

# Deep Personal Meaning

## A Subjective Approach to Meaning in Life

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### Abstract

Much has been written about what makes life in general or individual lives meaningful. Yet meaning judgments are aimed not only at lives, but also at things in life. Here I explore what elicits the judgment that things in life are personally meaningful, “things” such as people, relationships, memories, items, places, events, etc. On my account of personal meaning judgments, what makes something personally meaningful is that it provides a sense of connection for the one making the judgment. I begin by further exploring what is meant by “connection” and then show that, once we make room for personal meaning judgments in our theory of meaning in life, we can set up a new critical perspective on prior theories, such as those by Susan Wolf and Thaddeus Metz. Unfortunately, prior theories fail to guide us toward the important kind of meaning that we gain from personally meaningful things.

### 1. Introduction

When I say that my relationship with my parents is very meaningful to me, what do I mean? Or if I say a particular memory is very meaningful to me, or a place or an item or an activity or a vocation, what more can be said about such personal meaning judgments? If we want to better understand what makes *life* meaningful, this is an important question, because a meaningful life is presumably one that is filled with *things* that are meaningful. Here I provide an analysis for the judgment that something is deeply personally meaningful, or very meaningful to me. This analysis points to a kind of subjective state that can be described as a “sense of connection.” In a nutshell, the idea is that, when someone judges something to be deeply personally meaningful, it’s because the meaningful thing is thought to provide a sense of connection. I’ll begin by exploring this concept of connection more fully (section 2).

I also want to show that some recent accounts for what makes *life* meaningful don’t really illuminate the deep personal meaningfulness of *things in life*, and some accounts ignore it entirely.<sup>1</sup> I think this is problematic, because deep

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<sup>1</sup> I will be focusing on theories provided by Paul Edwards, Richard Taylor, Susan Wolf, Thaddeus

personal meaning – a subjective experience of connection – is a big part of what we want out of meaning in life (section 3). In the way that I talk about meaning in life here, I’m emphasizing the subjective, yet in the present philosophical debate over the nature of a meaningful life, there is controversy over whether meaning in life is subjective or objective. My account of deep personal meaning judgments affirms a subjective leaning in this debate by placing prime importance on the subjective state of connection. I hope to calm the worries of those resistant to subjectivism, however, by indicating how a judgment’s being subjective does not mean that “anything goes,” or that something is meaningful just because someone believes that it is. I will clarify this by pointing to ways in which judgments of deep personal meaning can be flawed (section 4).

## 2. Connection and Meaning

I’m tracking a particular kind of meaning judgment. The kind in question is not primarily a judgment about whether *life* is meaningful, but about whether *things in life* are meaningful, “things” such as people, relationships, memories, items, places, events, etc. Among meaning judgments of things in life, there can be both personal and impersonal meaning judgments, and it is the personal ones with which I am most interested here.

I will get to the main topic of personally meaningful things shortly, but to see how something can be meaningful without being personally meaningful, consider the example of a call to pass meaningful legislation. Legislation would be considered *meaningless* if it does not have the sort of positive effects it should have, and especially if it makes the sort of situation it’s supposed to solve even worse, in which case we might even go so far as to say that such legislation is absurd. But if it has the relevant positive effects, legislation can be deemed meaningful even if no one has any personal attachment to it. This could be called a detached, impersonal meaning judgment. Then again, it could also be that someone does have a personal attachment to a piece of legislation, such as the legislators who work hardest on writing and passing the bill, in which case the legislation could be personally meaningful to those legislators. My suggestion is that something can become personally meaningful as someone develops an

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Metz, and others. To clarify, making meaning judgments about things in life is distinct from making meaning judgments about parts, segments or time slices of a life, which still falls within the tradition of making judgments about a life.

attachment to it. When an attachment is judged personally meaningful, this is because it is thought to enable a sense of connection for the person in question.<sup>2</sup>

But what is this subjective state of connection? Connectedness gets talked about quite a lot in everyday life as something positively valuable but rarely is an analysis attempted, which might be owing to some inherent difficulties in doing so. I'll provide a sketch of an account of what a psychological sense of connectedness consists in. But to rope out the territory, it's helpful to first indicate what can count as its opposite, that is, a state of disconnection. My strategy here is to get at what "connection" means somewhat indirectly, because the concept of connection appears to be irreducibly metaphorical. I think that we have to live with this, because there also does not appear to be a good replacement concept that could improve upon the illuminatory power of the concept of connection.

So let's first explore connection's opposite. When we are feeling disconnected, we may report feeling alienated, ungrounded, disoriented, empty, fake, bored, depressed or unenthused. We probably could not come to appreciate the positive value of a feeling of connection if we did not have these experiences of its loss. In some way or another, each of these states of disconnection involves an unpleasant or unsettling awareness of oneself in relation to one's situation. These are the sorts of states inspiring Albert Camus' observation that the "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (6), a feeling which lurks within a subjective state of meaninglessness, or disconnection.<sup>3</sup> On the idea that there is no real escape from absurdity in modern life, Camus championed the absurd hero (120-123) who can maintain an ability to live entirely within a state of disconnection. But I think it's a rare individual who is truly permanently stuck in this state. We develop attachments along life's way and are typically able to maintain some sense of meaning in life by relation to these attachments that give us a sense of connection.

