

# The Void of Meaningful Activity after Completion

Fumitake Yoshizawa\*

## Abstract

This paper explores the absence of meaningful activity, a topic not commonly addressed, as most of the philosophical literature on meaning in life focuses on meaningful and meaningless activities. I demonstrate the significant role of this absence, which is particularly evident after the completion of activities one previously engaged in with the expectation that they would be meaningful. A void of activity then emerges. By examining situations in the work of John Stuart Mill and Leo Tolstoy, I illustrate how such an absence helps us to understand the characteristic kind of negative feelings that these two figures report about meaning in life. I thus clarify how we should understand, evaluate and feel about situations involving the absence of meaningful activity. I also suggest that emphasising this absence leads to a broader view of life's meaning.

## 1. Introduction

This paper does not focus on meaningful activities or meaningless activities. Both are common topics in the philosophical literature on meaning in life, as they attempt to identify the conditions that make activities meaningful. Rather, my focus lies elsewhere: I concentrate here on the *absence* of meaningful activity. This absence plays a significant role in life. We often find it after completing activities in which we had formerly engaged with the expectation that they would be meaningful. But once we have completed these activities, a void emerges.

I shall illustrate the role of the absence of meaningful activity with examples from John Stuart Mill and Leo Tolstoy (Section 2). I shall then clarify the assumptions that frame the discussion and sketch the general picture of the life situation shared by Mill and Tolstoy (Section 3). Next, I shall demonstrate the advantages of focusing on the absence of meaningful activity as we perceive their situation (Section 4). To conclude, I suggest that focusing on absence leads to a broader view of life's meaning (Section 5). I therefore explain how we should understand, evaluate and feel about situations that involve the absence of meaningful activity.

---

\* Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Graduate School of Social Sciences, Hitotsubashi University, 2-1 Naka, Kunitachi, Tokyo, 186-8601 Japan. fumitake.yoshizawa@gmail.com

## 2. Mill and Tolstoy

The significant role for the absence of meaningful activity that I explore in this paper traces to Mill's *Autobiography* and Tolstoy's *My Confession*. Both texts often figure in philosophical discussions on meaning in life, but I shall bring out some hitherto under researched aspects.

### 2.1 Mill's *Autobiography*

In his *Autobiography*, Mill writes as follows:

“Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?” And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, “No!” At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.<sup>1</sup>

First, although Mill uses the terms “joy” and “happiness” here, I interpret him as discussing *meaningfulness*, as do many scholars.<sup>2</sup> Understood this way, the story's most basic feature is that, while completing activities seems to contribute positively to life's meaningfulness, the very same thing also makes a negative contribution.

We thus learn several lessons from this text. Most recently, Gwen Bradford takes Mill's situation to suggest that the achievement—the state of affairs where one's objects are “realized” or “completely effected”—of an objectively valuable outcome does not guarantee subjective fulfilment. If we assume a subjective–objective hybrid theory, such as that proposed by Susan Wolf,<sup>3</sup> merely

---

<sup>1</sup> Mill (2018 [1873]), pp. 77–78.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Landau (2017), p. 149. In addition, Samuel Clark notes that during the crisis Mill recognised a lack of development in aesthetic and emotional capacities for a flourishing life (Clark 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Wolf (1997), p. 211.

completing a valuable activity is insufficient for the activity to be meaningful.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Mill’s story indicates that completing a goal on the one hand, and pursuing a goal on the other, hold distinctive significance.<sup>5</sup> And the third lesson—this one based on an insight from Neil Levy<sup>6</sup>—is that an activity remains lacking when it is not self-propagating.<sup>7</sup> Bradford notes that the meaning-deficiency in Mill’s situation is partly attributable to his engagement in activities that lack a self-propagating feature, such as “As we make progress toward the goal, new aspects of the goal emerge and so the pursuit expands.”<sup>8</sup>

Kieran Setiya argues that Mill’s situation represents a (precocious) midlife crisis. It highlights, for him, the problem with dedicating one’s life to “telic” activities, where people pursue a goal and aim to finish it. It also highlights the importance of “atelic” activities.<sup>9</sup>

These insights are useful, and I do not disagree with these authors. I argue, rather, that we have yet to address another aspect of the situation. Suppose the activities in which Mill has engaged *thus far* have been completed. Bradford takes these completed activities as lacking in meaningfulness because they lack the feature of self-propagation.<sup>10</sup> But Mill’s concern also seems to come from his *no longer engaging in meaningful activities*. I wish to emphasise that Mill’s sense of having “nothing left to live for” stems from the *absence* of meaningful activities and, more precisely, the *anticipated absence* of meaningful activities in the near future. In short, I wish to focus on Mill’s concern about what comes *after* his activities end—a *void* of meaningful activity, which seems to relate to his negative feelings.

