Journal of Philosophy of Life Vol.12, No.1 (November 2022):55-76

Axiological Values Grounded in Basic Motivational Dispositions

How to Be a Subjectivist about Meaning in Life

Frank Martela*

Abstract

Subjectivism as regards meaningfulness has fallen out of fashion due to certain highly counterintuitive implications. The present account aims to revive subjectivism by proposing a distinction between consciously chosen axiological values such as meaningfulness and more implicit proto-values that are part of our human nature. As regards the latter, the present account focuses especially on evolved basic motivational dispositions to seek out certain psychosocial experiences, which have been the subject of much research within empirical psychology. Instead of being connected to fleeting desires, it is argued that meaningfulness should be grounded in one specific basic motivational disposition – the disposition to do good to others – that helps to explain why meaningfulness is typically seen as intuitively appealing and an independent basis of value. Meaningfulness, in this account, isn't *mind independent*, but it is still *conscious-mind independent*, which helps this version of subjectivism to avoid the typical counterarguments against subjectivism, while retaining many qualities typically only associated with objectivism.

1. Introduction

Given their encounter with the slow death of God in the last few centuries, Western philosophers have been facing the terrifyingly humanistic possibility: What if our values would be up to us? There is no God, and only God could ground objective values, so all values must be subjective, as Sartre (2007) famously formulated the issue. Along with existentialists, subjectivism about meaningfulness and values was embraced by philosophers of many stripes in the 20th century including pragmatists such as James (1899) and positivists like Ayer (1947). What made subjectivist theories attractive was the fact that they fit well together with a naturalistic worldview that doesn't have room for the divine or for objective values. Accordingly, many philosophers have adapted subjectivism for the simple reason that it has presented itself as the only possibility as regards meaningfulness and values, given one's broader metaphysical commitments.

More recently, however, many analytic philosophers have argued for various

* University Lecturer, Aalto University, P.O.Box 15500, 00076 Aalto, Finland. Email: frank.martela[a]aalto.fi

versions of naturalistic objectivism that claim to be compatible with the scientific and naturalistic worldview but still leave room for objective values. Subjectivism, in turn, has declined in popularity, and the mainstream view nowadays seems to be that it has certain highly counterintuitive implications that should be resolved before it could be accepted as a serious theory of meaningfulness (see Metz 2013).

My aim is here to demonstrate that the reports of the death of subjectivism as regards meaningfulness have been greatly exaggerated. More particularly, I aim to build a subjectivist theory of axiological value and meaningfulness that depends crucially on two distinctions: First, as regards human values, we need to distinguish between, on the one hand, *explicitly held values* that we are consciously aware of and committed to, and, on the other hand, *implicitly held proto-values* or preferences that guide our behavior and thinking even when we are not aware of them (Haidt 2001; Street 2006). When I talk about *values* in this paper, I am thus referring to values that one is consciously aware of and reflectively endorses. Beyond these explicit values, however, human behavior is to a significant degree guided by implicit preferences, which I refer to as *proto-values*, to keep the distinction clear.

As regards these implicit preferences, I come to argue that there is also a distinction to be made between preferences that we have come to acquire through our idiosyncratic life experiences and those preferences that evolution has shaped us to have. As regards the latter, I focus especially on *basic motivational dispositions* that psychological research has investigated (e.g. Baumeister and Leary 1995; Deci and Ryan 2000; Martela & Sheldon, 2019; Sheldon 2011). They are defined by the fact that human beings have a natural motivational tendency to seek certain psychosocial experiences, especially when such experiences are lacking in their lives. Just as lack of nutrition leads us to seek food, loneliness leads us to seek human contact, as an example. Both nutrition and collaboration with others have been necessary for human survival, and thus we have evolved to have natural motivational dispositions to seek them. Importantly, as compared to explicitly held values, there is a significant difference in the degree of voluntary control: Explicitly held values are relatively easily changed through argumentation and conscious effort, while it might be practically impossible to change one's basic motivational dispositions as they are so deeply rooted in human basic psychological make-up. This means that while basic motivational dispositions are subjective in the sense of not being *mind independent,* they are still more or less *conscious-mind independent,* out of reach of conscious control.

Axiological values, in turn, refer to those explicitly held values that are not derivative of or dependent on other values, but 'provide their own justification', and thus are valuable for their own sake. This quality of being good "as an end" and "in virtue of its own nature" (Feldman 2000, p. 320) is sometimes called intrinsic value, but given the many separate definitions of that label (see e.g., Bradley 2006), I see axiological value as more exact label for this aim to identify the separate ways in which a life can be judged as valuable (Hart 1971; Feldman 2000). They are thus values we both consciously endorse and see as valuable as such. Along with others (e.g. Wolf 2016) I take meaningfulness to be one type of axiological value separate from other commonly accepted axiological values such as well-being or morality (Martela 2017). In other words, we seem to value well-being, morality, and meaningfulness each out of their own accord. A life that is full of pleasure might be morally base, or lack in meaningfulness, while a meaningful life might still be low on well-being and moral praiseworthiness. That meaningfulness is separate from well-being and morality has been argued for elsewhere (see Martela 2017; Williams 1981; Wolf 1997a, b)[1], is quite generally accepted, and in the present context well-being and morality serve only as examples of other types of axiological values. Thus, I will not argue for this separation here. In general, then, I take it that meaningfulness and other axiological values serve as separate bases of value that can all be independently used to evaluate the overall goodness of a life (Metz 2013; Wolf 2016; Martela 2017).

