolf eschews a metaphysics which sees objective value as “independent of human (or other conscious being’s) needs and capacities” and thereby steers clear of casting objective value as based upon some transcendent reality. (45) The sense of “objective value” Wolf appeals to is much less radical than this. By “objective value” she means value which “fall[s] in between the radically subjective and the radically objective.” (45) A sign that something has objective value in this moderately objective way, thinks Wolf, is “that a significant number of people have taken [it] to be valuable over a long span of time.” (47) This is a sign, she reasons, because “if people find an object or activity or project engaging, there is apt to be something about it that makes it so—perhaps the activity is challenging, the object beautiful, the project morally important.” (47) The idea here, as Wolf herself explains (128), is that qualities *inherent* to an object, activity, or project are what make it objectively valuable, i.e., valuable

independently of whether any particular individual is aware of these inherent qualities. Of course, to understand this in a manner true to both Immanentism and Wolf's dismissal of both absolute objective value and radically subjective value we must presume that such qualities are dependent on conditions or aspects of humanity such that some actual or possible claims to have identified value are right and some are wrong. Not coincidentally, this is as much as Wolf commits to about the conception of objective value which is necessary to her view on meaningfulness in life. (131)

I have, I think, said enough to illuminate Wolf's thesis and to envelop the proportionality argument in her theory. Here then is that argument:

P1) Life's meaning is a function of the proportion of active and loving positive engagement with projects or objects of non-subjective value within life to the proportion of activity which is not such (and a proportion of *inactivity*¹⁷), not simply the amount of activity of the former kind.

P2) If life's meaning is a function of the proportion of active and loving positive engagement with projects or objects of non-subjective value within life to the proportion of activity which is not such (and a proportion of *inactivity*), not simply the amount of activity of the former kind, then the length of a life alone cannot affect its meaning.

P3) If the length of life alone cannot affect its meaning, then, *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an immortal life.

C) Therefore, *ceteris paribus*, a mortal life is not less meaningful than an

¹⁷ For reasons highlighted in the previous two sections (see the discussions of natural or excusable inactivity vs. wasteful inactivity) certain moments of inactivity qualify as significantly meaningless.

immortal life.

Following the practice of the previous two sections, to support this formulation of the proportionality argument we can conceive of and contrast two lives with different proportions of meaningfulness to meaninglessness as we understand Wolf's theory. We may imagine, without difficulty, two lives including the same amount of loving positive activity directed towards or dedicated to projects or objects of comparable non-subjective value, but different amounts of meaninglessness. After all, if we agree with Wolf that some things are objectively valuable then certainly we must suppose that among the things that have such value some have more than others. To be consistent we must also assume that some things can be more or less *meaningless* depending on their degree of negative non-subjective value. Why shouldn't objects or projects be more or less *unworthy* of our care and attention if some are more or less worthy of our care and attention as Wolf suggests? There is no reason that they shouldn't. Her theory permits that two lives may have the same amount of meaningfulness but different amounts of meaninglessness (or vice versa); and because a life with a lesser proportion of meaninglessness to meaningfulness than another is more meaningful overall, we may conclude that Wolf's Immanentist view fits with the central premise of the proportionality argument.

4.1 Immortality

My defense and explanation of the thesis that an immortal life would *not*, simply as such, be advantageous with respect to overall meaningfulness in comparison to a mortal life is partway completed. The Immanentist theories of Schlick, Feinberg, and Wolf, discussed in the previous chapter, each independently supports my thesis; it is thus acceptable to tentatively conclude that Immanentism in general harmonizes with the proportionality argument. To finish, I will in this chapter address four theses, each of which either must be overcome to preserve the proportionality argument or be accommodated to improve our understanding of its force. These theses are: (1) our conceptions of immortal persons are inadequate to draw sound inferences about immortal versus mortal life; (2) immortal *persons* are impossible; (3) an immortal life would eventually and necessarily be meaningless; and, (4) an immortal life would be more meaningful than a mortal life. Thesis (1) implies that the proportionality argument rests on highly dubious grounds and so ought itself to be received as highly dubious. Similarly thesis (2) suggests that talk of immortal life in the proportionality argument is senseless, while theses (3) and (4) both gesture—in opposite ways—that it is a mistake to place mortal and immortal life on equal footing in terms of their potential for meaningfulness. The first of these theses has been forwarded by Mikel Burley (2009) while the second and third theses form the two horns of a dilemma proposed by Bernard Williams (1973) in his essay “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”. The fourth and last of the above mentioned theses is represented by Williams’ detractors, such as Jonathan Fischer and Timothy Chappell, among others. I turn now to defending the proportionality argument against the aforementioned theses, beginning with the first.

4.2 Burley's Arguments

4.2-1 *Immortality and Indeterminacy*

The first alleged truth which Burley (2009) says prevents competent speculation about immortality is that it is indeterminate what any immortals and their world would be like. Here are two passages in which Burley conveys this line of thought:

[It is foolish] to construct an imaginary scenario in which the only variable to be adjusted is the longevity of the imagined human beings, while everything else about them remains unaltered, or is at least not significantly altered...this, I would suggest, is itself a fantasy. To imagine a human being with a life-span dramatically longer than any normal human, let alone to imagine an immortal life, is to imagine, or *try* to imagine, a world in which such a life-span is possible. Of course, if the life-span to be imagined is merely a few years or a few decades longer than normal, then the network of facts that surrounds our ordinary human lives need not undergo much alteration in the imaginary scenario; but as the extent of the imagined longevity increases, so does the strain upon that network of facts. While it would be naïve to suppose that there is some specifiable range of longevity beyond which our imaginings break down into indeterminate ramblings, it would be equally naïve to merely assume that we can have any clear idea of what it means to imagine a life of millions or billions of years in duration, not to mention a putatively unending life. (536)