In contrast, when Setiya discusses the issue with telic activities, he says that “not all activities are like this. Some do not aim at a point of termination or exhaustion: a final state in which they have been achieved and *there is no more to do*.”<sup>11</sup> This statement pertains to the *absence* of meaningful activity. Now, Setiya focuses on atelic activities as alternatives and proposes them as crucial for avoiding the absence of meaningful activities. I do not disagree with this perspective because, while Setiya does claim that completing telic activities

---

<sup>4</sup> Bradford (2022), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Bradford (2022), p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Levy (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Bradford (2022), pp. 61–62.

<sup>8</sup> Bradford (2022), p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Setiya (2014), p. 13; Setiya (2017), esp. pp. 133–134.

<sup>10</sup> Bradford (2022), p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> Setiya (2014), p. 12, emphasis added; see also Setiya (2017), p. 140.

results in an absence of meaningful activity, he does not further argue for how we ought to understand the absence itself. I shall go in another direction to specifically discuss the nature of this absence.<sup>12</sup>

We can make another contrast to emphasise the focus on an absence of meaningful activity. Despite Mill’s claim that there is “nothing left to live for,” he continues to work. He writes,

During this time I was not incapable of my usual occupations. I went on with them mechanically, by the mere force of habit. I had been so drilled in a certain sort of mental exercise, that I could still carry it on when all the spirit had gone out of it.<sup>13</sup>

How should one understand this statement? One interpretation is that these activities, his “usual occupations,” are devoid of meaning; another could characterise Mill’s situation as disengagement from activities that would otherwise be meaningful. I favour the second interpretation, although the fact that the situation clearly involves some activities to engage in seems to suggest the first.

## **2.2 Tolstoy’s My Confession**

Tolstoy’s *My Confession* offers a second example of the absence of meaningful activity. Reflecting on the inevitability of death, Tolstoy—who was already a prestigious novelist—met with a profound sense of what he had achieved. However, he came to a point at which he felt a sense of meaninglessness:<sup>14</sup>

[T]hinking of the fame which my works would get me, I said to myself: “All right, you will be more famous than [...] all the writers in the world,

---

<sup>12</sup> Setiya’s view seems plausible as a practical solution to situations such as Mill’s. For alternative views and critiques, see Bradford (2022, p. 63) and Sigrist (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Mill (2018 [1873]), p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Iddo Landau notes that Tolstoy infers wrongly from life’s finitude to the meaninglessness of the activities he engages while alive (Landau 2017, p. 91). Setiya links Tolstoy’s crisis to the midlife crisis and suggests, “Although it is often inspired by the acknowledgement of mortality, the crisis can occur in other ways. [...] Since it is independent of death, the midlife crisis is not solved by the prospect of living forever” (Setiya 2014, p. 3). I claim elsewhere that Tolstoy conflates the vanishing of a meaningful life and a meaningless life (Yoshizawa 2015, pp. 141–145).

—what of it?” [...] if I did not answer them, I could not live.

I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that that which I lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by.<sup>15</sup>

In comparison to Mill, it seems more natural to interpret Tolstoy as believing that his previous activities held little meaning. My point, though, is that we can also take this situation as his believing that he was not engaging in meaningful activities *at that time*. Note how he continues:

My life came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink, and sleep, and could not help breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping; but *there was no life*, because there were no desires the gratification of which I might find reasonable.<sup>16</sup>

To take this circumstance as involving the absence of meaningful activity—or even as “no life,” as Tolstoy puts it—would be appropriate. It also seems clear that taking the activities in which Tolstoy was engaging at that time, such as “breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping,” as meaningless does not really describe the situation. These basic activities have always continued, and there is no reason to evaluate them as inherently negative. The point is even more apparent here than it is in Mill.