What more can be said about this experience of connection? Again, metaphor is clearly at work here, because physical connections don't by themselves produce

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<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the paper (section 4.2), I'll be clarifying that one can be wrong in judging how well something provides a sense of connection. For this reason, although personal meaning depends on the domain of attachments, just because someone is attached to something doesn't guarantee that it provides a sense of connection. For those interested, philosophical analysis of the concept of attachment has recently been pursued by Monique Wonderly (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Camus himself mainly spoke of the concept of meaning as a transcendent thing, such as a cosmic purpose, imagining that an absurd life could be lived without transcendent meaning. In contrast with Camus, I'm focused on meaning as a subjective experience which can be retrieved through an experience of connection, regardless of the transcendent state of affairs.

personal connectedness, although the physical can help to enable the personal. For instance, digital and telephonic communication systems can help to bring people together when distance would otherwise lead us to feel disconnected both physically and socially.<sup>4</sup> But it's not as if close physical proximity guarantees a sense of connection – one can feel very alone in a crowded room. Also, for those inclined to believe that a kind of spiritual energy is responsible for helping us to feel connected to other people or to nature or to God, even spiritual contact *per se* does not guarantee a sense of connection. If there is such a thing as demonic possession, this would involve spiritual contact, but the very opposite of a sense of connection, so something more than spiritual contact is needed to explain the positive psychological state of connectedness.

In further exploring the metaphor of connection, we find that there is commonly talk of three types of connection: connection to the world, connection to others, and connection to self. Within the human psyche, I think these three depend upon each other to a great extent, the first two involving a connection to something beyond oneself and the last to something within, so to speak. Since connection implies linkages between things, it might seem that a sense of connectedness has everything to do with external relatedness to others and the world, but I believe the internal relation is at least equally important. I think that the external relatedness connoted by the word “connection” derives from the very strong need to be in contact with the world and others, and to feel some sense of belonging and a role to play, but this role must also feel right internally in order for the external relation to feel like connection. One difficulty with an analysis of the concept of connection is that it relies more on an internal relation than it may at first seem. A sense of connection is experienced as a return to the world and a return to others, and certain external conditions must be in place for this to be possible, but there is a very important internal condition that must be met as well – a return to self.<sup>5</sup>

A sense of connection is deeply important for an experience of meaning in life. To have meaning in life is to be able to make sense of living as a welcome task,

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<sup>4</sup> However, later in the paper (section 4.2), I discuss how social media can also lead to disconnection.

<sup>5</sup> It's tempting to try to carve out a more precise account of what it means to be connected to self, but I'm not sure how well we can satisfy that ambition, and I won't be pursuing it here. I don't think we should imagine that there is a definite entity describable as the “self,” to and from which we can literally be connected and disconnected. Also, the constitution of one's sense of self may depend on various attachments to external things rather than existing entirely prior to them. I thank James Andrew Whitaker for pressing this last point.

one that we are faced with performing day in and day out. Without a sense of connection, we experience self as out of joint with others and the world, so that it's tougher to make sense of what one should be doing and to feel motivated to do it. When one has a sense of connection, things come into alignment and life flows. With a sense of connection, life's meaningfulness is manifest, our minds guided by meaning rather than grasping for it, so that the question of meaning may not even arise. But then, at times, we experience loss of meaning because of disconnection, which can inspire reflection on what is truly meaningful in life. When, within such reflection, we stop to explicitly judge something meaningful – e.g., “my family is so meaningful to me” – we're first of all appreciating that life is not always experienced as meaningful, that there is a threat of meaninglessness, of being lost, empty, or alone. We are also acknowledging that what we're judging meaningful has the power to restore or maintain an experience of meaning as connection. Meaningful things enable me to be in touch with the world and others and to be in touch with myself, providing me a deep sense of belonging, so that living a life makes sense. Once we identify meaningful things, we gravitate toward them, because they provide us grounding and orientation and the promise of wholeness, all of which is captured in the idea of connection.

Many different kinds of things can be judged meaningful in this way, and for a complex variety of reasons. *Close relationships* are commonly judged meaningful. A close relationship provides not only someone you can rely on, but also someone who understands you to a great extent, while also providing all of the psychological and physical comforts that come with human interaction and solidarity. You likely also have certain meaningful *places* that resonate with you very strongly, bringing out your deepest sense of self, either because of certain features of that environment, or because it is a place with which you have a history. Certain *memories* can also be very meaningful, because they are memories of a time when you felt connected, memories that are meaningful now because they remind you of what connection is like. Meaningful memories help you through difficult times as a reminder that life can be deeply meaningful, and memories can also serve as a bridge between the present and the past, bringing connection between you now and your life so far. Often, meaningful *items* kept around the home or worn on your person are reminders of meaningful times in your life, or else are reminders of who you are when you feel most like yourself. Also, various repeated *events* can be meaningful, like New Year's or your birthday, or attending church weekly, or a monthly book group, because of the way these events bring

people together to acknowledge special things, while also establishing a cyclical rhythm in our experience of time.

This is just a small sampling of the myriad things that we can find deeply personally meaningful for the various ways in which they enable a sense of connection. In my experience, occasions for explicitly and verbally expressing the judgment that something is personally meaningful are relatively rare, reserved for those times when one is in a special reflective state about the deeper things in life, and feeling a need to express gratitude or just to recognize what is most deeply valuable.<sup>6</sup> But I believe the connection analysis accounts for a capacity for personal meaning judgments that is at work even if we don't stop to explicitly describe something as personally meaningful. Whenever it is the case that we are moving toward or away from something, or opting for one thing over another thing, for reasons of personal meaning, we are navigating life based upon what does and doesn't provide a sense of connection. If I'm facing a choice between two different jobs, where one pays more, but the other seems more personally meaningful, these separate reasons can influence my decision-making, even if I never explicitly use the word "meaningful." The reason why the one job possibility has the quality of being more personally meaningful is because it enables a greater sense of connection than the other job possibility.