[T]he strategy of citing characteristically enjoyable features of ordinary mortal lives, and then presuming that these features can be unproblematically transposed

from this ordinary context to one in which the life in question is very much longer, and perhaps infinitely long [is flawed, for]...in arguments of this sort, the devil really is in the detail, and severely underdescribed imaginary scenarios give us very little upon which to base our judgments. (537)

What these remarks from Burley aim to establish is that, due to the fact that the life of any immortal might very well *eventually* be unrecognizable (to us) as a human life, we cannot answer whether being immortal would be desirable or undesirable. This, I take it, is why in the latter of the two above quoted passages Burley proposes that what makes human life *as we know it* subjectively valuable might not be relevant to assessing the value or disvalue of a human life that has gone on for a great deal of time. It is not immortality *per se*, then, that Burley is concerned with; one's being immortal would not automatically make one's life wholly alien and unappreciable from a mortal human perspective. Instead, Burley's claim is that since we can only speculate wildly about how living for an incredibly long time would necessarily change someone, we can only speculate wildly about the worth of living for vastly much longer than we now can.

Taking Burley's argument in the preceding way it can readily be cast as a criticism of an apparently central presumption of Chapter Three; namely, that the immanentist theories on what makes for meaningfulness (and meaninglessness) in life utilized in that chapter would be applicable to any human life no matter how long it has been going on. My rebuttal is simple: I need not presume this. Granted, in Chapter Three I utilized specific theories to support the conclusion of the proportionality argument and thus did imply that at no point in an immortal life would these theories be irrelevant. However, this implication was not made out of necessity. Perhaps Burley is

right that it is indeterminate what any exceedingly long-lived immortal would be like. Yet, even if we suppose that none of the immanentist theories employed, or that could have been employed, in Chapter Three potentially describe how meaningfulness (and meaninglessness) would or could obtain at any point in the duration of an immortal life,¹⁸ it does not follow that the key premise of the proportionality argument—(P1)—is false. The theories drawn on in Chapter Three support the premise that life’s meaning is a function of the proportion of meaningfulness within life to meaninglessness within life, not simply the amount of meaningfulness within life, by illustrating that on immanentist theories this is apparently true. And this does not entail that (P1) cannot be true without it also being true that any particular immanentist theory now available would be eternally applicable to any particular immortal life. For (P1) to be true of a life irrespective of the

¹⁸ I don’t think this is a fair supposition to make, though. Why would whatever cognitive capacities and needs due to which our lives may feature meaningfulness be replaced or otherwise eliminated simply as a function of extreme longevity? Why, for example, would one’s capacity for *play* (remembering that Schlick argues that incidents of play are the meaningful incidents of human life) disappear given enough time? As such capacities are ours as biological organisms, for them to no longer be ours we would have to be biologically altered. The question then becomes: why would the very wetware that allows for a brand of activity such as play necessarily, as a result of longevity, alter so as to cease to allow for play? I can imagine this happening as part and parcel of disillusionment with life, the ebb and flow of human life becoming nauseatingly familiar or old, drained of all novelty and appeal, as Bernard Williams (1993) imagines, yet in that case the fallout of extreme longevity or immortality is all too human. In other words, if that would eventually happen to any human for living too long it would happen due to their human nature. Thus this imagining is not one that supports the Burley-inspired contention that extreme longevity or immortality, were it possible, might eventually change any human being such that no known immanentist theory on meaningfulness (and meaninglessness) would apply to her manner of life. Could it be that Burley is imagining that in order to become immortal or to lengthen our life spans dramatically we would have to become trans-humans or post-humans by altering ourselves through merging with physical technologies? Is it not plausible that trans-humans might not have any use for our theories on meaningfulness in life? I guess so, but in this case extremely long-lived or immortal humans would be radically different from us, not because they are long-lived or immortal but because of how they made themselves long-lived or immortal. Questions about how human beings might be altered and become trans-humans are conceptually distinct from questions of how radical life extension or immortality might alter human beings. I am not in this essay interested in the former kind of questions.

temporal extent of its past, it need not be true that meaningfulness (and meaninglessness) in that life must always obtain in the same general manner. Perhaps we could not relate to meaningfulness or meaninglessness as it would feature in the life of a human being hundreds or thousands or however vastly many years old, but so long as meaningfulness and meaninglessness, where it attaches to such a life, attaches due to immanentist factors, (P1) is plausible.

At best then, Burley's "worry" involving indeterminacy indicates that immortal humans might require their own theories on meaningfulness and meaninglessness in life, not that their lives would not and could not include either. Indeed, the following words from Burley are consistent with the preceding:

It is easy enough to say that one can imagine an enjoyable immortal life; but it is quite another thing to spell out one's imaginings in sufficient detail to convince anyone that what one purports to be imagining is recognizably oneself existing in a world that is recognizably ours. (2009, 537)

Burley thinks it is indeterminate whether or not the structure and content of an immortal life would eternally be human-like, not that its structure and content might not allow for meaningfulness (or meaninglessness); so much then for his first criticism.