The version of subjectivism I develop here argues that even if values are not objective and instead depend on the subject, one can still ground them in something more stable than fleeting desires. More particularly, meaningfulness can be grounded in a specific implicit basic motivational disposition that can ensure and explain why meaningfulness as an axiological value has such a strong intuitive appeal. If there were a basic motivational disposition that makes certain behaviors or goals intuitively appealing, then an axiological value endorsing the same behaviors or goals would be especially attractive as an axiological value. The connection to a basic motivational disposition namely ensures that the corresponding explicit value has a strong intuitive appeal, appearing exactly as something that doesn't need further justification as it feels like valuable as such.

[1] For example, a rock star whose music provides uplifting experiences for millions of people, but whose narcissistic behavior makes life miserable for people close to him, might make a meaningful contribution to the world but still not be seen as highly moral person (May 2015).

Subjectivism about meaningfulness is often criticized for making meaningfulness dependent on any kind of fleeting pro-attitudes or preferences that a person might have (Metz 2013). The present proposal is more particular, connecting meaningfulness to a specific basic motivational disposition of the individual in question.

What basic motivational disposition could meaningfulness then be connected to? To answer that question, we first need an analysis of what we mean by meaningfulness in the first place. Thus, in the context of the present article, I take the recently advanced *contribution analysis of meaningfulness* (Levy 2005; Bramble 2015; Martela 2017) to be roughly correct about what meaningfulness is about. According to it, meaningfulness of a life is about "the positive contribution beyond itself that this particular life is able to make" (Martela 2017, 232). Many accounts of what meaningfulness means include this idea of making a difference to something that "transcend the limitations of individuals" (Levy 2005, 79; see also Smuts 2013; Audi 2005; James 2010). Furthermore, the prototypical examples of meaningful lives usually cited in Western philosophy – Gandhi, Mandela, Lincoln, Mother Theresa – and prototypical examples of especially meaningful occupations – firefighters, nurses, doctors – are united by the fact that the positive contribution beyond oneself is exceptionally strong in these individuals and occupations. Thus, our intuitions about what is meaningful often overlap with the idea of making a positive contribution, and many accounts of meaningfulness seem to include contribution as at least partially what makes life meaningful (e.g. Audi 2005; Wolf 2010; Smuts 2013). However, my aim is here not to defend this *contribution analysis of meaningfulness* as that has been done elsewhere (Levy 2005; Martela 2017). The question I am interested here is that *if* the contribution analysis of meaningfulness would be roughly correct about what meaningfulness is at least partially about, *then* would there be a corresponding basic motivational disposition that could explain its appeal to us. The general subjectivist theory of meaningfulness proposed here is not dependent on the contribution analysis of meaningfulness. If another analysis of the definition of meaningfulness is preferred, one could equally well examine whether that way of understanding meaningfulness is connected to some corresponding basic motivational disposition.

Given the contribution analysis of meaningfulness, there seems to be a basic motivational disposition that is closely connected to it: benevolence as a human tendency to care about and want to positively impact the lives of others (Aknin et

al. 2013; Schroeder and Graziano 2015; Martela and Ryan 2016a). As I will review later, a relatively robust body of empirical research seems to support the idea that humans indeed have a disposition that makes them want to help and positively contribute to the lives of other. Thus, I argue that meaningfulness as an axiological value is well anchored to a basic motivational disposition that has a reasonably good empirical support.

In brief, my argument is thus that meaningfulness is an axiological value, according to which our ability to make a positive impact to the lives of other people is valuable as such, and this value is connected to a basic motivational disposition we humans have, which makes us have a strong intuitive motivation to help other people. Given that this motivational disposition is by and large beyond our conscious control, it provides a stable and conscious-mind independent intuitive justification and basis for the axiological value.

Through this proposal, the present article aims to offer a new version of subjectivism about meaningfulness that avoids the usual counterarguments against subjectivism while retaining certain attractive qualities typically only associated with objectivist accounts of meaningfulness. Most importantly, unlike most previous versions of subjectivism, the present version doesn't lead to the counterintuitive conclusions where anything that the subject happens to prefer or value is considered meaningful, as meaningfulness is not connected to one's fleeting preferences but to one specific implicit and stable basic motivational disposition. Besides, the present account of subjectivism can offer an explanation for why we have certain intuitions about meaningfulness in the first place. Thus, the present suggestion could help to revive subjectivism as a serious option in debates about meaningfulness and axiological values.

2. The Standard Argument against Current Versions of Subjectivism

Subjectivism about meaningfulness, in the most general sense, means that what makes a life meaningful "depends on the subject" in the sense that the subject having certain propositional attitudes (mental states such as desires, emotions, goals and the like) is sufficient for making that particular subject's life meaningful (Metz 2013, 164)[2]. Subjectivists thus deny the existence or necessity

[2] This definition is more particularly about 'individual subjectivism' meaning that the subjects own attitudes determine the meaningfulness of the subject's life. This can be contrasted with 'intersubjective subjectivism' where the attitudes of some relevant group determine the

of standards independent of people's propositional attitudes as determinants of meaningfulness. For example, Richard Taylor attests that "meaning of life is from within us", and thus a Sisyphus condemned to push the same rock up the same hill could still find his life meaningful, if it so happened that "his one desire in life is to roll stones" (Taylor 2000, 175, 169). His is thus a desire-fulfillment theory of meaningfulness, where meaningfulness is a matter of being able to fulfill one's desires, whatever they happen to be.