A central explanatory point I'm wanting to get across here is that, when we judge things personally meaningful, it is because we believe that they help to bring us out of a state of disconnection or to maintain a sense of connection. This is different from impersonal meaning judgments, which track a kind of value which does not depend so much on personal attachment. For this reason, judgments of impersonal meaning can attract more social consensus. For instance, legislation can be meaningful just for having certain positive effects even if no one is personally attached to the legislation – many can see that such legislation is meaningful from a relatively detached, objective standpoint.

In the discussion that follows, more will be said to help clarify what connection and personal meaning are, and how personal and impersonal meaning differ. This will come out as I pursue a critique of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century theories of meaning in life. I'll be arguing that prior subjectivist, objectivist and hybrid theories fail to illuminate the true nature of personal meaning judgments, and for that reason they fail to provide us sufficient guidance in our search for

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<sup>6</sup> Iddo Landau calls this practice "recognizing" and notes that pausing to explicitly recognize meaningful things in one's life can also improve one's experience of meaning in life. (2017, 232)

meaning in life.

### 3. Theories of Meaning in Life

Recent theories of meaning in life can be broadly categorized as subjectivist, objectivist or hybrid theories. A subjectivist theory is one that declares a life meaningful if (and only if) the one living the life is in a particular subjective state. Richard Taylor's theory has become the paradigm example of such a theory. Following the lead of Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus," Taylor considers the case of the mythical Sisyphus, who is condemned to roll a boulder up a hill eternally. Each time Sisyphus reaches the top, the boulder rolls back down to the bottom, so that Sisyphus must roll it back up again, an endlessly repetitive task which leads to no valuable result. Taylor suggests that, really, all of life is like this, the life of humans and other animals, so that in the grand scheme of things life is objectively meaningless, since life is just endless repetition and pointlessness. (128-133) But Taylor argues that life can still be meaningful, at least subjectively, if one desires to do what one is doing. He imagines Sisyphus being given a drug that fills him with the desire to roll a boulder up a hill. In this case, Taylor concludes, Sisyphus' life is meaningful, because meaning comes from within. (130-131, 135-136) Taylor's theory is subjectivist because whether a life is meaningful or not is said to depend on someone's being in a particular kind of subjective state, in this case a state of desire, will or interest.<sup>7</sup>

Many theorists find it unintuitive to say that Sisyphus' life could be meaningful just because he desires to do what he's doing, that is, if what Sisyphus desires to do is so worthless as rolling a boulder up a hill just to let it fall back down over and over again. For a hybrid theorist, like Susan Wolf, it's not enough to be in the right kind of subjective state. The individual in question must also be engaged in activities that are worthwhile. (2010, 34-35) Wolf's is a hybrid theory because she requires that a life satisfy both a subjective and an objective condition in order for it to be considered meaningful. For Wolf, the subjective condition that must be met is a state of active engagement and the objective condition is that the activity in which one is engaged must be worthwhile. Sisyphus' life fails to be meaningful for failing the objective condition; but the alienated housewife, whose

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<sup>7</sup> In a later paper, Taylor (1987) abandons subjectivism for the view that only geniuses have meaningful lives, which would be a version of what I call "externalism," a kind of theory of life meaning that I am also critiquing below (section 3.1).

activities are worthwhile, but who cannot bring herself to be actively engaged with them, also fails to lead a meaningful life, for failing the subjective condition. (1997, 211; 2010, 21) In contrast with a hybrid theorist, an objectivist, like Thaddeus Metz, denies the need to meet a subjective condition at all, pointing only to the objective one. Metz concludes that, even if Mother Teresa does not enjoy or is not actively engaged in helping all those people who were under her care, her life would still be meaningful just for meeting the objective condition of performing worthwhile activities. (183-184)

An objectivist and a hybrid theorist share the intuition that a person's state of mind can't decide whether that person's life is meaningful or not, and for this reason both types of theories could be called "externalist," for quick reference. For an externalist, to be meaningful, a life must be oriented toward something that is truly valuable. Meaning is not just a kind of feeling or experience that one has. This view can seem rather harsh because it undermines the authority of the person living a life to decide what counts as meaningful for that person. Externalism can also lead to the conclusion that a given life is meaningless even if the subject experiences it as meaningful. But this kind of view that privileges an external standpoint over an internal standpoint isn't entirely unwarranted. We commonly have the experience of diving into activities that we feel to be meaningful at the time, like long hours spent playing video games on the couch, but then come to think differently of the time spent in retrospect. We can end up regretfully viewing some of our past engagements as pointless and the time spent on them as wasted. (Wolf, 2010, 44) When one adopts this sort of attitude towards one's past activities, one assumes an external standpoint on one's own life, judging one's own pursuits against a higher, or at least a different, standard. This is undoubtedly one kind of meaning judgment we can make, an impersonal kind. In what follows, I want to point out how different kinds of meaning judgments – personal and impersonal – can come into conflict, and also indicate why we shouldn't always favor the impersonal kind that's prioritized by the externalist.

### **3.1 Critique of Externalist Theories**

External meaning judgments track what is regularly referred to by externalists as "objective value." I am not denying that objective value exists in some sense. Even if there is not such a thing as a value that exists apart from the minds of

subjects who judge value,<sup>8</sup> there are certainly some things which are objectively more valuable than others in the sense of being more universally recognized to have value, or in the sense of serving the interests of more rather than fewer people, or something along these lines. I accept, for instance, that some books and movies are better than others, that some meals are better prepared than others, and that some courses of action are better than others, based on some form of objective normative reasoning. The view I reject is that objective value (in the sense intended by externalists<sup>9</sup>) is a necessary condition for meaning. I think this is one direction that our capacity for meaning judgments can go, along the rails of objective value, which would be the basis for an *impersonal* meaning judgment. But a *personal* meaning judgment goes in another direction. I'm suggesting that a sense of connection, as a kind of subjective value not captured by the externalist's objective value, guides such personal meaning judgments.