4.2-2 Immortality and Incompleteness

The second difficulty Burley sees for thinking about the value of a potentially infinite life span is articulated by him in the following passage:

[T]here is a crucial difference between a claim made about the desirability of any temporally finite life and a claim made about the desirability of a temporally infinite one. This difference derives from the fact that, in the case of a finite life, even if we have only limited information available to us, we could in principle acquire a fully rounded picture of the life in question, and could thus reach a well-informed judgment about the desirability of that life. In the case of a purportedly infinite life, by contrast, we could not acquire such a picture even in principle, since there is nothing that could count as a ‘fully-rounded’ picture of an endless life; however much information we acquired, there would always remain an infinite amount of life that was unaccounted for. (2009, 540)

Restated to be more obviously relevant to the proportionality argument, the trouble is this: since by definition an infinite life is never complete, it is incoherent to talk of the meaningfulness of an immortal life as a *whole*; and since the proportionality argument concerns the comparative meaningfulness of mortal and immortal life on the whole or overall, the proportionality argument is incoherent; or so it might seem.

As a matter of fact however, the sense in which the proportionality argument requires immortal life to have an overall degree of meaningfulness is not one which implies the contradiction that immortal life is finite. To have an overall degree of meaningfulness, as this is conceived of by the proportionality argument, a life need not be over. The conclusion of the proportionality argument indicates that there is no principled reason why at any point over its putatively endlessly ongoing course, an immortal life should so far have had a greater proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness within

it than a mortal life could have had over its completed course. Burley's second "worry" thus does not pose a problem for my thesis.

4.2-3 "*Contingent Immortality*" and "*Necessary Immortality*"

The third difficulty Burley says invalidates normative philosophical conclusions on immortality involves how immortality is conceived of. There are two basic options he explains; on the one hand immortality can be conceived of as necessary; "[i]n the case of necessary immortality, any being who existed in this state would be absolutely incapable of dying, whatever happened." (Burley, 2009, 541) To be contingently immortal, on the other hand, is to be capable of dying but not of dying a "natural" death. Such an immortal would be vulnerable to death by accident and perhaps communicable disease but not from non-communicable disease or old age—for such an immortal would not age past a certain level of development. Contingent immortality, I want to take this opportunity to make clear, is what the proportionality argument has to do with. I thus won't bother commenting on the issues Burley raises in connection to necessary immortality. I need only assess why, according to Burley, if one focuses on contingent immortality the debate about the value of immortality will still not be "placed on a firm footing." (541)

Should one opt to "talk about contingent immortality [rather than necessary immortality]", says Burley, one will not be able to find "a principled reason for holding some features of a human being, or of the world, constant while permitting others to be modified or dispensed with." (2009, 542) Burley's third worry then, as it pertains to the proportionality argument, is merely a restatement of his first. That criticism, remember,

runs thusly: the life of any especially long lived immortal might, for all we know, necessarily not bear any significant resemblance to characteristically human life—by current standards. As I explained earlier (section 4.2-1), this claim is not a problem for the proportionality argument; whether it is true or false has no bearing on the validity of the proportionality argument. Rather, Burley’s first criticism threatens the proportionality argument by inspiring the claim that for us to justify believing that the life of any especially old immortal could be meaningful (or meaningless) we must justify the claim that it would be a characteristically human life—again, by current standards. Yet the threat of this claim is small, for it is a non-sequitur, no reasons for the belief of which can be extracted from Burley’s writing. Hence, there is no onus on me to defend against it.

4.2-4 Mortality and Humanity

Burley’s final criticism, intended to undermine confidence in conclusions on the worth of an immortal human life, centers around the assertion that the concept of a human being essentially involves the concept of mortality. “To understand what a human being is,” says Burley, “and hence to be able to operate competently with that concept, one must also have some understanding of, among many other things, what it means for a human being to be born, to form sexual relationships, and to die.” (2009, 544) One upshot of these conceptual connections, explains Burley, is that those who imagine that they or anyone of their fellow human beings, if it turned out that they were immortal, would still be able to conceive of themselves as human, are wrongly assuming that their conception of themselves as human can be uncoupled from their conception of themselves as mortal.

Thus Burley believes that the concept of a human being as mortal is rigid; it cannot be significantly altered without being destroyed. This is why he asserts that “we [cannot] hold onto our understanding of who and what we are while at the same time abandoning our understanding of ourselves as mortal.” (544) However, as I will now argue, it does not follow that anyone who thinks they can coherently conceive of themselves or any of their fellow human beings as immortal is confused. Supposing, for the sake of argument, as Burley seems to, that the concept of mortality is essential to the concept of a human being, then, indeed the notion of an immortal human being violates the concept of a human being. This supposition is innocuous though, for a concept may change when what it is a concept of changes. So, if eventually some segment of the human population, or eventually all the human population were to undergo some procedure which made them contingently immortal, then they could, if they chose to, alter their concept of a human being so as to include themselves. Timothy Chappell has made this same insistence by explaining that even if our current conception of a human being is bound up with the fact of our mortality this does

nothing at all to prove that you, me or Burley could not be immortal. All it would show is that *if* you, me or Burley turned out immortal, then we would have turned out not to be human in Burley’s sense. At which point I think we can reasonably lose interest in that sense of ‘human.’ (qtd. in Burley 2009, 544)

In response to these very words from Chappell, Burley’s argument shifts from one for the above addressed claim that the concept of a human being does not allow for an immortal human being to one for the conclusion that the life of an immortal human being would be so extensively unlike the life of a mortal human being that it could not

represent, *for us*, a potentially meaningful life. This shift is most apparent when Burley, aligning himself with Martha Nussbaum, posits that,

for us, the constitutive conditions of our values—the very conditions of the possibility of those values obtaining in our lives—include the fact of our mortality and our pervasive awareness of that fact, and hence to imagine a life even remotely recognizable as ours is to imagine a life that is mortal. (545)

With these remarks Burley returns to the first of his arguments covered in this chapter. That argument, or rather an argument inspired by it, once more, goes something like this: for us to justify believing that the life of any extremely old immortal could be meaningful (or meaningless) we must justify the claim that it would be recognizable, *by us*, as a characteristically human life. I've already twice responded to this argument herein, hence this time I will simply note that our not being able to forecast what the life of any exceedingly long-lived immortal would be like prevents us from knowing if from our current perspective we would desire or value such a life, it does not prevent the presumption that such a life could be meaningful or worthwhile for the one living it.

