

On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life

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Can a person's life be meaningful? If so, what is it about a meaningful life that makes it so? As with many other questions involving value concepts, even plausible answers to these questions seem to face serious difficulties. A life we shall view as an ordered sequence of actions and events of a special kind. A plausible answer to the question of what makes a life meaningful (and the answer which we shall defend in what follows) is that a meaningful life is a life upon which some sort of valuable pattern has been imposed—a pattern which relates not merely to what goes on inside the person's head, but which involves also, in serious ways, the person having an effect upon the world.¹ Meaningfulness is thus a special kind of value which a human life can bear. More specifically, it is a kind of final value – something that we value for its own sake. We shall discover that it is crucial that, if such an imposed shape or pattern is to contribute to meaningfulness, then it must be the result of the person's own efforts and of his or her own decisions. It contributes nothing to the meaning of your life if what you achieve is merely the reflection of actions you perform at the behest of others.

¹ For discussion see e.g. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981). Our view shares important features with the views defended by e.g. Kai Nielsen, "Linguistic Philosophy and 'The Meaning of Life'", in E. D. Klemke, *The Meaning of Life* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1981), ch. 13, John Kekes in "The Informed Will and the Meaning of Life", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XLVII (1986), Kekes, "The Meaning of Life", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 24 (2000), 17-34, and especially Neil Levy, "Downshifting and Meaning in Life", *Ratio* 18 (2005, 176-189).

Two interrelated difficulties face this way of characterizing the meaning of life. One concerns responsibility: how are we to account for the fact that a life that satisfies the above criteria can have more meaning than a life with the same positive outcomes but which lacks responsibility on the part of the agent? The other turns on these outcomes themselves: how can the meaningfulness engendered by actions you perform now be affected by what those actions go on to produce in the future, perhaps even after your death? In what follows we provide a response to both of these difficulties.

A brief note on the character of this project is in order. Our concern is to analyze the term ‘meaningful’ as it appears in contexts such as: ‘S is leading a meaningful life’ or ‘S’s actions are meaningless’. It is not to provide a metaphysical account of what it is for a life to be meaningful. We believe that the two accounts may in the end come to the same thing. But lest our readers disagree, we shall focus our attention on what we believe ordinary folk actually mean by the expression in question.

I. What Makes A Life Worth Living? A Commonsensical Response

Accounts of the meaning of life may be divided into two broad categories of internalist and externalist, respectively.² Internalist accounts take the answer to the question of whether someone’s life is meaningful to depend exclusively on whether certain subjective mental states are present. An account of the meaning of life in terms of quantity or density of subjective states of happiness would qualify as an internalist account. Externalist accounts, on the other hand, take the meaningfulness of someone’s

² This division is inspired by similar ideas in Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life”, in O. Hanfling (ed), *Life and Meaning* (Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1987), 39-48, and Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd”, *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971), 716-27.

life to depend exclusively on factors external to the agent—including factors to which she herself need not have cognitive access.

Pure internalist accounts of the meaning of life face some obvious problems. If, for example, a meaningful life is equated with a happy life subjectively defined, then one could presumably lead a meaningful life just by taking special pills. Certainly happiness may contribute to the meaning of life; but there are also, in our opinion, cases of unhappy people who have led meaningful lives. Mozart might be one such case.

Pure externalist accounts of meaningfulness face problems as well. Consider, for example, an account given exclusively in terms of the positive or valuable effects a person has on the world. Effecting the world in serious positive ways clearly can contribute to our leading a meaningful life. But, intuitively, the two are independent. Imagine a Forrest Gump figure who affects the world in positive ways, over and over again, but always by accident. Here it seems to be responsibility, deliberate effort, decision-making, planning, and cumulation of effect, that are missing.

We conclude, then, that a mixed account will have the best chance of being right, and we here sketch what we take to be a plausible version of such a mixed account.³ A meaningful life is a life upon which a pattern has been imposed that relates not merely to what goes on inside the person's head but which involves also, in serious ways, the person having an effect upon the world. Leonardo, Mohammed, Alekhine, Faraday all led meaningful lives, according to this criterion, because in giving shape to their own lives they also shaped the world around them.