Unfortunately, externalist theories potentially obscure or distract us away from the sort of meaning that personal meaning judgments track. This is because the lives that are identified as sufficiently valuable to count as meaningful from an external standpoint aren't guaranteed to provide the person who is living the life with a sense of connection. Having one kind of meaning (an external kind<sup>10</sup>) does not guarantee the other kind of meaning (an internal kind). The sort of meaning that personal meaning judgments track is meaning that we subjectively experience. When we say of something that it is personally meaningful, this is what we're reporting, that this meaningful thing provides an experience of meaning. One's having an experience of meaning may not make one's life meaningful in the eyes of a detached observer adopting an external standpoint on one's life. But then, what would motivate us to care about the view from that external standpoint if we get no insight from it about how to establish a sense of connection so that we experience life as meaningful? A meaning judgment that doesn't lead me to an experience of meaning would seem to be profoundly unhelpful.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. L. Mackie classically and compellingly questions the existence of objective value in this mind-independent sense (1977, Ch. 1.6).

<sup>9</sup> At the end of the paper, I'll be pointing out an important ambiguity in what it means to be objective, so that even so-called "subjectivists" can be understood to be concerned about objectivity.

<sup>10</sup> James Tartaglia (2016) has classified what I'm calling externalist theories like Wolf's and Metz's as theories of "social meaning" (12-17; esp. 17), which he says suffer from issues of arbitrariness. The problem is that they are arbitrary with respect to whatever is considered valuable within one's culture or sub-culture, a problem worth mentioning.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, that something is commonly valued can serve as evidence that one could find it

It may be thought that Wolf's hybrid theory has already identified the two kinds of meaning judgment that I am distinguishing here. Again, she says that for a life to be meaningful, it must satisfy both a subjective and an objective condition, which may seem to line up with a distinction between personal and impersonal meaning judgments. But, while a hybrid theorist is right to set apart different aspects of meaning, I have two more complaints about Wolf's approach, in addition to the complaint about her externalism, all of which, taken together, strongly recommend against using her approach as a helpful guide for finding meaning in life. The first is that what she identifies as the subjective condition – active engagement – does not fully illuminate what personal meaning judgments track. Instead, the active engagement analysis fits into a problematic goal orientation paradigm, which unfortunately is common among those theorists identifying a subjective condition for meaning in life, as I will explain (section 3.2). The second complaint is that Wolf's approach to analyzing meaning judgments is to account for what makes *life* or *a life* meaningful, which is also a dominant and largely unquestioned approach in today's philosophy of meaning in life. But I suggest that aiming a meaning judgment at life in general or at particular lives distracts us away from a more clear-eyed pursuit of meaning in life guided by personal meaning judgments of *things in life*, which I take to be the more natural target of meaning judgments (section 3.3). I will now consider these two additional complaints in turn.

### 3.2 Critique of Subjectivist Theories

The problem with objectivist theories of meaning is that they ignore subjective states as a rule. As for subjectivist theories and hybrid theories involving a subjective component, the problem with the proposals available so far is that they don't present the right kind of meaning-giving subjective state. Taylor suggests desire, Wolf suggests active engagement, and Paul Edwards before them suggests that, for a life to have meaning, there must be a special zest in relation to goals (118-119).<sup>12</sup> The shared character of all of these proposals is that they are goal-oriented theories of meaning in life.<sup>13</sup> But, while orientation toward a goal is

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personally meaningful, and the fact that what one is doing is valued by many could contribute to its personal meaning, but this still does not make personal and impersonal meaning the same thing.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards calls this "terrestrial" meaning, as distinct from cosmic meaning. I will return to this issue of levels of meaning in section 3.3.

<sup>13</sup> A notable exception to goal-oriented theories of meaning is Moritz Schlick's "play" theory, which is

undeniably part of a life experienced as meaningful, a sense of connection is still more deeply responsible for the experience of meaning, and this sense of connection can be present even without goal orientation. Recall the various kinds of things in life we find meaningful because they bring us connection: relationships, places, memories, items, events, etc. Meaningful things make life meaningful by providing an experience of meaning, but in many cases it doesn't seem that this meaningfulness comes about by achieving or pursuing goals, or even by an active state of doing something, as suggested by Wolf's "active engagement." I suppose that relationships can be a project or activity in some sense, as Wolf suggests (2010, 36-37), but the active, goal-oriented character of projects or activities isn't really what makes close relationships meaningful to us. It is more fundamentally that being in a relationship with this person (or even animal) provides me a sense of identity and belonging, and enables interaction and social, creaturely contact. That is, close relationships provide us with a sense of connection.

It's understandable that theorists would think that goal orientation is the definitive character of meaning in life, because when we experience problems for meaning, we don't know quite what to do with ourselves. If I'm feeling disoriented, alienated, empty, fake or bored, it's natural to feel a need for better direction. So it can seem that the central answer to the problem of meaning is to have something to do with oneself, to have a goal, perhaps even an objectively valuable one, and to be thoroughly interested in going after it. Also, much of waking human life consists in having and pursuing goals and we certainly experience much of our meaning as connection within goal orientation. But I think there is a deeper layer of meaningfulness in which the meaning of action is rooted, which consists in having a sense of connection.<sup>14</sup> Again, much meaning is derived from just *being* in particular ways rather than doing. Since this is the case, if a theory focuses too much on doing as a method of deriving meaning, such a theory may well be leading us away from meaning and toward disconnection. If, in a state of disconnection, I am advised to put more effort into doing, but without

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explicitly opposed to the idea that goals provide meaning (58). While Schlick's theory provides a refreshing critical stance, I believe that connection is more fundamental than play in establishing personal meaning and meaning in life.