4.3 Williams' Arguments

4.3-1 Immortality and Personhood

I want now to consider the second antithesis, mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, to the conclusion of the proportionality argument. That antithesis, as the reader may recall, is that immortal *persons* are impossible. Why this contradicts my thesis is hardly in need of explanation. If immortality is impossible for you or I or anyone else,

then it is pure fiction to talk of it as though it were possible, and hence the proportionality argument is a piece of philosophical fiction.

Bernard Williams (1993) has argued that either an immortal life would eventually be unbearable or it would not be the life of a singular person; it would instead be the life of multiple consecutive (bodily continuous) persons. As I've indicated, it is the latter of these disjuncts which shall be my focus in this section. Yet because I will later have something to say about the former disjunct I'll first summarize how Williams reaches the dilemma (disjunction) which connects the two disjuncts.

A fine place to start in reproducing Williams' dilemma is with his distinction between *conditional* and *categorical* desires. Categorical desires, says Williams, are those desires in virtue of which persons want to continue living. Categorical desires, it can be said, to borrow a common phrase, give us "reason to live." Conditional desires, in contrast, do not have this function; these desires are not so important to us that we want to live so that we may fulfill them, though we might seek to fulfill them if we live.

Our desires, be they conditional or categorical, reflect our characters, or if you like, they are partly constitutive of our characters. Hence, our characters limit our desires or our desires limit our characters. For this reason no one person is apt to want absolutely everything that everyone else wants. That is not surprising; we can all imagine doing something or other that would have our acquaintances saying "that is not like him/her at all." Yet this rather mundane truth about desires and character, should we believe Williams, justifies a very strong claim. This claim comes out in his discussion of the

fictional case of “EM” a woman who at the age of 42 became contingently immortal and is now 342 years old. “Her trouble,” says Williams,

was, it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person.

These are difficult questions, if one presses the issue, about constancy of character. How is this accumulation of memories related to this character that she eternally has, and to the character of her existence? Are they much the same kind of events repeated? Then it is itself strange that she allows them to be repeated, accepting the same repetitions, the same limitations... The repeated patterns of personal relations, for instance, must take on a character of being inescapable. Or is the pattern of her experience not repetitious in this way, but varied? Then the problem shifts to the relation between these varied experiences, and the fixed character: how can it remain fixed, through an endless series of very various experiences? (82)

And of the fact that EM was so bored Williams writes:

The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the condition of EM’s unending life, the less it seems a mere contingency that it froze up as it did. That it is not a

contingency is suggested also by the fact that the reflections can sustain themselves independently of any question of the particular character EM had; it is enough, almost, that she had a human character at all. (82-83)

What these passages make clear is that, according to Williams, given enough time each of us would cease to generate new categorical desires and so we would be left without interests to propel us forward with gratitude for life; this state is what Williams means by boredom—a kind of *fatal boredom*¹⁹ from which recovery is possible only on pain of replacement of one's character. The only way an immortal can avoid this fate is if she cycles, perhaps forever, through distinct characters—but in that case she is not an immortal person, but indefinitely many linked (and bodily continuous) mortal persons. That is Williams' dilemma; I want now, as promised, to dispute its second disjunct.

The standpoint that individual personhood is sustained by constancy of character evokes the question of what aspects of character and/or how much of them must remain constant to sustain a single person. What sorts of changes in character are unsubstantial or to be regarded as changes in the periphery of one's character? If one goes from, say, being easily angered and generally angry to being patient and tolerant, is one a new person? If not, how many more changes in character are required? This question sets up a sorites paradox: if personhood is sustained when sameness of character is sustained, then what degree of change in character produces a new person? It is best, I think, to avoid this paradox rather than to try to specify a critical degree. What Timothy Chappell

¹⁹ I have borrowed the phrase "fatal boredom" from Jeremy Wisniewski's (2005) discussion of Williams' position.

(2007), following Derek Parfit, calls the “connectedness” view of personhood allows for this.

According to the connectedness view, as Chappell explains,

We do not require for sameness of person between t1 and t2 that there should be at least one unbroken strand of experience or character that stretches all the way from t1 to t2. We require only that every strand of experience or character that is present at t2 [is connected, if not directly then by other strands of experience or character] with some strand of experience or character that was present at t1.

(2007, 38-39)

Aside from the reason noted above (side stepping the sorites paradox), why prefer this position on personhood to the constancy of character account? Reflecting on our practices of identifying persons with their pasts can help us to choose between these two theories of personhood.

Reflections of this sort very quickly reveal the superiority of the connectedness view of personhood over the constancy view. It is violation of the connectedness condition, or apparent violation of this condition, which typically prefaces refusal to identify a human being with her former self. Probably nowhere is this more strikingly demonstrated than in cases of dissociative fugues. Dissociative fugues (American Psychiatric Association [*DSM-IV-TR*], 2000) occur when an individual abruptly forgets the life she has been living and, as it were, sets up shop in a different location and commences to display behaviours and traits very much unlike those of hers prior to the fugue. It is in these cases that expressions such as “she is no longer the same person” can

be taken literally if they ever can be. The absence of connective threads of memory and character between the fugue state and the life before it is what makes such judgments fitting.