### **3. Assumptions and General Sketch**

The rest of this paper clarifies the significance of focusing on the *absence* of meaningful activity. I first outline the assumptions that frame the argument (Section 3.1). I then sketch a general picture of the life situation shared by Mill and Tolstoy (Section 3.2).

#### ***3.1 Assumptions***

First, I outline the assumptions I make in my discussion and subsequent argument.

---

<sup>15</sup> Tolstoy (1904 [1882]), p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Tolstoy (1904 [1882]), p. 19, emphasis added.

(1) My discussion applies only to the standard view that meaningfulness is an evaluative notion. I have no argument against any non-standard view on which meaningfulness might be better understood by non-evaluative concepts, including intelligibility; this is simply because I have no scope to consider it here.<sup>17</sup> But I do aim to keep open additional conceptual options as much as possible. Although a purpose-based understanding for meaning is the most straightforward way to apply the points raised in this paper, it is not the only one.

(2) My discussion remains neutral on whether the subjective, objective or hybrid views are correct. But my argument runs more smoothly if it is understood through the lens of both subjective and objective elements; usually this is possible with a hybrid view.

(3) I presuppose a tolerant ontology for the bearer of meaning, called a “mixed view”: both life as a whole and its parts may have meaning.<sup>18</sup> I take activities to be parts of life. The reason is that this paper’s focus is on what we might call “doing.” I do not think that theories of meaningfulness in general exclude other ontological categories, such as states of affairs. One might think that if the pure whole-life view is true, on which “only life as an entire period can be something that counts as ‘meaningful’ or not,”<sup>19</sup> then a focus on the meaningfulness of activities makes little sense. But various modifications can make this conception sensible: we can say, for example, that an activity possesses *properties* whose instantiations contribute to the “whole-life” meaning. These properties might include an activity’s *being pursued toward a significant purpose*, or *being pursued toward a significant purpose while one feels satisfaction with the pursuit*. Mixed views, in contrast, might say that an activity possesses properties contributing to “part-life” meaning, and these “part-life” meanings would then accumulate to evaluate the “whole-life” meaning. I adopt for simplicity a mixed view about the bearer of meaningfulness.

(4) Related to the previous assumption, I use the term “activity” to include several distinguishable action types, particularly those that are telic or atelic—namely, whether they are directed toward its completion or not.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> For defences of this non-standard view, see Repp (2018), Seachris (2019) and Thomas (2019). For arguments against it, see Metz (2019) and Landau (2021). Joshua Lewis Thomas claims also that Mill’s crisis is properly interpreted by a sense-based view (Thomas 2019, p. 1572). Although I do not oppose this interpretation, I agree with Landau that we may also interpret the story in accordance with standard value-based views (Landau 2021, pp. 230–231).

<sup>18</sup> Metz (2013), Section 3.5.

<sup>19</sup> Metz (2013), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Setiya, for example, uses the term “activities” to refer to both telic (2014, esp. p. 16) and atelic

(5) In addition, and as an implication of the third assumption, I also suppose that different phases of a person’s life may be evaluated in different ways for meaningfulness. For instance, it is conceivable that one’s youth stage was meaningful, whereas one’s midlife was less so, and so on.

(6) I do not address the concept of “anti-meaning,” which is the negative opposite of meaning. There is debate over whether meaning has three categories—meaningful (positive), anti-meaningful (negative) and meaningless (neutral)—or two categories—meaningful (positive) and meaningless (neutral).<sup>21</sup> But even if we accept the concept of anti-meaning, it is not likely to affect our evaluation of the absence of activity, which I focus on here. The absence of activity implies that there is no activity possessing either positive meaning or negative anti-meaning. If evaluated at all, it would be neutral only.

(7) One might be concerned, finally, about uncertainty: how is one to be able to evaluate the meaningfulness of life activities in life’s midstream? For simplicity, we may assume determinism, or we may focus only on retrospective evaluations. But I prefer another approach: the idea of the absence of meaningful activity still makes sense even with the modifiers “probably” or “will turn out to be.” We might say, for example, “a person S is not engaging in activities that *will turn out to be* meaningful,” contrasting this statement with “S is engaging in activities that are *probably* meaningful,” and so on. Life decisions about meaningfulness, and also about other values such as morality and well-being, are practically significant even in uncertainty. But I set that issue aside here.