<sup>14</sup> At the risk of psychoanalyzing theorists, it is possible that some theorists so rarely experience deep disconnection that they are unaware of the important foundational role that connection plays in sustaining meaning in life, which would help to explain why their analysis stops at identifying some kind of goal orientation.

any insight into how this will reestablish connection, the disconnection may end up being made even worse.

### 3.3 Critique of Life-Targeting Theories

Meaning judgments can be applied to life itself or to individual lives, but I think that the kind of meaning judgment it is most important to get clear on is the kind applied to things in life. The grand question of whether life itself is meaningful is gripping, yet elusive, for the philosophical imagination. On the one hand, it seems to be a question of whether there is some plan, point or purpose for all of life or reality (an “objective” kind of question), but on the other hand, it seems to be a question of whether life is worth living (a “subjective” kind of question).<sup>15</sup> I think many agree that life can be worth living even if there is no objective plan, point or purpose, and when we are pressed to say why life is worth living, it is natural to identify meaningful things in life, like close relationships. In this way, the confusing question of the meaning of life quickly circles around to the more tractable question of what the meaningful things in life are, even if we never resolve the question whether life itself has an objective meaning. I think that one reason why the question of the meaning of life gets overtaken by the question of meaningful things is because the category of *things in life* is a more natural target for meaning judgments than the category of *life*.

Edwards distinguishes between the grand *cosmic* question of life’s meaning and the more everyday *terrestrial* question of whether an individual’s particular life is meaningful. Edwards argues that the answer to the terrestrial question does not depend on the cosmic one. (118-120) Assuming that life has meaning in the cosmic sense, an individual’s life could still fail to have meaning if, following Edwards’ theory of terrestrial meaning, the person living the life does not have sufficient zest in relation to goals. Likewise, one could have zest in relation to goals even if life fails to have meaning in the cosmic sense. Regardless of whether we agree with the accounts proposed by Edwards, Wolf, or Metz, or with some other account of what makes a particular life meaningful, I think that it is right that the *cosmic meaning of life in general* and the *terrestrial meaning of particular*

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<sup>15</sup> Complicating things, each level of meaning judgment – targeting *life in general*, *individual lives*, or *things in life* – appears to come with its own way of distinguishing the subjective and the objective. I’ll say more about the subjective and objective in relation to personal meaning judgments of things in life in section 4.

*lives* can be judged separately, but this is only because meaning judgments work in different ways in relation to these two different targets. Asking whether life in general is meaningful and asking whether a given person's life is meaningful are really two different questions that are only loosely related.

In recent decades, the question of judging the meaning of particular lives has taken center stage, and externalist leanings on this question have become dominant in philosophy, but unfortunately, this has been at the expense of our understanding of judgments of personal meaning. Externalist theories of meaning in life tend to favor impersonal meaning judgments, so that lives are judged meaningful based more on what a person achieves than on what attachments a person experiences. I think this is a result of the externalist's tendency to emphasize the idea of life as a biography as viewed from a third person point of view. It is within this framework that we are most inclined to think of meaning in terms of publicly observable achievement or attainment, and this is also certainly one way for a life to have meaning, a more impersonal way. But if we want our theory of meaning to guide us toward an *experience* of meaning as we are living it, then I think we need to break free of the third-personal biographical framework. A first-personal search for meaning in life would be less concerned with biography and more concerned with something like choreography, or a day-to-day dance with life, much of which would not make it into an autobiography or obituary. An experience of meaning in life is grounded less in the construction of a life story and more so in one's set of attachments to meaningful things that provide a sense of connection.<sup>16</sup>

I think that this phrase "meaning in life" best applies to the experience of meaning we can have owing to a sense of connection enabled by various kinds of attachments. If we want meaning in life, then the kind of meaning judgment that it's most important to illuminate is our *personal* meaning judgments of *things in life* rather than our *impersonal* meaning judgments of *individual lives*.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> We certainly do become attached to ideas of ourselves, so that we feel more connected when we can see ourselves fulfilling one storyline rather than another. In fact, I think this helps to account for our great interest in narrative when we're judging the meaning of lives. But I still want to emphasize the difference between *internally* assessing how these storylines affect our experience of meaning in life and *externally* assessing how choice-worthy a life seems to be because of its storyline.

<sup>17</sup> Another problem is that judging individual lives meaningful and meaningless carries with it an implication about the inherent value of those lives. To make the statement that someone's life is meaningless seems to imply that this life doesn't or shouldn't matter to anyone. Externalist theorists surely don't intend this implication, but I think it is a symptom of the awkwardness of aiming meaning judgments at lives, because meaning judgments are ultimately about whether something matters.

externalist will likely have a nagging worry about this that I would like to address in what follows. The worry is that, if we're being guided toward a meaningful life by subjective judgments about what enables an experience of meaning while bracketing an external standpoint, does that mean that it's impossible to be wrong about what is meaningful? Don't we need to stay in touch with an external standpoint in order to put a check on wayward subjective judgments? My response is that our judgments about what is deeply personally meaningful can in fact be flawed, and also that such flaws can be addressed through greater objectivity. But the relevant kind of objectivity does not ignore the internal standpoint, but must instead keep one eye on one's internal experience of connection in order to decide whether things judged meaningful are actually providing the degree of connection they are thought to provide.