Contrasting the extreme example of dissociative fugues with one of great but gradual and natural character change should make it yet more apparent that the connectedness account of personhood beats out the constancy account. Here is a story (invented by me) of such character change:

Over the course of the last decade or so Sam has, as he sees it, “grown personally.” Remembering back Sam can honestly and rightly say that since those times nearly everything about him has drastically changed. Many of these changes Sam links to hard times or traumatic events that required him to adjust his outlook on life in order to cope. Overall he thinks of his changed character as a consequence of learning—the hard way—to be psychologically healthier.

Even supposing that Sam’s character change was as drastic as what might occur in a dissociative fugue, due to the way that his character changed—the time it took, the factors that motivated it, and the fact that no abnormal breaks in his subjective experience happened—we are not inclined to think that there has been more than one Sam over the years. Yes, one might fairly say of Sam that “he is not the same person he used to be” but by this the man is distinguished from his former character; a change in character or personality does not suffice for a change in personhood anymore than a change in physical shape or build. It is rather how the changes in character take place—as illustrated by cases of dissociative fugues—which determines whether or not individual

personhood has been sustained. And it is precisely the recognition of this that is the strong suit of the connectedness view of personhood.

In addition to maintaining that eternal constancy of character is a condition for the obtainment of personal immortality, Williams also contends that it is the condition that must obtain for one's *hope* to live forever to be fulfilled. That is to say, as Williams sees it, constancy of character is not only necessary for personal immortality, it is also necessary for immortality to obtain in the way we would want it to obtain. These are, it is important to see, two separate requirements which Williams believes can be met with the same condition. I have already argued against Williams that persistence of personhood necessitates constancy of character; yet, according to Williams, "even if the [this] first requirement be supposed satisfied, it is exceedingly unclear that the second can be." (84)

What Williams seems to be suggesting with this second requirement is that individuals care about their futures contingently on the condition that their future characters will be consistent with their current characters. I think this is wrong. Years from now (should I live) I might very well be a very different person—in terms of personality—but I still care about what will happen to *me*, or what *I* will then be up to. If psychological connectedness between one's past and future self is enough to sustain individual personhood, I do not see why it wouldn't be enough to justify prospective self-concern. Moreover, even if connectedness does not justify this attitude—as Williams implies it does not—this does nothing to undermine the proportionality argument. That argument is sound conditionally on whether or not contingent immortal personhood is possible, not on whether or not a contingently immortal person would naturally be concerned about her future.

4.3-2 *Would Immortality (Eventually) Be Meaningless?*

If, as I have argued, immortality does not require eternal constancy of character, Williams' dilemma has but one leg left. But it cannot stand upon one leg. The two claims that make up his dilemma are linked in such a way that to defeat one is to defeat the other. An immortal life would eventually and necessarily be meaningless, says Williams, because genuine immortality requires constancy of character, and inevitably, a putatively unending life—more precisely, the events of that life—contributed to and received unceasingly by one in characteristic ways, would wear thin. The claim that an immortal would inevitably become fatally bored with life goes through, according to Williams, on condition of constancy of character. Thus there is no dilemma if immortality does not require eternal constancy of character.

That being said, I do nevertheless think that the view that an immortal life would eventually lose its value (for the one living it) deserves a bit more attention. After all, it is not obvious that an immortal life wouldn't necessarily become permanently dreary even if one's character shifted regularly over its course (nor, for that matter, is it obvious that one would become irrevocably bored with life if her character remained somewhat constant). Might the issue be an empirical one? Perhaps an indeterminably long longitudinal study is in order? No. For at any point in the course of such a study it could be surmised that fatal boredom might yet set in for all participants. Furthermore, even if boredom had set in among all participants it couldn't be known that the boredom wouldn't eventually dissipate, i.e. it couldn't be known to be fatal boredom. The best that can be done towards settling this issue is to provide principled reasons in favour of one view over the other.

Jeremy Wisnewski (2005) has, I believe, put his finger on the proposition which would have to be true for Williams' stance that an immortal life would inevitably enter a state of irrevocable boredom to be true. Williams' view, writes Wisnewski, "rests on the assumption that an infinite life takes place within a finite set of possible activities." (33) That is to say, for it to be the case that all of one's possible categorical desires would, given the space of eternity, run out, it would have to be the case that there is a finite set of possible categorical desires that could be had by one, and moreover that categorical desires do not inevitably refresh so that an object or project of some categorical desires can always be re-engaged with to one's satisfaction. But it is hard to believe that there is a finite set of "un-refreshing" categorical desires for each of us. Our desires are limited, if at all, we may safely say, by our preferences and the possibilities we are aware of to desire. Remove the supposition, as I earlier argued we can, that an immortal person's character (and preferences) must remain fixed and the premise that one can only generate so many such categorical desires falls by the wayside. That leaves the supposition that there is a ceiling on our categorical desires because how we may interact with materials, others, or our environments at large, is limited by the fixed nature of these things. However, neither does this supposition ring true. Why it doesn't has been succinctly stated by Chappell (2007):

the world is a big place, and the range of worthwhile possible projects and commitments that it might afford us seems—as a matter of common experience—to be indefinitely and incalculably large. So if there is a reason why [it is not "possible for us to have projects and commitments such that our participation in a

range of them could go on continuing to be rewarding forever” (37)]...that needs arguing. (37)

Roy Sorensen provides a stronger rebuttal:

A finite object can have infinitely many *relative* properties. The circumference of a wheel equals pi and pi is an irrational number. So it is possible to spin the wheel infinitely many times without the wheel ever repeating its exact orientation to another object...The lesson for [the contingent immortal]...is that she needs to keep up with her environment. She never exhausts her meaningful activities. She has important relational properties and so a potentially endless array of personal possibilities. (2006, 408)

It seems safe to conclude, then, that an immortal life wouldn't inevitably turn meaningless because boring. Consequently, as the conclusion of the proportionality argument entails, it may also be said that the proportion of meaninglessness in an immortal life would not eventually and necessarily surpass its proportion of meaningfulness.