³ This view shares important features with the views defended by John Kekes in “The Informed Will and the Meaning of Life”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XLVII (1986), Kekes, “The Meaning of Life”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 24 (2000), 17-34, and especially Neil Levy, “Downshifting and Meaning in Life”, *Ratio* 18 (2005), 176-189.

It is crucial, again, that to contribute to meaningfulness this imposed shape or pattern must be the result of one's efforts and of one's own decisions. Sisyphus is the archetype of meaninglessness not only because of the inconsequentiality and repetitiousness of his task, but also because he is condemned to perform this task against his will.

If you want to lead a meaningful life, it seems, then you will need to decide how to shape your life and the world in which you live and set goals accordingly. These goals must be effective in giving rise to corresponding actions on your part, and they must culminate in a shape or pattern that is non-trivial. The realization of the goals you set must further represent what is for you a genuine achievement. Your goals must match (or challenge) your mental and physical abilities.

The sorts of achievements here relevant go hand in hand further with a willingness to sacrifice one goal for the sake of other, less trivial goals and to delay immediate gratification for the sake of the realization of long-term plans. They involve, not less importantly, the sort of making and realizing of plans which rests on the use of reason, and thus on knowledge of one's own capacities and of relevant features of one's physical and social environment.

To capture the factor of non-triviality in a more substantial fashion we need further to impose the criterion that the effort in question must be directed and calibrated in relation to some independent standards of success and failure, standards which are 'objective' in the sense that they could be applied by some disinterested observer. A meaningful life is a life which consists in your making and realizing what are *for you in your particular setting* ambitious and difficult plans; but these must at the same time be plans in relation

to which there exist genuine, public measures of success, and therefore also the risk of failure.

Activities closely associated in our minds with the possibility of leading a meaningful life – medicine, chess, athletics, opera-singing, natural science, exploration, invention, house-building, raising children – are characteristically those activities for which there are standards of the sort described, standards which can be easily applied in the public light of day, and which are calibrated against the amount of care, effort and skill that is invested in the realization of the corresponding achievements. To engage in these activities is to discover what the relevant standards of achievement are. Daydreaming, in contrast, which is calibrated against nothing in external reality, is an activity which is characteristic of a quite different sort of life – where there are no standards of better and worse, and no widely disseminated culture of honest admiration. Activities which have to be practiced in the dark, in secret (petty crime, for instance), are lacking such public measures of success, and thus they, too, are associated in our minds with meaninglessness.

Some activities, such as genocide and gratuitous torture, cause problems for this criterion. However, we suspect that, upon further scrutiny, these activities also will be found to be such that they need at least to some extent to be practiced in the dark. Hitler, Stalin and Mao did not, after all, openly advertise what was happening to the victims in their concentration camps.⁴

Notice that our suggested account makes meaningfulness something objective. One may lead a meaningful life without knowing or caring about this fact. But equally,

⁴ Kekes argues in “The Meaning of Life” (p. 30) that we can accept genocidal dictators as leading meaningful lives if we draw a bright line between the meaningfulness of a life and the morality of the achievements which it contains.

one may think one leads a meaningful life when in fact one does not do so. Suppose that you are an ambitious artist. You invest a great deal of deliberate effort and long-term planning in producing your paintings. You have what seems to you to be a perfectly successful career. Your paintings are exhibited regularly because they sell very well. In fact, however, unbeknownst to you, all of them are being bought by your rich uncle, who has taken pity on you because you are such a bad painter.

Whether a person leads a meaningful life depends in every case not on that person's, or other people's, beliefs or feelings, but on what the person did as a consequence of his or her own decisions, as evaluated (actually or potentially) against the relevant public measures of success.

II. Meaning and Character

Our account requires that a person must be responsible for his achievements in order for his life to be meaningful. The Forest Gump figure, whose actions affect the world positively but who is not responsible for his achievements, does not, by our lights, lead a meaningful life. This raises the question of how the factor of responsibility contributes to the meaning of a life. Notice that simple causal responsibility is not what matters here. One can be responsible in this sense for a result simply by being a *cause* of the result, just as a short-circuit can be a cause of a fire. Even if Forest Gump is a cause of the positive outcomes of his actions, he is still not responsible for his actions in the sense that is relevant here.

A person is responsible for an achievement roughly insofar as (1) it is caused by the person and (2) it is reflective of his character. In order for an action to be reflective of

a person's character, this character – roughly: a constellation of dispositions – must be such as to lead the person to produce similar actions under a broad enough range of alternative conditions.