#### 4. Flawed Meaning Judgments

To say that meaning in life is based upon a subjective state is not the same as saying that the subject decides what is meaningful by making a meaning judgment, although these two kinds of subjectivism can be easily conflated. Taylor represents the first but not the second kind of subjectivism. He says that Sisyphus' life is meaningful if Sisyphus desires to do what he is doing. Now, if Sisyphus himself were to learn of Taylor's theory and disagree with it, Taylor would have to conclude that Sisyphus is wrong about his own life. That is, imagine that Sisyphus does indeed desire rolling a boulder up a hill continually forever, but also imagine that Sisyphus does *not* think that desiring to do this makes his life meaningful. A subjectivist of the sort who leaves it up to the subject to decide would have to conclude that desiring to roll boulders up a hill does *not* make Sisyphus' life meaningful, simply because Sisyphus does not think it does. But this conflicts with Taylor's subjectivist theory, so Taylor must be a subjectivist of a different sort.

To keep the two kinds of subjectivism distinct, we could call Taylor's theory a *subjective state* theory and the other a *subjective authority* theory.<sup>18</sup> When I say

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<sup>18</sup> At the same conference that I presented ideas from this paper, Landau presented a paper (forthcoming) bringing attention to a similar distinction using different terminology, more broadly distinguishing between subjectivism/objectivism and internalism/externalism binaries. Landau helpfully points out how the conflation of subjectivism (what I call "subjective authority" theory) and objective internalism (what I call "subjective state" theory) shows up in the work of numerous theorists. However, it should be noted that Landau uses the term "externalism" in a different (though

that we find things meaningful because they enable a sense of connection, this is also a subjective state rather than a subjective authority theory. In some sense, we may decide what we become attached to in life, but that is not the same as saying that we decide whether our attachments give us an experience of meaning in life.<sup>19</sup>

But, as far as subjective states go, I've presented my view that a sense of connection is a better explanation for our experience of meaning than desire, and in fact, treating as meaningful everything you could possibly desire would lead to flawed meaning judgments. As I noted earlier (section 3.2), it's understandable that we might look to a state of desire as the kind of subjective state that gives life meaning, because desire puts us in pursuit of something. As long as we're in pursuit of something, our life is filled with mission, as Taylor puts it (130), so we aren't as liable to wonder what we should be doing, because we are already up to something. But then we also have experiences of empty desires, that is, desires that leave us feeling empty while we pursue or even acquire what we desire. In that case, the problem with the desire is that it doesn't really lead us to a sense of connection, which would involve overcoming states of disconnection like emptiness.

So, judgments based on desire can be flawed with respect to personal meaning if the desire in question doesn't enable a sense of connection. When it comes to experiencing meaning, I think this is the central flaw to be avoided, because personal meaning is the kind of meaning that we experience. Externalist critics of desire theory have identified other flaws as well, but another critique I'd like to make of externalists is that the flaws with desire theory that they identify are not flaws with respect to personal meaning *per se*. To see what I mean and why it's important, let's consider Wolf's view that a desire to engage in either trivial or immoral activities cannot contribute meaning to life.

#### **4.1 Of Trivial and Immoral Activities**

According to Wolf, trivial activities, like counting blades of grass or doing crossword puzzles, fail to be activities important enough to meet the threshold of sufficient value that her hybrid theory requires. (1997, 207; 2010, 18-23) Immoral

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certainly well-motivated) way, and that he also pursues the life-targeting theoretical approach to meaning in life that I critiqued in the previous section (3.3). I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing the publication to my attention.

<sup>19</sup> Also, not all attachments are equally conducive to an experience of connection, a point to which I will return in section 4.2.

activities, like murder or pedophilia (2010, 60), also fail the objective value test (and may even represent negative value<sup>20</sup>), so desire theory fails as a theory of meaning in life, since, according to desire theory, desire to do anything whatsoever can make life meaningful. If an activity is undoubtedly trivial or immoral (though I think it is harder to agree on cases of trivial activity, as I will explain), then it makes sense to identify a flaw in the judgment that a trivial or immoral activity is objectively valuable. However, this isn't the same as showing that the judgments are flawed *with respect to personal meaning*, that is, the kind of meaning that we experience. Rather, such judgments are flawed with respect to certain kinds of value or importance that serve as the building blocks for impersonal meaning. Personal meaning, by contrast, consists entirely in the value of a subjective state of connection, and I would suggest that meaning is more clearly its *own* value in the context of the experience of personal meaning.

To put it another way, an externalist theory of meaning like Wolf's, which asserts an objective value requirement, is actually trading in other kinds of value and obscuring the special value of personal meaning in the process. If so, this leaves open the possibility that, while a judgment that trivial or immoral activities are meaningful may be flawed with respect to other values, such a judgment actually may still not be flawed with respect to personal meaning. The connection account for what makes something personally meaningful can help to clarify things in this regard, which is what I will pursue next. I will conclude that it's difficult to identify a category of trivial activities that always fails with respect to personal meaning, though there might be some foundation for the common view that immoral activities fail in this way.

When it comes to trivial activities, it seems rather clear that many of the activities that show up on an externalist's list of trivia can actually be very meaningful if meaningfulness is understood as something's capacity to enable a sense of connection. For example, crossword puzzles can help us to focus our attention and regain orientation in the midst of an otherwise complex and confusing day. Wolf says<sup>21</sup> that aerobics are a trivial activity that can't make life meaningful, but physical exercises and mindfulness practices can bring us back to ourselves and encourage a sense of clarity and balance. Wolf says that eating chocolate can't make life meaningful, but tasty treats like chocolate or pie, if

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<sup>20</sup> At least Landau makes the suggestion that there is such a thing as less than zero meaningfulness that can result from immorality (2011, 317).