**3.2 General Sketch**

I give a general sketch for the situations I focus on. While they do differ,<sup>22</sup> I characterise the situations of Mill and Tolstoy as involving a preceding phase during which their (seemingly) meaningful activities are conducted and completed (Phase 1). They then

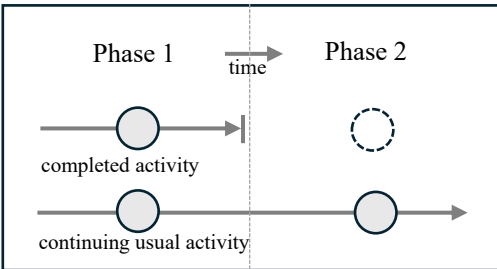


Fig. 1: General sketch

activities (esp. p. 13). Michael Sigrist, on the other hand, distinguishes “action” into telic “achievement” and atelic “activity” (2015, p. 85). I adopt the former usage. This approach preserves the clarity and context of the discussion throughout the paper.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Nyholm and Campbell (2022).

<sup>22</sup> Setiya claims that Tolstoy’s crisis turns on “pervasive skepticism about reasons or values, on philosophical doubts so fundamental they owe nothing to the shape of human life,” but Mill’s crisis is

involve a succeeding phase in which there are no such meaningful activities (Phase 2). As discussed above, both Mill and Tolstoy describe their negative feelings as marking the transition between these two phases. My focus here is only on these phases and the transition between them, even though, as a matter of fact, both Mill and Tolstoy eventually recovered following Phase 2. Importantly, these cases are not examples of thwarted achievements. Moreover, several “usual” activities continue during both phases.

As described, this type of situation is common for events such as resigning from a job, graduating from school or reflecting on one’s career achievements, often during midlife.<sup>23</sup> These may be cases in which one’s activities thus far are not thwarted in Phase 1, before a void of meaningful activity emerges in Phase 2. And as long as we live, we always find ourselves involved in the “usual” activities that span both phases.

#### **4. Absence of Meaningful Activity**

The stories of Mill and Tolstoy show individuals who, after completing their intended purpose, then experience, perhaps paradoxically, a sense of meaninglessness. Scholars have found such cases intriguing. Iddo Landau characterises Mill’s situation as “the paradox of the end.”<sup>24</sup> While these stories teach many lessons, they highlight in particular an interesting relationship between completing activities and seemingly inappropriate negative feelings that require some explanation.

I argue that these paradoxical negative feelings are directed toward the absence of meaningful activity during Phase 2. Certain limitations in Bradford’s analysis of the Mill and Tolstoy situations underscore the significance of this absence. I first schematically illustrate Bradford’s notion of the self-propagating feature of meaningful activities (Section 4.1). Then, I demonstrate that her view does not fully account for why these situations merit such negative feelings (Section 4.2). I then show how the absence of meaningful activity functions (Section 4.3).

---

not like such an “unqualified emptiness” (2017, pp. 38–39; see also 2014, pp. 2–3). In contrast, Bradford juxtaposes Mill and Tolstoy’s texts as both suggesting that achievement alone is not sufficient and that subjective components are also required for life’s meaning (Bradford 2016, pp. 801–802; 2022, p. 71).

<sup>23</sup> Setiya (2014; 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Landau (2017), p. 146.



## 4.1 Bradford's View

As noted, Bradford analyses the Phase 1 activities as not self-propagating because of the absence of subsequent meaningful activities in Phase 2. If Mill's Phase 1 activities led to other activities in Phase 2, then they are taken as self-propagating. To use