4.4 Would an Immortal Life Be More Meaningful Than a Mortal Life?

Those who disagree with Williams tend to argue, as I have, that immortals wouldn't inevitably lose their wills to live—so far as the will to live is generated by categorical desires. Unlike me, however, many of those who hold views contrary to Williams emphasize that, on condition of sufficient quality of life, longer life is preferable to shorter life and *a fortiori* immortal life is preferable to mortal life. I have no complaint for authors who emphasize this point. I would add, however, that the

desirability of immortal life does not entail that immortal life is necessarily better or more meaningful (overall) than mortal life. Showing that this is so will be my aim in this section. To fulfill this purpose I'll assess, with an eye to determining if there are any points of friction between them, how the main argument for the desirability of ever more life fits alongside the proportionality argument.

The primary argument for the desirability of indefinitely longer life is a simple one which, paraphrasing Nagel (1970, 74), runs as follows: because life can be good and because more goods are better than fewer goods, more life is better than less. Now, since meaningfulness is a "good" that may attach to human life, we may infer that according to Nagel a longer life with more meaningfulness is better than a shorter life with less meaningfulness. And with this we have what appears to be a conclusion incompatible with the conclusion of the proportionality argument. What's more, Nagel is not alone in suggesting that our lives could and probably would be more meaningful for being longer. Chappell, for example, also believes that the finitude of our lives diminishes their meaning. "Whenever a good life is ended by death," writes Chappell, "there will always be broken strands, projects of meaning that are left unfulfilled. How much this fateful cutting of the threads will destroy the overall meaningfulness of the life depends on the importance of the threads that get cut." (2007, 34) But Nagel's and Chappell's views, though they may seem to be at odds with the conclusion of the proportionality argument are, in fact, not.

In one sense—the sense employed by Nagel and Chappell—our finitude does diminish the meaningfulness of our lives in that were it not for death we could go on to do more meaningful things. In another sense however—the sense in play in the

proportionality argument—our finitude does not detract from the meaningfulness of our lives since the meaningfulness of our lives is a function of the proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness in them, not merely the quantity of meaningfulness. These two senses of meaningfulness are not competing; the conception of *overall* meaningfulness put to work in the proportionality argument is not the only form of meaningfulness in life; indeed, for there to be overall meaningfulness there must be projects and activities that are meaningful in and of themselves. Only if Nagel and Chappell thought that how worthwhile a life is overall is due solely to its meaningful activities and rejected the proposition that the meaningless activities of a life also have a bearing on how worthwhile it is, would the conclusion of the proportionality argument clash with their views on the badness of death.

It would be quite inappropriate, though, to read this as implicit to either Nagel's (1970) or Chappell's (2007) positions. The inappropriateness of such an interpretation of Chappell is unequivocal in light of these remarks from him:

My point is not that an infinitely long life is better than a finitely long one simply because it contains more goods. For one thing I do not believe...that the value of any life is simply a function of the goods in that life; lives in my view are not just receptacles for value—they have value in themselves. For another, it isn't always true that 'More is better'. More of some goods can, familiarly, be less: wives, for instance. Rather, my argument is that from the viewpoint of the person living it, a good life means one where at any point some longstanding projects and commitments are continuing, others are coming to completion, others again are just beginning. When our lives are going well, we are carried forward into the

future on the crest of a variety of different narrative waves. *Eudaimonia*, according to me, just is this busy variety, this engagement in a happy mix of interesting and absorbing commitments. We cease to be eudaimones, people who are living well when our lives lose this structure. But the good life, because of its overlapping-thread structure, always continues to give us reasons to want its continuance: the good life is a narrative (or rather complex of narratives) that goes *on*. The logical pressure that I want to set up towards having reason to value immortality comes from this familiar feature of lived experience, not from any pressure to maximize or promote the good (whatever that might mean). (36)

Chappell's main point here is that the value of indefinitely longer life is relative to our desires to *do* or *experience* this or that. This too is why Nagel argues that more life is better than less. "It is *being* alive" says Nagel, and "*doing* certain things, having certain experiences that we consider good." (74)

As a moment's reflection should convince anyone, Nagel and Chappell are right. Our priority is to do and experience, not for posterity or the sake of building an overall meaningful life, but for the sake of doing and experiencing. What, it is instructive to ask, does this mean for the proportionality argument?

What is important to recognize is just this: the (conditional) desirability of ever more life and thus of longer life over shorter life does not amount to a justification of the claim that potentially infinitely long life is more meaningful (overall) than mortal life. The perspective from which we are likely to regard ever continuing life as superior to finite life is our ordinary every day perspective; it is the perspective from which we have

things to do, places to go, and people to see. The perspective of the proportionality argument is not this one. Rather, the perspective of the proportionality argument is an impersonal or objective one of the kind Nagel has been so concerned with (see Chapter Two). From this perspective my own life is something of an artifact and its properties can be qualified and quantified. Additionally, from this perspective it makes no difference to calculating the overall degree of meaningfulness of my life whether my life is ongoing or not. For a life to be worthwhile its proportion of meaningfulness must be greater than its proportion of meaninglessness. This is not, generally, something we are much concerned with in our day to day lives. As I mentioned, our priority is to do and experience, not to do and experience for the sake of racking up a larger quantity of meaningful doings and experiences over meaningless doings and experiences. Were this not the case we would desire to continue living only if we thought it probable that we would thereby increase the overall meaningfulness of our lives; and should we figure it more probable that we would thereby decrease the overall proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness in our lives, we would not desire to continue living. But that is absurd. We desire further life for being currently engaged in the business of living, for having projects, commitments, and bonds; it need not even cross our minds whether these things are meaningful.