Such subjective desire-fulfillment theory has been later refined by arguing that, instead of any kind of desire counting towards meaningfulness, only the fulfillment of certain specific kinds of desires or mental states matter. Harry Frankfurt (2002, 250, see also 1982) defends a position where meaningful life "need not be connected to anything that is objectively valuable." However, instead of being about any kind of desires, for him meaning is connected to love. Loving is for him an axiological value, by which he means "that loving as such is valuable to the lover" (p. 246). Accordingly, "devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved" (p. 250).

Bernard Williams (1981), in turn, argues that some desires and projects are categorical and grounded by constituting one's character and being closely related to one's existence. Such ground projects "to a significant degree give a meaning" to a person's life (Williams 1981, 12). This kind of subjective theory has been recently revived by Frans Svensson, who defends a view according to which, "your life is meaningful to the extent that your *categorical desires* – i.e. those desires that are partly constitutive of your practical identity, or of who you are as a practical agent – are fulfilled or satisfied" (Svensson 2017, 45).

As regards objections to subjectivism, Metz (2013, 175) argues that there is "only one standard argument" against subjectivism, that it has "seriously counterintuitive implications about which lives count as meaningful." For example, Frankfurt (2002) admits that while Hitler's love for Nazism might have led to horrible and immoral acts, from the subjective point of view of Hitler himself, it provided him with value and meaning. Against this, Wolf (2002) notes that there seems to be something wrong with a view that suggests that if one loves hurting and torturing people more than taking care of them, then one should pursue the first path as it brings more meaningfulness. Accordingly, she argues

meaningfulness of the subject's life. (See Metz 2013, 167–68; Wong 2008.)

that some things seem to be objectively more worth loving than others.

More generally, if meaningfulness is only about subjective attitudes, then anything – lining up torn newspapers in neat rows (Cottingham 2003), maintaining 3732 hairs on one's head (Taylor 1991), counting the blades of grass on Harvard Yard, collecting rubber bands (Smuts 2013), and so forth – could make one's life meaningful, provided that this is what the subject desires. This goes so deeply against most philosophers' intuitions that many are willing to reject subjectivism right away.

While Taylor's desire-fulfillment view seems to be vulnerable to such counterintuitive implications, the refined theory where only categorical desires count (Williams 1981; Svensson 2017) might on the surface look to be better protected against such implications. However, this would require that one somehow restricts what can be a categorical desire for a person. In other words, one would need an argument for why maintaining a certain number of hairs on one's head can't never be a categorical desire for any person. However, Svensson (2017, 60)[3] doesn't provide such arguments or restrictions, and thus has to admit that if some of the activities listed above "*really are* objects of someone's categorical desires … such that the person would find that his or her life had diminished seriously in its worthwhileness if s/he were to lose them or had to give them up" then their satisfaction indeed would contribute to making the person's life meaningful. So if a person deeply and genuinely desires to collect rubber bands finding it a worthwhile pursuit, Svensson is willing to admit that for that person, life devoted to only collecting rubber bands indeed is meaningful. This sole anchoring of meaningfulness to categorical desires of course also implies that if a person's categorical desires included torturing babies or systematically killing people of another religion, then fulfilling these desires would make the life of such a person more meaningful.

So, while current defenders of subjectivism seem to be willing to 'bite the bullet' as regards the counterintuitive implications, many theorists see them as "far too permissive" as regards what kind of activities and lives can be counted as meaningful (Kauppinen 2012, 356). Accordingly, a version of subjectivism would be significantly more attractive if it were somehow able to avoid at least the most

[3] Williams's (1981) article is mainly focused on offering a critique of impartial or Kantian morality, and thus doesn't engage much with the literature on meaning of life or with the specific counterarguments laid against subjective theories of meaningfulness. Thus I focus here on Svensson's (2017) contribution that offers a similar basic argument, but locates it within the context of contemporary debate about the merits and problems of subjective theories of meaningfulness.

seriously unattractive cases of what could make one's life meaningful. If such a version could be constructed, "subjectivism would become a bigger player in today's field," as Metz (2013, 179) notes. Constructing such a version of subjectivism is exactly what the present article aims to achieve.

3. Distinctions: Explicit Values, Implicit Idiosyncratic Preferences, and Basic Motivational Dispositions

The subjectivist and naturalistic view of values that the present thesis is built on sees values as something humans have culturally generated on top of biological foundations in order to navigate their lives to the best of their abilities. Following Sharon Street (2006, 118), I see that "the capacity for full-fledged evaluative judgments was a relatively late evolutionary add-on, superimposed on top of much more basic behavioral and motivational tendencies." There is thus nothing objective or mind-independent about values, they are generated by us and for us. We are born with certain rudimentary preferences – too hot or cold temperatures make us feel uncomfortable or painful, empty stomach feels bad, we fear being left alone, and so forth – and through constant daily interactions with our environment we evolve to have the more explicit and sophisticated reflectively endorsed values of a well-cultured adult. Thus the more instinctive preferences will be accompanied by more rationally chosen and generalized explicit values. There is no strict ontological or epistemological gap between mundane everyday preferences and wants, on the one hand, and more 'noble' values on the other hand. The difference is only in the degree of abstraction and in the degree of conscious commitment. Desires come and go while values are something we are more consistently committed to. While 'I want to be on time to meet my friend today at 4 PM' is a mundane preference, it is connected to the more abstract values of 'respecting friendships' and 'respecting one's commitments.' Values as objects of conscious reflection are thus generalizations about what we believe we have a strong motivational commitment to respect. They are tools for self-reflection and self-guidance that are ultimately cashed out in their ability to guide our actions (Dewey 1938; Martela 2015).