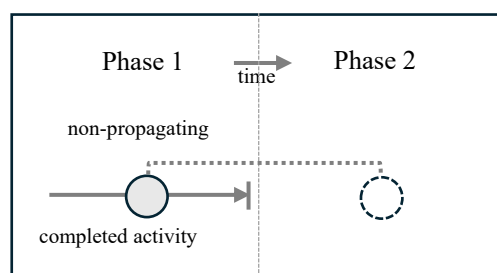


Fig. 2: Non-propagating activity

To use another example familiar to contemporary researchers: if one engages in an activity to publish a philosophy paper, then that activity would not be self-propagating. In contrast, though, if one engages in that activity with the aim of pursuing some broader truth about the world, justice and so on, it is more likely to develop into future activities—perhaps even becoming open-ended.<sup>25</sup> In relation to Mill, Bradford suggests that the activity completed in Phase 1 does not have this self-propagating feature, as Mill engaged in it as an activity that would be “completely effected” and would not lead to future ones. It would thus have diminished meaning.<sup>26</sup>

I should note that I have simplified Bradford's view in two respects. First, her actual characterisation for the concept of “self-propagation” seems richer. It may involve a phenomenon whereby, for example, as an activity with a certain goal moves forward, the goal itself becomes clearer.<sup>27</sup> My characterisation of self-propagation focuses only on its capacity to lead to future activities. But one might also think that my simplification is not that remote from Bradford's view, because the difference lies primarily in a different perspective on the individuation of activities. For instance, when Activity A in Phase 1 leads to some new Activity B in Phase 2, we could also describe that situation as Activity A developing into a different Activity C that then spans Phases 1 and 2; C would encompass Activities A and B. Here Activity C's goal can be seen as one that develops from the A's goal, and this goal, at least from a future perspective, can be regarded as having been less clear. In any case, because it is reasonable to assume that the central characteristic of self-propagation is its capacity to lead to new future activities, I focus on this capacity alone.

<sup>25</sup> Levy (2005), p. 185.

<sup>26</sup> Bradford (2022), p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> Bradford (2022), p. 62.

Second, Bradford also claims that an activity’s self-propagating feature has potentially limitless value. She bases this value on the concept of a *challenge* or difficulty.<sup>28</sup> I do not take this factor into account explicitly in my reconstruction above. But as I understand it, her view and mine may contrast as follows—suppose an initial self-propagating activity in Phase 1, Activity A, leads to an activity in Phase 2, Activity B; this activity then grows into a larger one, Activity C, which consequently subsumes Activities A and B as its parts. This development progresses through future Phases 3, 4 and beyond. Bradford takes Activity C as a significant challenge because, as it proceeds from Phase 1 to later phases, new goals continue to emerge. I perceive, in contrast, the initial Activity A as being completed in Phase 1; it leads to Activity B, which is completed in Phase 2 and so forth. I do not posit the entire subsuming activity, Activity C, but we may consider the entire sequence of generating new goals as a significant challenge. Although it may be the case that the value of the challenging Activity C is not entirely reducible to the mere sum of its parts—here, Activities A, B and so on—its overall value must be grounded partly in the values of its parts. And each part must have its value independently from the whole. If this were not true, then when the entire activity is thwarted, the values of completed early parts would disappear all at once. This implication seems implausible, however. I thus believe that my piecemeal picture of the relationship between these activities is compatible with Bradford’s apparently more unified picture, while mine can still illuminate the focus here on the absence of activity.<sup>29</sup>

#### ***4.2 Bradford’s View and Possible Interpretations of the Situations***

In the above picture, then, where should we place the paradoxical negative feelings? First, as suggested in Section 2, the most unlikely possibility is that Mill’s and Tolstoy’s negative feelings fit with their continuing activities: “usual

---

<sup>28</sup> Bradford (2022), p. 65.

<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that my view aligns with a description Bradford provides as follows: “The more you accomplish, the more is possible for you to accomplish. As you move along toward the goal, you can turn around and look back and see what you have accomplished from where you started” (Bradford 2022, p. 63). This statement seems to assume that the parts composing the entire activity (Activity C) can be individuated as “what you have accomplished.” Moreover, grounding the value of the whole self-propagating activity at least partially in the values of the activity’s parts avoids potential objections to her view, which suggests the implausible implication that protracting the goal would be preferable, and completing the potentially open-ended goal would be impossible (Bradford 2022, p. 64).

occupations” for Mill, and “breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping” for Tolstoy. This view is most unlikely because these two people perform all these routine activities even while engaging in the typically meaningful activities in Phase 1. There therefore seems no compelling reason for them to view those usual activities inherently negatively.