The idea that only achievements for which you are responsible in this sense may contribute to meaning may seem to face obvious counterexamples. Suppose you act freely, but out of character. For example, you go on a “moral holiday” and kill someone, or you are led to do magnanimous deeds out of a temporary conversion to utilitarianism. Can such actions not affect the meaning of your life?⁵ We believe that they can, but only because the actions in question are indeed grounded in your dispositions, even if they are not grounded in dispositions to commit murder or to do magnanimous deeds. Thus we are not dealing here with the case where you kill someone accidentally, when the act in question would indeed be entirely neutral with respect to meaning. Rather we are dealing with the case where very special circumstances conspire to bring together an odd combination of dispositions which lead you (say) to kill someone. Your act seems to be out of character; but still it is not accidental, which we take to mean that it is to some degree reflective of your dispositions. Certainly you were not responsible in the fullest sense, but you are still responsible in some degree, and so your act is still such as to make some difference to the meaning of your life.

The mistake here is to think that in order for an achievement to be grounded in an agent's dispositions, there must be a disposition precisely tailored to the achievement under any potential description. But this, of course, is not so. Presumably no one has a disposition to strangle someone slowly in Times Square with a telephone cord. But an

⁵ This objection can be found in is from Thad Metz, “The Concept of a Meaningful Life”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (2001), 137-53, especially pp. 140-5. See also George Sher, “Blameworthy Action and Character”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXIV (2002, 381-392), p. 388

agent may still be responsible for the aforementioned strangulation if it is a reflection of an underlying disposition to kill or to harm others. What this shows is that an act of, say, committing murder can reflect an agent's character even if the disposition which makes it so would not have led to that act under a broad enough range of alternative conditions under the description 'disposition to commit murder'.

III. The Definition of *Life*

A life, we said, is a series of actions and events of a special kind. But one may question whether it is appropriate to conceive of lives in such narrow terms. Thus it might be argued that a life must include also certain enduring relationships which are not easily cashed out in occurrent terms.

Suppose, for example, that God loves you but that you are never aware of this fact and that it involves no action on your part. Does God's love then contribute to the meaning of your life? We think not. For we find it odd to define a life to include other agents' attitudes toward the person whose life it is. To the extent that such relations leave no traces on your life as a sum of actions of events, they are from our present perspective mere Cambridge relations, analogous to the relation of *being non-identical with*, or of *being further from Witwatersrand than*. If God's, or an unknown admirer's, love could contribute meaning to your life, then so also could your neighbor's abhorrence take away some of this meaning. And this, too, seems counterintuitive.

Another possible objection to the conception of a life as a sum of actions and events would have it that your character and abilities should be viewed as part of your life. However, these are mere dispositions, and it is not clear that they can make a

difference to your life and to its meaning except through realization—which brings us back to actions and events.

IV. Two Puzzles about Meaning

Our way of defining a life in terms of actions and events, however, gives rise to another puzzle about dispositions. Certainly it does seem to be the case that the fact that a person has certain dispositions—for example the disposition to work hard in order to acquire new skills—can contribute to the meaning of his life. This is not to say, however, that the life of a more able or strong-minded person is automatically more meaningful than that of someone less able or weaker minded. For as we saw above, the nature of a person's dispositions—his character—plays an important role in determining what sorts of achievements are relevant when it comes to gauging the meaning of his life. But now we need to think more carefully about how this can be so. How can a difference in dispositions make for a difference in the meaning of otherwise identical *lives*, if a life is just a series of actions and events?

The phenomenon of greater meaningfulness being attributed to what is a reflection of mental and physical abilities is pervasive. We value the gold medal we won in the Olympic games more than the exactly similar gold medal we found on the street. We value responsible action more than the careless yet inadvertently beneficial deed. We value knowledge more than mere true belief. But what is it about the responsibly effected that makes it more meaningful in the sense at issue here?