<sup>21</sup> The examples discussed in this paragraph are discussed by Wolf at (1997, 207).

indulged at the right time and not taken to excess, can bring a meal to completion or wake up the senses, opening us up to joy at times when we've been burdened by too much drudgery. It is often the little things or the simple pleasures that bring us back to ourselves and reconnect us with self, the world and others. This is why it's so problematic to say that trivial things don't make life meaningful. If we're seeking an experience of meaning in life, the best advice should not be to sideline the little things. Advice on meaningful living shouldn't privilege what appears important from an external standpoint. Too much emphasis on this point of view may well distance us from ourselves and produce disconnection. Also, whenever so-called "trivial" things enable connection, they are then important rather than trivial, because it is very important to feel connected.

As for immoral activities, my assessment is a bit more tentative. For those who have a conscience – that is, a capacity for guilt, shame, remorse, and regret – any seriously immoral pursuits will certainly be haunting, leading to a sense of alienation from the moral community, or a sense of disconnection. Actions that are most clearly immoral are those that violate someone else, which directly undermines one's connection with others, at least those others who are violated. So if a sense of connection is at its optimum when we feel connected to self, world and *others*, then each time we compromise a connection to someone else by acting immorally, we reduce our capacity for connectedness. And it is also largely true that connection to self *depends upon* connection to others. Being in touch with myself depends in complex ways on how I see myself in relation to others and how my inclinations are shaped based upon the way that I relate to others. At the same time, it is certainly humanly possible to be cruel to one individual or group while maintaining a bond with another, but as a rule of thumb, it doesn't seem that immorality toward others can be recommended as a pathway toward the kind of meaning we derive from connection.<sup>22</sup>

My critical point is that, if an experience of meaning is thought to depend on

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<sup>22</sup> Note that this way of approaching the question of the relation between meaning and immorality remains open to intuitions on both sides of the debate, both those who think immorality is consistent with meaningful living (including Edwards and John Kekes, 2000), and those who think it is not (including Wolf, Metz, and Landau). There's not space to pursue this topic further here, but for those who think that immorality can give one just as much of an experience of meaning in life as morality, I would suggest this little thought experiment. If someone is getting connection from membership to a hate group, that means that this sense of connection is dependent upon a sense of disconnection from the out-group. What if this person switched to a universal love group? I think the subject's overall experience of connection would improve. I thank Michael Hauskeller and Michael Woodruff for pressing me to say more about this point.

morality in some way, as some theorists suppose, then we should figure out what that dependency consists in, rather than simply building morality into the analysis of meaning based on its being a source of objective value. If it's true that immorality towards others undermines a sense of connection, then this would give the right kind of explanation for why experiencing meaning in life is heavily dependent on being moral.

## 4.2 Of Judgments Flawed with Respect to Meaning

Subjectivist theories invite skepticism for seeming to give the subject too much authority in deciding what is and isn't meaningful, but I think it's clear that someone can believe that something provides a sense of connection when this is not the case. I suggest that personal meaning judgments are adequate when one judges something to be meaningful just to the extent that it provides connection, where the most deeply meaningful things are the ones that provide the most enduring connection. By contrast, personal meaning judgments are inadequate or flawed when something provides less connection than it was judged to provide.

If one judges chocolate to be meaningful for the occasion but not so much as one's deepest anchor in life, then the meaning judgment is adequate because the treat isn't expected to be more meaningful than it is. Personal meaning judgments often go wrong when what was expected to provide lasting connection does not sustain that sense of connection for very long. This a common problem with consumeristic materialism. An advertisement suggests to you that the purchase of a car, an outfit, or a trip to an exotic location will give you a newfound sense of wholeness or completion. While the purchase of the product may provide an initial thrill and also a distraction from your sense of disconnection owing to your absorption in the actions taken to acquire and consume the commodity, it is common that the sense of disconnection creeps back in despite your continued pursuit or ownership of the fetishized consumer good.<sup>23</sup> If a purchase is made for the sake of deep personal meaning, but the purchase does not provide any lasting

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<sup>23</sup> Bringing out this kind of problem, a recent *Saturday Night Live* commercial spoof featuring Adam Sandler ("Romano Tours," 2019, Season 44, Episode 19) reminds customers that a trip to Italy will not necessarily overcome the problem of disconnection: "here at Romano Tours, we always remind our customers: if you're sad now, you might still feel sad there. ... remember, you are still going to be you on vacation. If you are sad where you are, and then you get on a plane to Italy, you in Italy will be the same sad you from before, just in a new place. ... And please, if you and your partner are having trouble connecting, we guarantee our tour will not help. If you don't want to touch each other at home, be reminded, in Italy you will have those same bodies and thoughts."

sense of connection, then this personal meaning judgment is flawed with respect to personal meaning. This helps to make clear that it is not the case that you decide what is personally meaningful just by making the judgment that it is.

The most deeply meaningful things will be those that support your sense of connection over longer periods of time. This is why close relationships are among the best examples, but only if these relationships are not toxic. A toxic relationship is one in which there is some kind of abuse or neglect. One might think that it's important to stay in the relationship because it provides some sort of stability or because of what it does for one's identity; for instance, one may feel the need to be socially recognized as being in a romantic relationship with a certain sort of person. Stability and identity are part of the network of factors that are important to feeling a sense of connection, so concern for stability and identity would count as reasons of personal meaning. But it would be flawed to view a toxic relationship as meaningful if being in the relationship is actually undermining one's sense of connection because of the abuse or neglect.