The proportionality argument does not therefore push us to *not* desire Malthusian mortal life or immortal life over mortal life. The perspective of the proportionality argument from which overall meaningfulness is a greater good than ongoing meaningfulness has no authority over the perspective from which our conscious lives have forward momentum and whereby the continuation of life is a prerogative. Ought

one to desire and if possible achieve ever extended life? If neither that desire nor its achievement is properly seen as dangerous or evil—as I believe it certainly is not, what can be said against such a desire or its achievement? Nothing, I submit.

Do not mistake this for a retraction of the proportionality argument. It is no strike against the proportionality argument that it does not implore that we be indifferent between shorter or longer life. That would be a bizarre thing to fault any argument for. What the proportionality argument helps us realize is that we are not logically obliged, from the point of view of overall meaningfulness, to desire our lives to always continue. One can of course be rational in wanting to die (in cases of terminal degenerative illness for example), but that is not what I am getting at. My point is that one's lust for life, desire to go on, to do and see more, when one has quieted it—when one is prepared to relinquish life—one has not thereby necessarily adopted an attitude of sour grapes, one is not thereby necessarily deluding themselves into believing that death is not the denial of additional life (which were it not denied might be meaningful), rather one can shift her perspective or attitude from one of desire for more meaning to a retrospective one of gratitude for meaning had. Granted, there would little impetus to take on this perspective were it not for mortality, but it is not therefore a shame that the impetus of mortality obtains. Mortality is acceptable to a viewpoint that understands that the worth of life is not due to the sheer amount of meaningfulness in it but to the proportion of meaningfulness to meaninglessness in it. It is neither here nor there that this viewpoint can have a consoling role, for what it appreciates is no less true for that.

4.5 The Transhumanist Argument for Immortality

Before concluding I have one more task I'd like to complete. I want to inquire whether the burgeoning philosophy of transhumanism offers resistance to the proportionality argument. Transhumanism according to one of its founding figures, Max More,

is a class of philosophies that seek to guide us towards a posthuman condition.

Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural "afterlife".

Transhumanism differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies such as neuroscience and neuropharmacology, life extension, nanotechnology, artificial ultraintelligence, and space habitation, combined with a rational philosophy and value system. (1990)

I need not concern myself here with all of the aspects of transhumanism. For my purposes it is enough to focus on the principle form of transhumanism, which More calls extropian transhumanism (1990; 1998). What extropian transhumanism is can be comprehended from these three definitions (More, 1998):

1. Extropy—the extent of a system's intelligence, information, order, vitality, and capacity for improvement.
2. Extropians—those who seek to increase extropy.
3. Extropianism—the evolving transhumanist philosophy of extropy.

A big part of the extropian agenda is the elimination of aging and death. This is an agenda which, like all philosophical agendas, follows directly (one hopes) from the philosophy which issues it. My aim in this section is to link this agenda back to its philosophy and outline the principle transhumanist argument in favour of ever lengthening the (trans)human life span and to determine how this argument fits or not with the proportionality argument.

It is not difficult to find the Transhumanism's core argument for life extension and immortality. I will draw exclusively from "The Transhumanist FAQ" (2003). I choose this work because it was written by Nick Bostrom, a leading proponent of transhumanism and an accomplished academic philosopher with a long list of publications; more importantly Bostrom wrote the FAQ in collaboration with approximately 100 other persons with the express (and I take it achieved) intent to produce a widely grounded consensus account of rudimentary transhumanism.

Section 4.1 in 'The Transhumanist FAQ' answers the question "why do transhumanists want to live longer?" Here is the bulk of that section:

Have you ever been so happy that you felt like melting into tears? Has there been a moment in your life of such depth and sublimity that the rest of existence seemed like dull, gray slumber from which you had only just woken up?

It is so easy to forget how good things can be when they are at their best. But on those occasions when we do remember—whether it comes from the total fulfillment of being immersed in creative work or from the tender ecstasy of reciprocated love—then we realize just how valuable every single minute of

existence can be, when it is this good. And you might have thought to yourself, “It ought to be like this always. Why can’t this last forever?”

Well, maybe—just maybe—it could.

When transhumanists seek to extend human life, they are not trying to add a couple of extra years at a care home spent drooling at one’s shoes. The goal is more healthy, happy, productive years. Ideally, everybody should have the right to choose when and how to die—or not to die. Transhumanists want to live longer because they want to do, learn, and experience more; have more fun and spend more time with loved ones; continue to grow and mature beyond the paltry eight decades allotted to us by our evolutionary past; and in order to get to see for themselves what wonders the future might hold. (34)

As is evident from this excerpt, the transhumanist goal of ever longer life shares a point of emphasis with Nagel and Chappell. The value of life is in the living, claims the transhumanist, hence the transhumanist wants to live more—to do and experience more of those things that make human life valuable and meaningful. I have already said what this means for the proportionality argument. To re-cap: more life may certainly be desirable (when one’s current life and prospects are desirable, that is); but the normalcy of this desire does not oppose the proportionality argument. It is quite plausible, as I have argued, that ever more life holds no promise to make our lives more meaningful overall. The transhumanist position is importantly different from Nagel’s and Chappell’s, however, due to the mission to improve human life by enhancement of its

virtues.²⁰ Not only will longer life afford more goods in life, it will also afford, if all goes to plan, a good life that is better than is now possible. This inspires a claim that does seem at odds with the proportionality argument; in particular, that an unending life would be more worthwhile overall than finite life since the degree of worthwhileness achievable by transhumans would outstrip the degree of meaningfulness achievable by any human. The idea is that if one goes from being human to transhuman, one goes from being a being capable of creating and engaging in meaningful projects to being a being capable of creating and engaging in projects which are considerably more meaningful.