There is also the related problem of whether and how the meaningfulness of an action can be affected by its *results*, by what it produces *in the future*.⁶ Raising children can contribute meaning to your life; but that your children do well as a result of your teaching and nourishment may be something which establishes itself only after your death. Raising children may thus contribute to the meaning of your life, but the extra meaning derives in part from something that is external to your life. Creative work, again, is meaningful. But what if, with Metz, we hold that ‘creative behavior is simply rational action that results in intrinsically valuable art objects (or that results in art objects, which in turn produce intrinsically valuable experiences)’?⁷ Here again, the future experiences caused in others by the object that comes into being through your endeavors are not part of your present creative behavior. Yet it still seems that they can help to contribute meaning to your life, even though they are external to this life.

Certainly creative behavior may give rise immediately to intrinsically valuable and pleasurable experiences. Your actions shape the stone or parchment now, and your behavior leads thereby to the immediate imposition of a pattern on reality, a pattern of just the sort which, on our view, contributes to meaning. This is so also in the case of raising children: already now your actions are imposing patterns on your child, even though the significance of these patterns may become clear only in the distant future. Consider, however, the case of Ruth, the hermit mathematician whose proofs of important and original theorems suffer two distinct fates: in one possible world the proofs are lost, so that Ruth’s life work remains entirely unknown; in another possible world

⁶ See e.g. David Wiggins, “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life”, in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, *Essays on Moral Realism*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 162. For an overview of this discussion, see Thad Metz, “Recent Work on the Meaning of Life”, *Ethics* 112 (2002), 781-814.

⁷ “Recent Work on the Meaning of Life”, p. 808.

they are found after her death and published to great acclaim. We are assuming that the existence of this future acclamation makes a difference to the meaningfulness of Ruth's life, and this then raises in particularly clear form the problem of how a future end-result can contribute meaning to a person's life in the present.

We can now see how the latter problem is related to the problem of how an agent's character can contribute to the meaningfulness of her achievements. In both cases we are asking how something – an effect in the one case, a cause in the other – that is external to the agent's achievements, and so external to her life, can contribute to the meaning of this life. In both cases it seems that we are forced into saying that an achievement can be meaningful partly in virtue of something that is external to it.

V. Non-Intrinsic Final Value

How can an agent's character and future outcomes of his achievements make a difference to the meaning of his life? Meaning is something that we value for its own sake. Yet the agent's character, as well as the positive future outcomes of his achievements, are external to the life which bears the meaning. It may be noticed that this problem can be avoided by assuming that it is not Ruth's life (as we have been conceiving it) that is meaningful, but rather the composite of this life with Ruth herself, her dispositions and the positive effects of her actions.⁸ The obvious problem with this idea, however, is that the entity to which common sense attributes meaning is not some metaphysically peculiar

⁸ Linda Zagzebski and Wayne Riggs suggest a similar solution to the value problem in epistemology. See e.g. "The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good", *Metaphilosophy* 34 (2003): 12-28, and L. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 300-302. For discussions of the value problem, see also e.g. W. Jones, "Why Do We Value Knowledge?", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997): 423-40, J. Kvanvig, "Why Should Inquiring Minds Want to Know?" *The Monist* 81 (1998): 426-51; and Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003).

composite of a person, effects, and life. Indeed common sense seems not to know such metaphysically peculiar composites. We can, however, sidestep the problem by noticing that the motivation for the claim that it is a composite that is meaningful turns on assumptions to the effect that a valuable cause cannot confer value on its effect, and that a valuable effect cannot confer value on its cause, and both these assumptions are false.

For as Rabinowicz and Roennow-Rasmussen (RRR) argue,⁹ we often attribute extra value to a thing that is externally related to something else that we value. Moreover we do this in such a way that this extra value, though not intrinsic (because it does not derive exclusively from the intrinsic properties of the thing in question), is yet seen as accruing to that thing for its own sake (and thus not instrumentally). Thus we may value Princess Diana's dress more than an exact copy, simply because the former but not the latter belonged to Diana. Following RRR, let us call the sort of value that accrues to a thing in the sense described 'final value'. RRR's point, then, is that we sometimes rightly assign different quantities of final value to things that possess the same intrinsic properties.

We now have a different answer to the question of how responsibility and positive effects can contribute to the meaning of an achievement. RRR show us how achievements themselves can be meaningful. Even though an achievement, as standardly conceived, includes neither the person's character nor the future consequences of the achievement, it can nonetheless possess the sort of non-instrumental value that derives

⁹ Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Roennow-Rasmussen, "A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and for Its Own Sake", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100, part 1 (1999): 33-49; and "Tropic of Value", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66 (2003): 389-403. For a Kantian defense of the existence of a category of extrinsic non-instrumental value, see e.g. Christine M. Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness", *The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983, 169-195), and also, Shelly Kagan, "Rethinking Intrinsic Value", *Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998), 277-97.

from the person's character or from these future consequences in the way that, on RRR's view, the non-instrumental value of Diana's dress derives from value accruing to Diana.