Another possibility is that these negative feelings are directed toward the “non-propagating” past activity in Phase 1. But this interpretation presents a difficulty and cannot be the whole story. Although it is plausible that a self-propagating feature renders an activity meaningful, perhaps even highly so, it is not clear how a *lack* of that feature renders an activity *negative* in terms of meaningfulness to the extent of meriting negative feelings. The lack of a self-propagating feature would be considered negative only *if* having that feature were a necessary condition for an activity’s meaningfulness. This appears too demanding, however. Most importantly, as noted earlier, the situations here involve a *completed* activity, not a thwarted one, even though it is non-propagating. There is a difficulty in explaining why we should view the completion as negative.

Let us examine the difficulty by shifting the focus to propagated future activities. As noted above, the value of the self-propagating feature primarily stems from the value of the future activities propagated from the preceding one. In some cases, as Bradford suggests, the self-propagating feature could “supply a potentially limitless source of meaning.”<sup>30</sup> If one engaged in a self-propagating activity in Phase 1, for example, then it would formulate a new activity in each of Phases 2, 3, 4 and so on. One’s entire life would then be highly meaningful because it would include many completed activities. But we have not yet shown how the situation in which future activities are not propagated might fit with the negative feelings. Even if the completed activity in Phase 1 were not self-propagating and as such did not lead to future activities, the activity in Phase 1 would still be a *completed* activity. Something is lacking, therefore, in explaining why we should consider the situations negative.

To sum up so far, while I do not oppose Bradford’s view, I believe certain elements still require further explanation. In her account, those who engage in a self-propagating activity would indeed have no reason to experience negative feelings. However, this does not explain why disengagement from such a self-

---

<sup>30</sup> Bradford (2022), p. 65.

propagating activity merits negative feelings.

### 4.3 How the Absence of Meaningful Activity Works

It is at this point that the absence of activity in Phase 2 enters the picture. The paradoxical negative feelings would connect to the absence of meaningful activity in Phase 2. On this view, the function of the self-propagating feature—the function of generating new future activities—is taken as filling the absence of meaningful activities in Phase 2 and beyond.

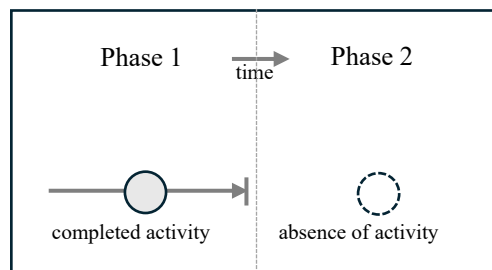


Fig. 3: Absent activity

Introducing just the absence of meaningful activity into the picture cannot by itself explain the negative feelings, however. There would be no inherently negative factor in Phases 1 and 2 to fit with the negative feelings—because, as seen above, it is implausible to regard the completed activity in Phase 1 as negative, while the absence of meaningful Phase 2 activity is neither positively nor negatively valuable for meaning (see Section 3.1, assumption (6)).

But we can offer an explanation by looking closely at the situations. Like Mill and Tolstoy, those who have engaged in activities such as articulating philosophical thought or writing novels in Phase 1 maintain an *evaluative attitude*—such as *concern* or *care*—toward these activity *types* during Phase 1.<sup>31</sup> It also seems plausible to assume that an attitude like this continues during Phase 2, the period after a *particular* activity is completed in Phase 1, which is an object of that attitude. This is because we do not want just *any* activity to be meaningful. Each person wants to engage in specific *types* of activities, and expects *them* to be meaningful. This might be because meaning is not the only value category that matters to us: we also care about morality, well-being, and so on. We want activities that earn daily bread, activities that give us intellectual pleasure and activities that involve interactions with specific individuals, to be meaningful. These attitudes vary among people, typically persist long-term and are rooted in each person's way of living thus far.<sup>32</sup> The point is that even when an *instance* of

<sup>31</sup> From the perspective of subjective or hybrid views, this evaluative attitude is naturally assumed in Phase 1 in order for the activity to be meaningful, because activities that are meaningful for a person are those that the person positively evaluates. But even objectivism can acknowledge such an evaluative attitude while denying that meaningfulness depends on these subjective evaluative attitudes.