I have two comments on the preceding. First, my thesis is that immortal life is not inherently advantaged compared to mortal life with respect to overall meaningfulness; I need not oppose that idea that a *transhuman* immortal life would be better than mortal life in this regard. In other words, the imagined “benefits” of being transhuman (whatever that means) are not to be confused with the imagined “benefits” of living longer or eternally. To see this, note that one could be transhuman in all respects except for immortality; one could be mortal and transhuman. Second, it is anyway far from clear that transhuman beings would derive superior levels of meaning from their projects within life compared to human beings. I’ll illustrate with an example.

Imagine two scientists, both working on a problem—both have a goal in mind. In each case the goal is widely regarded as important and there is consensus among experts that attainment of the goal would require path-breaking advancements and extreme ingenuity. Suppose further that both scientists achieve their respective goals. Finally,

²⁰ See for example Max More’s “A Letter to Mother Nature.” (1999)

imagine that the two scientists are separated in time by hundreds of years of advancements. Say one scientist succeeds in 2011 in doing something that is child's play to the other scientist who succeeds in reaching her goal in 2764. What, if we stipulate that both of the scientist's achievements were highly regarded and meritorious for their respective times, is the more meaningful achievement? This question itself gives a sense of why it is not obvious that the lives of transhuman beings would include more and greater meaningfulness than the lives of human beings would. The latter scientist's knowledge and skill is surely greater than the former scientist's, yet does this mean her work and achievement is more meaningful? Quite arguably it does not.

Furthermore, against the contention that an exceedingly long life that carries on indefinitely into a transhumanist future would inevitably be more meaningful overall than a mortal life of radically shorter duration, stands the belief that, from the subjective side of things, meaningfulness for humans and transhumans cannot be weighed on the same scale. Thinking that transhumanist life, as it would be like from the inside, is more meaningful than mortal human life as it is from the inside, is like thinking that the good life for some non-human animal—say a dog or a whale, because it is not as “high” or “refined” as the good life for humans, must be very less rewarding from the perspective of the dog or whale, than the human good life is rewarding from the human perspective. One is better off comparing apples and oranges.

4.6 Conclusion

In closing I will review the central conclusions of this and the preceding chapters. Four main conclusions were reached in the present chapter. First, Mikel Burley is wrong

to believe that philosophical thinking on immortality is akin to blind speculation. There are, in fact, no principled reasons to believe that what effects exceedingly long life would have on human beings are largely unforeseeable and that therefore competent speculation about immortal life is impossible. Second, because constancy of character is not likely necessary for continuity of personhood, we should not suppose, like Bernard Williams, that radically long life or immortality would necessarily stretch and break the conditions for continuity of personhood over time. Third, radically long life or immortal life is neither guaranteed to become more meaningful nor more meaningless overall than shorter mortal life. Time and sufficiently rich and dynamic surroundings are enough to provide one with unlimited possibilities for action and development; hence, an immortal's life would not inevitably become irrecoverably tedious and undesirable. As for meaningfulness in Malthusian or immortal life, it is not certain to exceed the proportion of meaninglessness anymore than the proportion of meaningfulness in a comparatively brief mortal life is certain to exceed the proportion of meaninglessness in it. Longevity alone cannot ensure more and more meaningfulness in life and less and less meaninglessness. Fourth, transhumanist philosophy does not contradict the preceding. Any advantage a transhumanist life might hold over a mortal human life with regards to overall meaningfulness wouldn't result solely from its greater or infinite length.

For these reasons, together with the demonstrated (in Chapter Two) inadequacy of both transcendentalism and nihilism in comparison to immanentism, and the consistency (exhibited in Chapter Three) of the proportionality argument with three prominent immanentist theories—Schlick's, Fienberg's, and Wolf's—I propose that the reader

accept (at least tentatively) the conclusion of the proportionality argument: *ceteris paribus*, immortal life is not more meaningful overall than mortal life.

Should the reader take my suggestion he or she may yet question the importance of the proportionality argument. The observation, made earlier in section 4.4 of this chapter, that, for the most part, persons are more concerned with continuing life and making it meaningful than they are concerned with the overall meaningfulness of their lives, could fuel such doubt. Focusing on the overall meaningfulness of life, one might argue, is valuable only as a coping strategy in the face of looming death. The idea is that taking a retrospective and evaluative view—seeing one's own life as a complete narrative—is part of letting go of life. I think this idea is right, but even so, the conclusion of the proportionality argument is not irrelevant. Indeed, the proportionality argument can be but a small solace for those of us who live always, or nearly always, with the expectation of a future. But for those whose age and/or health dislodges the expectation of further life, for those who look backward on life in gratitude because they would be foolish to look forward with hope, the proportionality argument is relevant. For very many of us then, if the proportionality argument does not yet seem relevant, it is perhaps only a matter of time before it does.

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