The issue here relates to the question we raised above about whether Hitler's actions should be viewed as meaningful. Just what sorts of dispositions are intrinsically valuable? Though we cannot answer this question here, it seems clear to us that there are dispositions that are intrinsically valuable, and that morally admirable dispositions are among them.

VI. Luck and Value

There is, however, a still deeper problem for the commonsensical account of meaning, which turns on the fact that it is never solely in virtue of one's own dispositions, efforts, planning and choices that one's life becomes shaped in the right way and that one achieves what one does. Unless you are placed in a suitable environment, you may not achieve anything worth achieving, and so your life may not be shaped in any way that we could call 'meaningful'. For our plans to succeed, we need our surroundings to collaborate, and from this it follows that our achievements are never entirely without some factor of contingency. Contingency of different degrees can therefore make a difference to the value of your life. The Forest Gump figure whose actions affect the world positively by a series of lucky accidents does not lead a meaningful life. But nor does a very unfortunate person who has all the right dispositions, and makes all the right decisions, but whose plans are repeatedly thwarted by a series of equal and opposite *unlucky* accidents having nothing to do with his decisions and planning.

One might stipulate that the meaningfulness of a life must be such that luck never plays a role. This, however, swiftly leads to nihilism about meaning. For if none of our achievements are without contingency, and if luck can play no role in determining how meaningful a life is, then our lives will have no meaning.¹⁰

Can it be that luck plays an important role in defining the meaning of a life after all? Can it be that there is a difference in meaning in the lives of two people who are equally talented and make the same plans and exactly the same efforts to shape their lives in non-trivial ways?

Familiarly, the parallel problem in ethics is called the ‘problem of moral luck’,¹¹ and one popular solution consists in denying that how much a person is to blame ever depends on luck.¹² There is, on this view, no difference between the moral status of the lucky and the unlucky; it is merely that, in the case of the latter, we are in a better epistemic position to evaluate defective moral character.

Perhaps one could adopt a similar response in our present case. The idea would be that, while there is a fact of the matter as to whether or not a life has meaning, we are very often mistaken about the degree of meaningfulness a person’s life has. The view in question would thus imply that we would have to attribute the same meaning to the Mozart who in fact wrote symphonies as we would to his unfortunate brother who faced

¹⁰ Another route to nihilism is to require that a life can be meaningful only if the positive effects on the world are in some sense permanent. This is the route taken by many of the French existentialists. For discussion and a response to this problem see e.g. Nagel, “The Absurd”. In our opinion, the problem does not arise if one is concerned merely with an elucidation of the ordinary concept of the meaning of life.

¹¹ See B. A. O. Williams and T. Nagel, “Moral Luck” (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 50, 1976, 115-35; 137-51), and T. Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 31.

¹² See e.g. M. J. Zimmerman, “Luck and Moral Responsibility” (*Ethics* 97, 1987, 374-386); R. Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 41ff; and B. Rosebury, “Moral Responsibility and ‘Moral Luck’ ” (*The Philosophical Review* 104, 1995, 499-524).

obstacles at every turn and who, over and over again, found these obstacles insurmountable.

We find this sort of response unconvincing. For again: it implies that our ordinary assessments concerning meaning may be mistaken *en bloc*. This raises the question of what the point of analyzing a concept like the meaning of a life is. Presumably, it is either to advocate a definition of what people actually mean by the term in question, or to provide a proposal for a modified use of the term that is close enough to an imprecise or vague actual meaning but has advantages such as clarity. The word ‘meaningful’ is evidently a vague term, just like ‘rich’ or ‘tall’ or ‘flat’. But this should not lead us to dismiss ordinary judgments of meaningfulness, any more than the vagueness of ‘flat’ should lead us to dismiss ordinary judgments about flatness. Suggesting that we are almost completely in error about the way we use a term like ‘meaningful’ may be gratifying from a metaphysical point of view, but it falls out of bounds when our concern is with the analysis of the everyday use of terms.