<sup>32</sup> For a view that one's character or disposition, which is certainly a part of one's way of living thus

such an activity type that one evaluates positively is completed in Phase 1, it is not likely that the attitude will fade.

We find an explanation based on this evaluative attitude. In Phase 2, if one is engaging in a particular instance of such *types* of activities, whether ongoing from Phase 1 or newly started in Phase 2, this fulfils, or at least resonates with, one’s evaluative attitude. If this

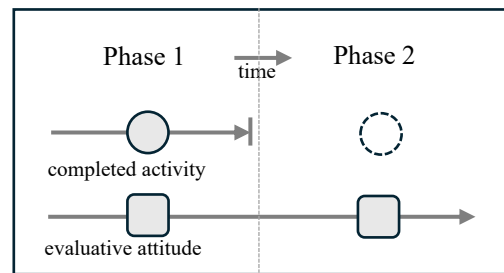


Fig. 4: Evaluative attitude

activity is absent, a discrepancy arises between the evaluative attitude and its object, which may then be experienced negatively.

I believe that this picture can explain many situations in which one’s activity ends and then a void emerges. But the explanation may require some expansion because it does not seem to apply well to Mill’s situation as it stands.<sup>33</sup> This concern comes from the fact that the explanation relies on one’s evaluative attitude in Phase 2. Having such an evaluative attitude seems to imply finding “charm” in the object of their attitude, so to speak; Mill does state however that, “The end has ceased to charm.” It might thus be plausible to think that Mill’s evaluative attitude probably fades as completion approaches. This might be because if Mill’s evaluative attitude in Phase 1 is precise, such as when he appreciates seeing his distinct philosophical thought realised, there is little reason to maintain it after the corresponding activity is completed. Here, it seems reasonable to suppose further that there is no other, more flexible evaluative attitude toward an activity type, as discussed above. We could describe this situation as a lack of “charm” in anything. In this case, Phase 2 becomes a void where no evaluative attitude is to be either fulfilled or unfulfilled by its object. This situation would therefore not inherently involve a negative factor fitting with the negative feelings in Phase 2, even though it does seem to engender negative feelings.

Even in this case, nevertheless, *if* one is compelled to engage in *meaningful activity in general*, then anxiety may naturally arise. Such an inclination toward meaning is prevalent, I believe, though not universal, regardless of cultural, educational or personal temperament influences. At the least it is not unnatural to

---

far, plays an essential role in the theory of meaningfulness—especially in terms of an achievement-based conception—see Brogaard and Smith (2005, p. 450).

<sup>33</sup> I am grateful to James Tartaglia, Michael Hauskeller and Nikolaos Gkogkas for pushing me to address this concern.

suppose that Mill, who had been given an exceptionally excellence-oriented education in his youth, would exhibit such a tendency.<sup>34</sup> If one possesses this attitude, it may lead to negative feelings, especially when one perceives it as challenging to begin new activities with the expectation of their being meaningful. What is important here is that if one has this blanket attitude toward meaning, and meaningful activities are absent, then the situation fits with negative feelings. Here the absence plays an essential role.<sup>35</sup>

This view aligns with the fact that not all completed activities evoke negative feelings.<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, there is no problem if one feels satisfied with the completed activity in the absence of subsequent activity. Whether one has or should have negative feelings depends on whether one has a relevant evaluative attitude, which one might direct toward a specific activity type or toward meaning in general. If one does not have this attitude, and the conditions fortunately allow, one could spend some or even a long time doing nothing meaningful, and be at ease.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated the significance of the absence of meaningful activity. To my knowledge, this topic has not been explicitly discussed in existing literature. This absence plays a crucial role in life and is particularly evident in situations in which previously engaged-in activities have been completed. The absence offers a supplemental explanation for certain situations, particularly when combined with the concept of a self-propagating activity. My approach addresses an insufficiency in Bradford's view about the negative feelings associated with these situations. I have argued that it is essential to recognise the absence of meaningful activity as something meriting the negative feelings experienced by Mill and Tolstoy.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise another general benefit of the focus on

---

<sup>34</sup> This point might align with the lesson that Mill himself gained from his crisis, that pursuing happiness as such can sometimes paradoxically distance one from attaining it (Mill (2018 [1873]), p. 82). Although, as noted, Mill refers to "happiness," it is not unreasonable to think that the same holds for meaningfulness.