To illustrate another way in which something chosen for the sake of connection can turn out to be problematic in that regard, consider social media, like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. In one way, social media does enable us to be more involved in each others' lives even when we are physically distant. But use of social media also produces problems of addiction, isolation and vulnerability to social overexposure or to the invasion of one's privacy, all of which can undermine one's sense of connection. One of the largest problems, at least among the youth, is FOMO, or the "fear of missing out" on the prestigious and exciting things that others present themselves as doing, which can produce the comparative judgment that one's own life is inadequate.<sup>24</sup> This socially hypercomparative attitude inspired by the online social media environment is a source of anxiety that undermines a sense of connection.

Incidentally, avoiding excess social anxiety is yet another reason to temper comparative externalist meaning judgments (like those discussed in section 3.1) with personal meaning judgments. Personal meaning judgments don't compare individuals' lives as being better or worse than one another, but instead these judgments identify those things in life that provide an experience of connection

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<sup>24</sup> This and other problems with social media are discussed by Caroline Miller in "Does Social Media Cause Depression?: How heavy Instagram and Facebook use may be affecting kids negatively" at Child Mind Institute ([childmind.org](http://childmind.org)).

for the one making the judgment.<sup>25</sup> Being more mindful of making well-founded personal meaning judgments can help to counteract disconnection that results from too much concern that others see one's life as meaningful from an external standpoint.

In the case of social media, what we need to acknowledge is that this online environment can be good and bad for our sense of connection in different ways. The strengths of the pros and cons with respect to one's experience of meaning in life will depend upon one's individual psychology so that no precise universal judgment can be made about the effect of social media on our sense of connectedness. It is not a weakness of a theory of meaning judgments to acknowledge this variability. It is just the reality of the ineliminable subjective role played by individual psychology in the search for meaning.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that a standard of objectivity can be applied to personal meaning judgments that track a subjective state of connection. While externalism's form of objectivity imposes a standard of objective value arrived at from a third person standpoint, objectivity about personal meaning judgments must determine from a first person standpoint whether a subject can really be said to be in a subjective state of connection to the degree anticipated by the personal meaning judgment. It is important to review our attachments in life in this way,

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<sup>25</sup> Landau also stresses the need to relax comparative (or what he calls "competitive") attitudes for the sake of meaning in life (2017, 44-48).

<sup>26</sup> I believe there is much more to explore on the topic of personal meaning judgments and how they can be flawed, which will have to be left to future discussion. I'm emphasizing the experiential side of having a sense of connection, but, to explore the metaphor further, to feel connected is also to feel in touch with something real, whether this is connection with the real world or a real situation, or connection with real others as they honestly or authentically are, or connection with one's true self in some sense or other. This suggests that an experience of connection is importantly dependent on additional factors beyond the experience that can be external (others, world) or internal (self). Nonetheless, I still take the subjective experience of connection itself to be what drives our judgment that something in life is meaningful, and this is also the important kind of experience that we seek when we seek an experience of personal meaning in life. In the paper, I've emphasized a kind of objectivity that pays attention to how well things in life reliably produce an experience of connection, but another form of objectivity is sensitive to the reality or authenticity of that with which we are connected. Extreme examples to consider are (a) experiencing connection to things within a virtual reality or (b) believing in and experiencing connection with a deity that may not exist. But, for those exploring this question, I think that one thing to keep in mind is that there may be ways of believing or make-believing in things which aren't real externally that do allow one to really connect with oneself internally, so I think there are some complex issues to sift through here.

using the internal standpoint to determine what is truly meaningful for me, in order to assess whether our attachments are allowing for as much meaning in life as we hope to experience.<sup>27</sup>

But I should add that I don't think there's any sure way to maintain a strong sense of connection without fail. What was meaningful to me in the past may not be meaningful in the future. To an extent, meaning is a moving target, because life's playing field of self, world and others is continually changing (again, it's more like a dance). For this reason, the search for meaning requires continual openness to discovery and experimentation, and it is probably best to view occasional experiences of disconnection – or dark nights of the soul – as part of a natural cycle of growth and change that we must accept and learn to manage.

Also, while I've said that our experience of connection involves attachment to things, a more enduring sense of connection is also greatly aided by the cultivation of non-attachment, or the ability to let things go, so that we do not lose all sense of meaning in life when faced with loss of attachments. As I suggested earlier, a connection with self may well be the more important aspect of our overall sense of connectedness, and connection with self can also benefit from an ability to let go.

At times, it may be important to let go of certain ideas of who one is if these ideas don't represent who one needs to be in order to experience connection. Likewise, meaningful living also requires balancing the social pressure to “be somebody” with the need for connection that one has in one's present circumstance. I haven't argued that we should abandon external or impersonal meaning judgments altogether, but that this kind of meaning judgment should not eclipse personal meaning judgments in our search for meaning in life.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> My emphasis in this paper on distinguishing internal and external standpoints on meaning in life owes a great deal to Thomas Nagel's work on meaning exemplified in Ch. XI of *The View from Nowhere* (1986). I look at how this distinction in standpoints affects consideration of the question whether life can be meaningful without free will in (Chastain 2019), where I present additional critique of Wolf's approach to meaning in life.

<sup>28</sup> I am grateful for helpful comments from an anonymous reviewer, as well as for audience comments on a presentation based on this paper delivered at the Third International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, hosted online at the University of Birmingham, UK, in July 2020. In addition to those acknowledged in previous footnotes, I also thank Jason Berntsen, Marilyn Chastain, Everett Fulmer and Leonard Kahn for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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