Most importantly for our present purposes, we need to make a distinction between *explicitly* held values and *implicitly* held proto-values (Street 2006). By explicit values I refer to the values we consciously have chosen to uphold, that we are aware of having. They are the values that we can verbally express if asked to

explain our values, they are the values we can have rational discussions about. And being something we value, they guide our behavior. However, modern human psychology has demonstrated in a myriad of ways that besides such explicitly held values, humans also have more implicit preferences that significantly influence thinking and behavior without the person in question having to be aware of these influences (Haidt 2001; see e.g. Cowell and Decety 2015). For example, we might yearn for parental approval and make several life choices to appeal to that yearning, even though on a conscious level we might rationalize these choices using other reasons. Or we might state that we are not at all racist, but still subconsciously avoid people of different color, when, for example, choosing whom to recruit or whom we are willing to accept as a son-in-law.

As regards these implicitly held proto-values, yet another distinction needs to be made. Some of the implicit preferences of an individual are the results of the idiosyncratic conditions of one's social upbringing. A father who only showed affection for his son when that son excelled in some sport might bring up a son who desperately craves to achieve in sports. A child growing up in conditions of constant shortage of money might develop a strong desire to achieve financial success above all else. Various sects, groups, cultures, religions and educational institutions like schools have their own favorite proto-values that they (more or less consciously) try to pass on to the next generation. However, other implicit preferences might be more universal in the sense of being the types of dispositions that evolution has equipped us with (Street 2006). It is clear that evolution has given rise to certain physical needs that manifest themselves in strong motivational dispositions. Being thirsty makes us strongly motivated to seek water. Suddenly being out of oxygen overrides all other desires as we desperately seek for air to breathe. But beyond these physical needs designed to keep our physical body alive, humans have also evolved to have more socio-psychological needs. For example, the parental instinct to care for one's offspring is strong in mammals like humans where the infants are highly vulnerable for a long time after birth (Brown and Brown 2015). Accordingly, human parents typically have a strong motivational disposition to protect and help their children that can in extreme situations even override their own survival instinct.

Recent psychological research has devoted increased amount of attention to basic motivational dispositions, sometimes referred to as 'fundamental human motivations' (Baumeister and Leary 1995) or 'basic psychological needs' (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2017). Such fundamental human motivations are

defined as “evolved tendencies to seek out certain basic types of psychosocial experiences and to feel good and thrive when those basic experiences are obtained” (Sheldon 2011, 552). They are thus defined by the simultaneous presence of three crucial elements: 1) Human beings have a natural motivational tendency to seek their fulfillment especially when the given psychosocial experience is lacking. 2) When humans are able to acquire such psychosocial experiences, this tends to make them feel good in the short term. 3) When humans are able to chronically have such experiences, this tends to lead to better physical and mental health and other symptoms of human flourishing. Furthermore, 4) the disposition has to be universal in the sense of being operational across cultural context. A candidate disposition thus needs to motivate and lead to both short-term and long-term well-being no matter the cultural context where it is studied to be considered a basic motivational disposition. Various candidates such as autonomy (Doyal and Gough 1991; Deci and Ryan 2000), and social relatedness (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Deci and Ryan 2000) have been suggested, and the evidence behind such candidates has been carefully reviewed to arrive at conclusions about how strong or weak the scientific support is behind each of the candidates. The suggested fundamental motivational dispositions are thus not arbitrary but have acquired their status based on a synthesis of literally hundreds of scientific inquiries.

4. The Proposal: Connecting Explicitly-held Axiological Values with Basic Motivational Dispositions

Subjectivist theories of meaningfulness make meaningfulness dependent on certain pro-attitudes (wants, desires and so forth) that individuals have. Subjectivists are opposed to there being any objective or mind-independent values ‘out there’, but take all explicitly endorsed values to be something constructed by us humans. Nevertheless, even if values emanate from human psychology, deliberation and reflection, distinctions can still be made between more fleeting desires and such reflectively endorsed values that we are strongly committed to and that are tightly grounded to our identity and who we are. In particular, if we want to suggest that something like meaningfulness is an axiological value that should be used as an independent basis for evaluating the overall goodness of a life, we would like it to be grounded in something. It could be grounded in our intuitions: We – at least the pack of mostly Western philosophers who usually write about meaningfulness (which of course is not a very representative sample

of the human population) – seem to have strong intuitions about what lives are meaningful (think Mandela, Gandhi, Einstein, Curie), what occupations are meaningful (think fire-fighters, nurses, emergency workers), and what activities are meaningless (think collecting rubber bands, watching reruns of sitcoms and drinking beer alone) (these are widely cited prototypical examples circulating in the meaningfulness literature, see e.g., Metz 2013; Smuts 2013; Svensson 2017; Wolf 2010). In building our philosophical theories about meaningfulness, one of the main criteria used for the successfulness of the theory is whether it is able to explain these intuitions and not lead to counterintuitive cases of meaningful or meaningless lives.

The version of subjectivism I develop here suggests that meaningfulness could be grounded also in something else than intuitions, and furthermore, this grounding could help us understand why we have these intuitions in the first place. The central proposition of the present subjectivism is that axiological values such as meaningfulness should not be connected to any kind of pro-attitudes that a person might have, but, more specifically, they should be grounded in the basic motivational dispositions of the individual in question. In the quest to identify axiological values worth committing to, grounding axiological values to these evolutionary acquired motivational dispositions makes much sense. When we seek to identify axiological values, we are exactly seeking for values that are not derivative of other values. In other words, we are seeking values that feel like their own justification, that don't need anything beyond themselves to justify themselves. And, if evolution has equipped human beings with certain natural motivational preferences, then a corresponding explicit value would need no further justification as it would feel valuable as such. We would be naturally inclined to find the value in question valuable. Thus building an explicit axiological value upon an implicitly held motivational disposition would ensure that the axiological value satisfies the most important criterion for any axiological value: That it is valuable as such and not derivative of other values.