<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that such a blanket evaluative attitude toward meaning is not like a desire whose fulfilment is valuable. This attitude may indirectly make one's life more meaningful by compelling one to engage in many specific meaningful activities. In this case, what contributes to meaningfulness must be these specific activities, and not the blanket attitude's fulfilment.

<sup>36</sup> Landau (2017), pp. 149–150.

meaningful activity's absence. Specifically, in examining possible interpretations for Mill's and Tolstoy's situations, I claim that identifying the appropriate targets for negative feelings can reveal that negative evaluations of usual activities are unnecessary. I also claim that recognising this absence helps to prevent the devaluation of completed activities—even those without a self-propagating feature. I also suggest that it is often unnecessary to regard as negative a situation that lacks something meaningful. The relationship between these observations and their potential applications deserves further attention. It seems plausible to conclude that the approach given here not only offers a broader perspective on the situations discussed but also, hopefully, paves the way for a more relaxed understanding of what constitutes meaning in life.

\* I would like to express my gratitude to the audience of the Sixth International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, held at the University of Liverpool, for their valuable feedback on my presentation of an earlier draft for this paper. I also want to thank Mone Sakata for improving the paper's clarity. English language editing was provided by Lex Academic. The research for this paper was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP24K00001).

## References

- Bradford, Gwen (2016). "Achievement, Wellbeing, and Value." *Philosophy Compass*, 11(12): 795–803.
- Bradford, Gwen (2022). "Achievement and Meaning in Life." In Iddo Landau (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*. Oxford University Press, pp. 58–73.
- Brogaard, Berit and Smith, Barry (2005). "On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life." *Philosophical Papers*, 34(3): 443–458.
- Clark, Samuel (2010). "Love, Poetry, and the Good Life: Mill's *Autobiography* and Perfectionist Ethics." *Inquiry*, 53(6): 565–578.
- Landau, Iddo (2017). *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*. Oxford University Press.
- Landau, Iddo (2021). "Is Meaning in Life Constituted by Value or

- Intelligibility?” *Philosophical Papers*, 50(1–2): 211–234.
- Levy, Neil (2005). “Downshifting and Meaning in Life.” *Ratio*, 18(2): 175–189.
- Metz, Thaddeus (2013). *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. Oxford University Press.
- Metz, Thaddeus (2019). “Recent Work on the Meaning of ‘Life’s Meaning’: Should We Change the Philosophical Discourse?” *Human Affairs*, 29(4): 404–414.
- Mill, John Stuart (2018 [1873]). *Autobiography*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Mark Philp. Oxford University Press.
- Nyholm, Sven and Campbell, Stephen M. (2022). “Meaning and Anti-Meaning in Life.” In Iddo Landau (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*. Oxford University Press, pp. 277–291.
- Repp, Charles (2018). “Life Meaning and Sign Meaning.” *Philosophical Papers*, 47(3): 403–427.
- Seachris, Joshua (2019). “From the Meaning Triad to Meaning Holism: Unifying Life’s Meaning.” *Human Affairs*, 29(4): 363–378.
- Setiya, Kieran (2014). “The Midlife Crisis.” *Philosophers’ Imprint*, 14(31): 1–18.
- Setiya, Kieran (2017). *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide*. Princeton University Press.
- Sigrist, Michael J. (2015). “Death and the Meaning of Life.” *Philosophical Papers*, 44(1): 83–102.
- Thomas, Joshua Lewis (2019). “Meaningfulness as Sensefulness.” *Philosophia*, 47(5): 1555–1577.
- Tolstoy, Leo (1904 [1882]), *My Confession*. In *The Complete Works of Count Tolstoy*, Vol. 13, translated and edited by Leo Wiener, Colonial Press, pp. 3–90.
- Wolf, Susan (1997). “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life.” *Social Philosophy & Policy*, 14(1): 207–225.
- Yoshizawa, Fumitake (2015). “Death and the Meaning of Life: A Critical Study of Metz’s *Meaning in Life*.” *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, 5(3): 134–149.