Of course, people are sometimes completely mistaken when they use certain terms. There are strong arguments for the thesis that ‘S sees O’ implies ‘O exists’. But in ordinary life, we are often quite happy to say ‘what S saw did not exist’. In such cases, we must say that the ordinary judgment is mistaken because it ignores differences that become evident under reflection.

There is, however, an important difference between theories of perception (or of matter, or gravity, or time, or of the sun’s rising and setting) and theories of value or meaning. The former, it seems, can be—perhaps should be—grounded in scientific

theory, but it is far from clear that the latter can, or should, be similarly grounded. Hence, it is unlikely that ordinary judgments about the meaning of life are altogether flawed.

A more plausible response is to admit that our actions and decision-making processes do indeed have a kind of contingency.¹³ So, if life is to have any meaning, then this meaning must in part depend on luck. The person who in fact manages to impose certain patterns on his life for reasons partly accidental does in fact have a more meaningful life than the person who does not manage to do so.

Since ‘meaningful’ is a vague term, there will be no precise answer to the question of how much contingency is acceptable in order for ‘S is leading a meaningful life’ to come out true. There are borderline cases: people who are leading neither meaningful nor meaningless lives. But there are clear-cut cases as well.

VII. Concluding Remarks on Free Choice

We noted at the outset that it contributes nothing to the meaning of a person’s life if what he achieves is merely the reflection of actions performed at the command of others. Free choice is required for a meaningful life. Before concluding, therefore, some remarks on the notion of free choice are in order.

‘Free choice’ may be defined as choice anchored in a person’s free will (assuming that there is such a thing). We assume that for a choice to be free the agent must have been able to do otherwise. However, defining ‘free choice’ in this way has odd implications from the point of view of meaning. An athlete who has a compulsive drive to enter and perform in competitions may, surely, lead a meaningful life even if her

¹³ For an analogous response to the problem of moral luck, see e.g. B. Browne, “A Solution to the Problem of Moral Luck” (*The Philosophical Quarterly* 42, 1992, 345-356); M. U. Walker, “Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency”, in Daniel Statman, ed., *Moral Luck*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, 235-250; and J. Andre, “Nagel, Williams and Moral Luck”, in Statman, ed., 123-129)

achievements are not the result of free choices. We have to be careful here. It is one thing to say that an achievement is the result of free choices and is within the agent's control; it is something else to say that the agent is responsible for the achievement (as we defined it earlier). Even if our athlete has little control over the acquisition and use of her skills and abilities, she might still be responsible for winning a competition. For her achievements may be a reflection of her character and abilities. But her achievement would not be the result of free choices, since, we assume, she could not have done otherwise. Yet would we not want to say that such a person could lead a meaningful life? Does neurologically determined passion and compulsion rule out meaningfulness in one's achievements? We think not. Indeed, common sense seems to allow attributions of meaning to the successful athlete's life even if the athlete could not have done otherwise.

A final point: leading a meaningful life is worthy of appreciation. Possessing a physical trait may also be worthy of appreciation. We rightly appreciate people who smell nice or have sparkling eyes. But people who smell nice or have sparkling eyes do not deserve credit for their appearance.

Matters are similar, we believe, in the case of meaningfulness. Judgments of whether a life is meaningful are comparable, in this respect, to esthetic evaluation; they represent a form of evaluation that does not involve any assessment of desert. A beautiful painting does not *deserve* the appreciation that is attributed to it (it is the *artist* who does so). Of course, the analogy is not perfect. A beautiful painting does not achieve anything in the sense that is relevant here. Nor does a person by smelling nice or having sparkling eyes. Nonetheless, we think that the analogy between esthetic evaluation and the evaluation of the meaning of a life holds up to this extent: that whether or not the person

deserves the appreciation his life is receiving is irrelevant to its meaning. What matters to meaningfulness is that through realizing your goals you impose a valuable pattern on reality, as evaluated (actually or potentially) against the relevant public measures of success, and this pattern is ultimately a reflection of your abilities and character.¹⁴

¹⁴ We are grateful to Thad Metz and Jim Stone for comments on an earlier version of this paper. Smith's contribution to this paper was supported by the Wolfgang Paul Program of the Humboldt Foundation and by the Volkswagen Foundation Project "Forms of Life".