The present account thus argues that of all the different types of pro-attitudes, some more explicit, some more implicit, only the basic motivational dispositions matter when we examine meaningfulness and axiological values. In other words, meaningfulness as an axiological value is grounded in a particular basic motivational disposition that ensures that it feels valuable as such for us human beings.

This formulation means that the current theory can avoid the key shortcoming

that the subjectivist theories have been traditionally accused of. Even if a person enjoys lining up torn newspapers in neat rows (Cottingham 2003), categorically desires reading gangster novels (Svensson 2017), finds value in maintaining 3732 hairs on one's head (Taylor 1991) or if Sisyphus has "a keen and unappeasable desire to be doing just what he found himself doing" (Taylor 2000, 173), these desires and feelings would not add anything to the meaningfulness of the activity, as they are not connected to a relevant basic motivational disposition. In examining a certain activity's capability to make a person's life meaningful, we thus need to evaluate if that particular activity is fulfilling the relevant basic motivational disposition that makes certain activities seem intuitively meaningful. Thus a supporter of the present account can agree with Metz when he says that most readers will be inclined to find meaning "only when a person is absorbed by a condition that intuitively *merits* it." (Metz 2013, 174). The basic motivational disposition can serve as the source of the intuition that makes us see certain activities as intuitively meriting to be seen as meaningful. Thus the current theory seems to be as good as the objectivist alternatives in avoiding labeling an activity as meaningful, if it intuitively sounds as a totally meaningless activity. The present account of meaningfulness therefore doesn't seem to suffer from the standard argument against subjectivism – that it leads to highly counterintuitive cases of meaningfulness where anything that a subject endorses or chooses to value is meaningful.

5. Explaining Our Intuitions about Meaningfulness and Other Merits of the Current Theory

Besides not falling prey to the counterintuitive cases that many subjectivist theories suffer from, the current theory of axiological value provides something more: An explanation for why we have an intuition about certain conditions meriting meaningfulness in the first place. Our intuitions about meaningfulness (or any other matter) don't come into being out of nowhere, but there is always a story behind them. All the intuitions we have are the results of either our evolutionary developed dispositions, our life experiences, or our reflection that builds on these two. In appealing to intuition – as philosophers of meaningfulness almost inevitably do (see Metz 2013) – we are in essence appealing to this developmental path behind us. Most robust and uncontroversial intuitions would be those that are not dependent on having particular life experiences but that we

have inherited from our evolutionary past. Basic motivational dispositions thus should give rise to very robust, uncontroversial, and widely shared intuitions about what we find valuable and meaningful in life. Thus, the current theory not only appeals to our common intuitions, but aims to provide an explanation for them.

Furthermore, if the basic motivational disposition is really a product of evolution, it should be something that all members of the human species would share (discounting various pathologies). Thus, a corresponding value would have wide appeal across people and cultures; virtually everyone would see value in it – naturally, to establish this requires a broad cross-cultural research program and thus conclusions about 'human nature' should be done with care before the true cross-cultural generalizability has been established (see Henrich et al. 2010; Henrich 2020). Within a society, such values would be primary candidates for what kind of values the society should protect and promote when making choices about various structures such as the educational system or legislature. Between societies, these values could provide the cross-cultural common ground upon which dialogues about more specific policies, rules and agreements could be built upon.

6. Benevolence as the Basic Motivational Disposition Grounding Meaningfulness as an Axiological Value

As noted in the introduction, I take the contribution analysis of meaningfulness, where meaningfulness is about the positive contribution beyond oneself that one is able to make (Levy 2005; Bramble 2015; Martela 2017), to be roughly correct. Thus, given the current suggestion of grounding meaningfulness in a corresponding basic motivational disposition, the question is whether there exists a suitable basic motivational disposition for it. Before examining that, I want to note that this version of subjectivism is not dependent on the contribution analysis of the nature of meaningfulness. If we come to endorse another theory about how meaningfulness is defined, we can similarly look for a corresponding basic motivational disposition, given that definition.

Given the contribution analysis of meaningfulness, a look at the psychological literature reveals that there indeed is a good candidate for a basic motivational disposition that would be connected to it. This disposition, labeled here as *benevolence,* is defined as a disposition to want to have a "positive impact in the

lives of other people" (Martela et al. 2018, 1263). There is quite a broad set of empirical evidence demonstrating that such a disposition is able to fulfill the three criteria of a basic motivational disposition.

First, research has demonstrated that humans are motivated to benefit others even when the effects of other potential motivations are experimentally controlled for. Research in behavioral economics has shown that even in anonymous situations, without any reciprocal or reputational benefits, most people, in most situations, are willing to give away at least some of their money to benefit others (see Engel 2011 for a meta-analysis of 616 experiments). Social psychological research, in turn, has shown that other-oriented empathic concern leads to and explains prosocial behavior, even when the effect of various types of selfish motivations have been experimentally controlled for (reviewed in Batson et al. 2009). Furthermore, various ways of priming participants to make decisions more intuitively (time pressure, cognitive load etc.) tend to show that more intuitive decision-making is associated with increased prosocial behavior (Rand et al. 2012, 2014).

Second, a wide number of experimental studies have demonstrated a robust connection between engaging in behavior that helps others and increased subjective well-being afterwards (Dunn et al. 2008; Martela and Ryan 2016b; 2021), and this is true in countries around the world (Aknin et al. 2013) including a small-scale rural society on the Pacific Island of Vanuatu (Aknin et al. 2015). Third, several longitudinal studies have shown that various types of prosocial behavior have positive long-term effects on psychological well-being and various indicators of health, such as decreased blood pressure and reduced risk of mortality (e.g. Okun et al. 2013; Whillans et al. 2016). Accordingly, even though a full review of empirical evidence would require much more space than can be dedicated to the topic here, I submit that we have relatively robust scientific evidence to conclude that humans have a basic motivational disposition to be benevolent in the sense of wanting to contribute positively to the lives of others (for reviews, see chapters in Schroeder and Graziano 2015). Thus, if take meaningfulness to be about being able to contribute, then meaningfulness would be well connected to a corresponding basic motivational disposition that could explain why we have such strong intuitions about meaningfulness being its own source of value.

7. Answering Some Counterarguments and Challenges to the Present View

Before we can conclude, there are certain open questions that need to be addressed. First, are we here committing the naturalistic fallacy (Moore 1903) of using empirical and naturalistic facts about the human nature to derive conclusions about what is good and normative? The present account indeed argues that one can use the empirical generalizations about basic motivational dispositions to identify axiological values especially suitable for human beings. Yet, these two levels are kept separate: *Basic motivational dispositions* such as the need to be benevolent and *axiological values* such as the value of contributing are two separate things even though they might guide people towards the same kinds of behavior: The first is a descriptive and empirically verifiable fact about the human nature, the second is a normative value about what humans should strive to do in life. Instead of silently creeping from one level to the other, the step between the levels is made explicitly: It is argued that when we operate on the normative level, aiming to choose what normative values are worth defending and upholding – indeed what values are worth being valued – we can use empirical facts about the human nature to identify especially defensible axiological values that are in need of no further justification. The basic motivational dispositions and axiological values are thus not one and the same quality or otherwise essentially connected. Rather it is argued that, in our normative discussions about what values to adopt, it would be wise to connect our axiological values to the human nature in the way proposed in the present account. Instead of an automatic or hidden jump from descriptive facts to normative values, the discussion taking place on the normative level consciously utilizes descriptive facts to reach certain normative conclusions.

Another worry concerns the case of a person that lacks a certain basic motivational disposition or is for some reason alienated from it. Would that person have different axiological values from the rest of us? Take the case of a psychopath, who arguably (see Blair 1997) totally lacks the ability to care about the welfare of others and is simply unable to feel the sympathetic emotions that neurotypical people feel when seeing someone suffering? The psychopath's inability to care about the welfare of others has been compared to color-blindness (Cleckley 1941)[4]. Just as it is impossible to explain how 'red' looks to a color-

[4] Within clinical psychology there is a debate about whether such descriptions capture the essence of psychopathology or whether our view should be more nuanced. However, for present purposes let's

blind person, it is impossible to explain to a person lacking the relevant experience how sympathy for others feels like. Would that kind of a person, who seems to totally lack the disposition for benevolence, have a reason to uphold contribution as an axiological value?

I assume that here an objectivist would argue that contribution would still remain an axiological value even for that person, but I am willing to bite the bullet and admit that this person would probably lack this axiological value. As the corresponding motivational disposition would be lacking, the potential axiological value would have no intuitive appeal for the person. For such a person, there wouldn't be any specific meaningfulness attached to making a positive contribution. The person would have as much trouble upholding it as an axiological value as we would have trouble upholding 'everything should be in neat rows' as an axiological value. It simply wouldn't resonate. This doesn't mean that such a psychopathological person couldn't hold contribution as an important instrumental value. Success in a society, in friendships, in career, or other fields of life often benefits from having a prosocial reputation. Accordingly, an individual living in our type of society probably would learn to contribute in many situations in order to reap the benefits that such behavior gives rise to. In fact, many psychopathological persons are probably well-adjusted and their behavior might be more or less indistinguishable from the behavior of neurotypical persons. Such a person thus could have contribution as an important consciously upheld value, it just would be an important instrumental value instead of a self-justifying axiological value. And naturally such a person might have other axiological values that give value to one's life such as valuing self-expression and authenticity – lacking a particular disposition thus would not make a person's life valueless in any sense even though they might personally lack a particular axiological value other people uphold. Thus, I argue that although mainly all humans would have the same axiological values due to their connection with our evolutionary nature, there can and will be individual cases for whom a certain axiological value simply lacks any resonance and who personally thus would not have it as an axiological value.

Furthermore, there is the question of whether one's life can be meaningful without one knowing it. Objectivist consequentialists about meaningfulness such as Smuts argue that if Sisyphus, while pushing the rock up the hill, scares away

assume that such clear-cut 'totally color-blind' psychopaths exist.

vultures that otherwise would attack a nearby village (example is originally from Wolf 2010), this makes Sisyphus's life somewhat more meaningful, even if Sisyphus himself would never find out about this positive impact of his labor (Smuts 2013). The present subjectivist account anchors meaningfulness in the subjective sense of fulfilling one's disposition to have a positive impact. Thus, it leads to the opposite conclusion: If Sisyphus never finds out about the impact he is making, this will not make his life feel subjectively more meaningful. This, however, doesn't mean that a future Sisyphus could not conclude that the past Sisyphus was wrong about not finding meaning in his life. $\text{Sisyphus}_{\text{time1}}$ might scare away vultures unbeknownst to him and accordingly experience his life as meaningless. $\text{Sisyphus}_{\text{time2}}$, informed about his impact, might conclude that his life is, after all, meaningful. And that it was meaningful all along. From the point of view of $\text{Sisyphus}_{\text{time2}}$, the $\text{Sisyphus}_{\text{time1}}$ was thus mistaken. This, of course, doesn't help $\text{Sisyphus}_{\text{time1}}$. His life, while he was living it, still felt as meaningless. No future revelations can change the past experiences. Similarly, I as an observer of $\text{Sisyphus}_{\text{time1}}$, aware of his impact, might conclude that he is actually mistaken in concluding that his life is meaningless. This is a fair conclusion, but again doesn't affect how $\text{Sisyphus}_{\text{time1}}$ experiences his life. His life remains meaningless to him until the moment a kind soul decides to inform him about the great service he is actually doing to the people of the nearby village. From a future point of view, or from the point of view of someone else, one can thus be mistaken about whether one's current life is meaningful. But from the point of view of the person actually living that life, it remains meaningless.

Finally, one might object that contribution analysis of meaningfulness is too narrow and that there is more to meaning in life than contributing towards other people. I fully agree with this criticism. I see that being able to contribute is *one* key axiological value that we typically associate with meaningfulness. Being able to have a positive impact in the lives of other people thus tends to make our own life feel more meaningful. And my aim in this paper has been to show how this axiological value is related to one specific motivational disposition, benevolence. However, there could be other axiological values associated with meaningfulness as well. In particular, self-realization and authenticity are often seen as valuable and something that could make the life of a person more meaningful (e.g., Roessler 2012). Thus I would like to see an article examining self-realization as a potential axiological value, perhaps examining how it could be connected to psychological research on experiences of authenticity as giving rise to meaning in

life (e.g., Schlegel et al. 2011). But that is a work for another time. Here the focus has been on connecting contribution as a value with benevolence as a disposition.

8. Conclusion

Although naturalistic objectivism seems to be in vogue as regards the nature of meaningfulness and axiological values, there are still many among us who think along with Frankfurt (2002, 250) that "efforts to make sense of 'objective value' tend to turn out badly." For various metaphysical background commitments, or for other reasons, many philosophers can't make sense of how objectivism about values or meaningfulness could be possible. For the sake of these philosophers, I have attempted to show that a novel type of subjectivist account is able to overcome the key counterintuitive implications that have been used to reject previous versions of subjectivism. What I have not attempted to do here is to reject naturalistic objectivism in any way, as that would need a treatment of its own. Rather, I have wanted to present a plausible alternative to it by showing that the kind of subjectivism I aim to construct here can have many of the qualities that have made such objectivism attractive in the first place.

The key quality separating the present version of subjectivism from some of the previous theories is the distinction between preferences and wants that are more conscious, explicit and changeable, and basic motivational dispositions as deeply held, implicit, and virtually unchangeable as they are connected to our inherited human nature. While objectivism anchors values to something *mind independent*, the present version of subjectivism anchors values to something *conscious-mind independent*, namely the basic motivational dispositions. This is how the present version can account for many of the qualities typically only connected to objectivism such as the relatively independence of meaningfulness from our fleeting wants and preferences.

So when Metz (2013, 170) argues – in summarizing Susan Wolf's objection to subjectivism – that "there intuitively are mind-independent standards governing what one ought to love", the subscriber to the present version of subjectivism can almost agree, only caveat being that these standards are independent of what we *consciously* have come to value. Furthermore, these very intuitions that objectivists typically appeal to about what one ought to love and value might arise from our basic motivational dispositions, as they typically serve as the source of the most robust and widely shared intuitions about what we

humans tend to value.

References

Aknin LB, Barrington-Leigh CP, Dunn EW, et al (2013) Prosocial spending and well-being: Cross-cultural evidence for a psychological universal. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 104:635–652

Aknin LB, Broesch T, Hamlin JK, Van de Vondervoort JW (2015) Prosocial behavior leads to happiness in a small-scale rural society. *J Exp Psychol Gen* 144:788–795

Audi R (2005) Intrinsic value and meaningful life. *Philos Pap* 34:331–355. doi: 10.1080/05568640509485162

Ayer AJ (1947/2000) The claims of philosophy. In: Klemke ED (ed) *The Meaning of Life, Second Edition*. Oxford University Press, New York, pp 219–232

Batson CD, Ahmad N, Lishner DA (2009) Empathy and altruism. In: Lopez SJ, Snyder CR (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press, New York, pp 417–426

Baumeister RF, Leary MR (1995) The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychol Bull* 117:497–529

Blair RJR (1997) Moral reasoning and the child with psychopathic tendencies. *Personal Individ Differ* 22:731–739

Bradley B (2006) Two concepts of intrinsic value. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9:111–130

Bramble B (2015) Consequentialism about meaning in life. *Utilitas* 27:445–459. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S095382081500014X

Brown SL, Brown RM (2015) Connecting prosocial behavior to improved physical health: Contributions from the neurobiology of parenting. *Neurosci Biobehav Rev* 55:1–17. doi: 10.1016/j.neubiorev.2015.04.004

Cleckley HM (1941) *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Reinterpret the So-called Psychopathic Personality*. The C. V. Mosby Company, St. Louis, Mo.

Cottingham J (2003) *On the Meaning of Life*. Routledge, London

Cowell JM, Decety J (2015) The neuroscience of implicit moral evaluation and its relation to generosity in early childhood. *Curr Biol* 25:93–97. doi: 10.1016/j.cub.2014.11.002

Deci EL, Ryan RM (2000) The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychol Inq* 11:227–268
Dewey J (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Henry Holt and Company, New York
Doyal L, Gough I (1991) *A Theory of Human Need*. Palgrave, London
Dunn EW, Aknin LB, Norton MI (2008) Spending money on others promotes happiness. *Science* 319:1687–1688
Engel C (2011) Dictator games: A meta study. *Exp Econ* 14:583–610
Feldman F (2000) Basic intrinsic value. *Philos Stud Int J Philos Anal Tradit* 99:319–346
Frankfurt H (2002) Reply to Susan Wolf. In: Buss S, Overton L (eds) *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., pp 245–252
Frankfurt H (1982) The importance of what we care about. *Synthese* 53:257–272
Haidt J (2001) The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychol Rev* 108:814–834
Hart SL (1971) Axiology: Theory of values. *Philos Phenomenol Res* 32:29–41
Henrich J (2020) *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. Penguin, London
Henrich J, Heine SJ, Norenzayan A (2010) Most people are not WEIRD. *Nature* 466:29–29
James L (2010) Activity and the meaningfulness of life. *The Monist* 93:57–75. doi: 10.5840/monist20109314
James W (1899) What makes a life significant? In: James W (ed) *On Some of Life’s Ideals*. Henry Holt and Company, New York, pp 49–94
Kauppinen A (2012) Meaningfulness and time. *Philos Phenomenol Res* 84:345–377
Levy N (2005) Downshifting and meaning in life. *Ratio* 18:176–189
Martela F (2015) Fallible inquiry with ethical ends-in-view: A pragmatist philosophy of science for organizational research. *Organ Stud* 36:537–563
Martela F (2017) Meaningfulness as contribution. *South J Philos* 55:232–256. doi: 10.1111/sjp.12217
Martela, F., & Sheldon, K. M. (2019). Clarifying the concept of well-being: Psychological need-satisfaction as the common core connecting eudaimonic and subjective well-being. *Review of General Psychology*, *23*(4), 458–474.
Martela F, Ryan RM (2016a) The benefits of benevolence: Basic psychological

needs, beneficence, and the enhancement of well-being. *J Pers* 84:750–764. doi: 10.1111/jopy.12215
Martela F, Ryan RM (2016b) Prosocial behavior increases well-being and vitality even without contact with the beneficiary: causal and behavioral evidence. *Motiv Emot* 40:351–357
Martela, F., & Ryan, R. M. (2021). If giving money to Red Cross increases well-being, does taking money from the Red Cross increase ill-being?–Evidence from three experiments. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *93*(104114), 1–10.
Martela F, Ryan RM, Steger MF (2018) Meaningfulness as satisfaction of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beneficence: Comparing the four satisfactions and positive affect as predictors of meaning in life. *J Happiness Stud* 19:1261–1282. doi: 10.1007/s10902-017-9869-7
May T (2015) *A Significant Life: Human Meaning in a Silent Universe*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
Metz T (2013) *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Moore GE (1903) *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
Okun MA, Yeung EW, Brown SL (2013) Volunteering by older adults and risk of mortality: A meta-analysis. *Psychol Aging* 28:564–577
Rand DG, Greene JD, Nowak MA (2012) Spontaneous giving and calculated greed. *Nature* 489:427–430
Rand DG, Peysakhovich A, Kraft-Todd GT, et al (2014) Social heuristics shape intuitive cooperation. *Nat Commun* 5:1–12
Roessler B (2012) Meaningful work: Arguments from autonomy. *J Polit Philos* 20:71–93.
Ryan RM, Deci EL (2017) *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*. Guilford Press, New York
Sartre J-P (2007) Existentialism is a humanism. In: Macomber C (ed) *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, pp 17–72
Schlegel RJ, Hicks JA, King LA, Arndt J (2011) Feeling like you know who you are: Perceived true self-knowledge and meaning in life. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 37:745–756
Schroeder DA, Graziano WG (eds) (2015) *The Oxford Handbook of Prosocial Behavior*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Sheldon KM (2011) Integrating behavioral-motive and experiential-requirement

perspectives on psychological needs: A two process model. *Psychol Rev* 118:552–569
Smuts A (2013) The good cause account of the meaning of life. *South J Philos* 51:536–562
Street S (2006) A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philos Stud* 127:109–166
Svensson F (2017) A subjectivist account of life's meaning. *Ethica J Philos Theol Appl Ethics* 4:45–66
Taylor C (1991) *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
Taylor R (2000) The meaning of life. In: Klemke ED (ed) *The Meaning of Life, Second Edition*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 167–175
Whillans AV, Dunn EW, Sandstrom GM, et al (2016) Is spending money on others good for your heart? *Health Psychol* 35:574–583. doi: 10.1037/hea0000332
Williams B (1981) Persons, character and morality. In: *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 1–19
Wolf S (2016) Meaningfulness: A third dimension of the good life. *Found Sci* 21:253–269. doi: 10.1007/s10699-014-9384-9
Wolf S (1997a) Happiness and meaning: two aspects of the good life. *Soc Philos Policy* 14:207–225
Wolf S (1997b) Meaning and morality. *Proc Aristot Soc* 97:299–315
Wolf S (2010) *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
Wolf S (2002) The true, the good, and the lovable: Frankfurt's avoidance of objectivity. In: Buss S, Overton L (eds) *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., pp 227–244
Wong W (2008) Meaningfulness and identities. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11:123–148